

Original Paper

A Study on Two English Translations of Rickshaw Boy from the Perspective of Eco-translatology

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Abstract

Eco-translatology views translation as the translator's adaptive selection in the ecological environment. It emphasizes adaptive choices across linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions to achieve overall harmony. Rickshaw Boy, a landmark of Chinese realist fiction, has four English translations to date. From an eco-translatological perspective, this study examines the two versions by Goldblatt and Shi Xiaojing, comparing how the translators make adaptive selections and transformations in the three dimensions to recreate the source text's linguistic features and cultural connotations, with the aim of offering practical insights for literary translators.

Keywords

eco-translatology, rickshaw boy, three-dimensional transformation

1. Introduction

Rickshaw Boy—first serialized in a magazine in 1936—is Lao She's most representative novel. Its language is brisk and concise, laden with Beijing dialect and a strong flavor of everyday life. The colloquialisms and culturally nuanced expressions intimately convey the social milieu of ordinary people at the time. Dialect and oral speech not only reveal the characters' class status and behavioral traits, bringing them to life, but also lend greater realism to the novel's thematic concerns. To date, four English translations are in circulation, and a key function of these versions is to reproduce and transmit the cultural background and rich linguistic content of the original, thereby facilitating the outward translation of Chinese literature. From the perspective of Eco-translatology, this paper focuses on how translators make choices and adaptations between source and target texts so as to better deliver the linguistic and cultural connotations of the original to target readers, ultimately achieving effective cross-cultural communication.

2. Theoretical Overview of Eco-translatology and the “Three-Dimensional Transformations”

Hu Gengshen first introduced the concept of Eco-translatology in 2001. In his monograph *Translation as Adaptation and Selection*, he defines translation as “a selective activity by which the translator adapts to the translational eco-environment”, and argues that this process should incorporate “three-dimensional transformation” (linguistic, cultural, and communicative) to bring the source text into the analytical framework and produce a more accessible translation for readers (Hu, 2004). The translational eco-environment is a complex system encompassing language, culture, society, communication, as well as interrelated agents such as the author, the reader, and the client (Hu, 2013). Eco-translatology draws on Darwin’s theory of adaptation and selection, while also integrating the traditional Chinese ecological wisdom of “harmony between man and nature” (Hu, 2021; Liu, 2022). Much like biological evolution, the translating process requires constant adaptation and selection within the eco-environment, ultimately achieving the cross-cultural transplantation of the “textual life”.

Adaptive selection in the linguistic dimension calls for attention to formal shifts at various levels—phonology, lexis, syntax, and discourse—so as to comply with target-language norms and make optimal choices. In the cultural dimension, adaptive selection emphasizes the transmission of cultural connotations, requiring the translator to navigate cultural differences and strike a balance between preserving source-cultural features and accommodating target-cultural receptivity. In the communicative dimension, the focus falls on the realization of communicative intent: the translator must go beyond the linguistic and cultural surface to ensure that the target text generates a communicative function and effect equivalent or similar to that of the source text (Hu, 2004). These three dimensions are not separate but interwoven, forming an organic whole that serves the translating activity.

Literary translation, in particular, demands that the translator adapt to both the source eco-environment and the target readers’ expectations. Eco-translatology offers a fresh theoretical lens for literary translation: from this standpoint, translation is a process where multiple factors interact, and the translator should follow the core methodology of three-dimensional transformation, striving to meet target readers’ expectations while conveying the cultural essence of the source text, so as to revitalize the text in the target language and achieve a balanced translational ecology.

3. *Rickshaw Boy* and Its Two English Translations

Rickshaw Boy depicts the lives of the lower classes in Beijing during the warlord turmoil of the 1920s in China. The novel records the painful struggles and tragic fates of the underclass, including Xiangzi, serving as a microcosm of social life in old China. Xiangzi, initially a diligent and honest rickshaw puller, is determined to buy his own rickshaw and achieve prosperity, but a series of misfortunes eventually reduce him to a self-abandoned vagrant. Through the portrayal of Xiangzi and those around him, the author exposes the hardships and helplessness of the lower classes at the time, offering a biting satire of social injustice. The novel is rich in Beijing dialect and provides meticulous depictions of social life. Lao She’s original intention was to dispense with unnecessary humor and adopt a plain style of narration, yet

he aimed “to infuse plain text with a touch of intimacy, freshness, aptness, and vivacity through the relaxed deployment of colloquial language”, thereby adding interest to the language (Lao She, 1990). Howard Goldblatt is a renowned sinologist and translator who has rendered a large number of modern and contemporary Chinese literary works into English, earning the reputation of “the leading Chinese literary translator in the West”. Goldblatt states that his goal is to present this classic of modern literature to readers in a “complete and faithful” manner while ensuring the readability of the translation (Goldblatt, 2010). Working from the complete version published in 1939 and consulting other editions, he produced a coherent translation of the full text, remaining maximally faithful to the original in both form and content, and leaning toward a scholarly approach (Liu, 2021). Shi Xiaojing, a seasoned translator of Chinese descent, possesses a high level of bilingual competence in both English and Chinese. In an interview, Shi revealed that her translation of **Rickshaw Boy** prioritizes fidelity to the meaning of the original, while also taking into account readers’ language habits and reading experience—yet she does not distort the source text or reinvent it simply to cater to readers (Chen, 2015). The two translators represent distinct cultural backgrounds: Goldblatt as a Western sinologist and Shi as a translator with a Chinese linguistic background. Shi chose the revised version that Lao She had abridged in 1954, which omits the last chapter of the original, whereas a reissued edition in 2001 supplements the missing part, primarily for educational and learning purposes. Scholars have found that Shi’s translation tends to be more readable and generally flows naturally, but often rests content with conveying the informational content of the source text while neglecting to capture the distinctiveness and particularities of the Chinese language (Sun, 2013).

4. A Comparative Analysis of the Two English Translations of *Rickshaw Boy*

4.1 *Adaptive Selection in the Linguistic Dimension*

The so-called “adaptive transformation in the linguistic dimension” refers to “the translator’s adaptive conversion of linguistic forms during the translation process. This adaptive selection and transformation in the linguistic dimension occurs at different levels and on various planes” (Hu, 2011). Chinese and English differ systematically in syntactic structure, lexical density, parataxis vs. hypotaxis, and other aspects (Lian, 1993). In the process of translation, the translator must take the entire translational eco-environment into comprehensive consideration, carrying out necessary syntactic restructuring, lexical choices, and attention to textual style and cohesion, so that the target text not only accurately conveys the source-text information but also is understood and accepted by target-language readers.

Example 1:

Original: 这是跑长趟的，不愿拉零座；因为拉一趟便是一趟，不屑于三五个铜子的穷凑了。

Shi’s translation: These long-distance runners will only make trips which pay and scoff at the paltry three or five coppers which is all that one gets for short distances.

Goldblatt’s translation: Interested only in long hauls, these men disdain the short, penny-ante business.

The original sentence consists of four short clauses. Both Shi Xiaojing and Howard Goldblatt restructured

the sentence to varying degrees, integrating the run-on Chinese clauses into single sentences, thereby making the logic clearer. The term “零座” is a rickshaw-puller’s jargon, referring specifically to short-haul passengers who are hired on the spot and pay per trip. Both translators render it accurately as “short distances”. The phrase “不屑于三五个铜子的穷凑” is a colloquial expression from northern China; “穷凑” means “to scrape together reluctantly”, conveying the pullers’ contempt for earning just three or five coppers from a short trip. Shi translates literally as “three or five coppers”, preserving the original image, and renders “穷凑” as the verb “scoff” and the adjective “paltry”, faithfully conveying the meaning and the disdainful emotion; however, the sentence is somewhat lengthy and awkward to read, losing the brisk force of the original colloquialism. Goldblatt omits “穷凑” and paraphrases “三五个铜子” into the idiomatic English “penny-ante business”, making the sentence more concise. Both versions accurately convey the semantic content of the original; Shi leans toward literal translation, while Goldblatt prefers free translation, producing a more fluent style and a textual rhythm closer to the original, thus better adapting to the expressive habits of target readers.

Example 2:

Original: 当他跑得顺“耳唇”往下滴汗，胸口觉得有点发辣，他真想也这么办……

Shi’s translation: When Xiangzi had run till the sweat dripped from his ears and his chest seemed a ball of fire, he longed to do the same...

Goldblatt’s translation: When Xiangzi ran until sweat dripped from his ears and his chest felt the strain, that’s what he’d have liked to do...

The expressive term “发辣” uses synaesthesia to depict both physical heat and psychological torment. At this point, Xiangzi endures unbearable heat yet grits his teeth and perseveres. Shi externalizes the sensation as “a ball of fire”, turning the abstract into a concrete image that evokes a similar rhetorical effect. Goldblatt adopts semantic generalization with “felt the strain”, suggesting muscular tension and fatigue, but loses the specific burning sensation; though the core meaning remains, the emotional intensity weakens. Both versions accomplish linguistic transfer, but Shi’s choice aligns more closely with the original context in terms of affective force.

Example 3:

Original: 穷人的命，他似乎看明白了，是枣核儿两头尖：幼小的时候能不饿死，万幸；到老了能不饿死，很难。

Shi’s translation: It seemed to him that the fate of the poor was like a jujube kernel, pointed at both ends and round in the middle: if you are lucky enough not to die of hunger as a child, you could hardly escape starving to death in your old age.

Goldblatt’s translation: The life of a poor man, he now understood, was like the pit of a date, pointed on both ends and round in the middle. You’re lucky to get through childhood without dying of hunger, and can hardly avoid starving to death when you’re old.

The metaphor “枣核儿两头尖” compares a poor person’s life to a kernel pointed at both ends—childhood and old age are hardest, with only middle age offering relative ease. Linguistically, Goldblatt’s

version better suits English hypotaxis and is overall more effective. He splits the original run-on structure into two sentences, creating clarity and a progressive rhythm; Shi, by contrast, weaves the clauses into one long compound sentence. For logical cohesion, Shi uses a colon and “if”, whereas Goldblatt achieves a natural contrast through semantic parallelism between the two clauses, closer to Chinese syntax. Lexically, both choices are defensible: Shi renders “命” as “fate”, emphasizing predestined misery, while Goldblatt opts for “life”, which foregrounds daily hardship. For the jujube kernel, Shi stays literal with “jujube kernel”, preserving the cultural image, but Goldblatt domesticates it to “the pit of a date”, more familiar to English readers. Shi’s version thus more accurately retains the original image and may even spark curiosity about Chinese dates; Goldblatt’s removes comprehension barriers but slightly deviates from the source. On balance, Goldblatt’s sentence division, cohesive devices, and lexical selections make his translation more fluent and forceful within the English linguistic ecology, achieving a higher degree of linguistic adaptation, whereas Shi better preserves cultural connotations.

4.2 Adaptive Selection and Transformation in the Cultural Dimension

The adaptive selection and transformation in the cultural dimension require the translator to attend to the cultural connotations embedded in the source language, while also ensuring that the same effect achieved in the source text is reproduced in the target language. *Rickshaw Boy* abounds with material-culture and social-culture loaded expressions, which embody a nation’s modes of thinking and cultural traditions. In translating literary fiction, the translator, grounded in a profound understanding and command of both cultures, must avoid both misunderstandings arising from literal translation and the loss of cultural connotations and emotional resonance caused by excessive domestication.

Example 4:

Original: 她上身穿着件浅绿的绸子小夹袄，下面一条青洋绉肥腿的单裤。

Shi’s translation: She was wearing a short silk lined jacket of pale green and wide black crepe trousers.

Goldblatt’s translation: She was wearing a light green satin jacket over a pair of wide unlined black crepe trousers.

Clothing often indicates social status and personality. Tigress usually wore plain-attired for work, but on this occasion she deliberately put on a brightly coloured short silk-lined jacket to seduce Xiangzi. Shi translates “绸子” as “silk” while Goldblatt renders it as “satin”. Which is more accurate? “Silk” denotes pure silk fabric; during the Beiyang government period, only the wealthy could afford it, making it a symbol of status and prestige. “Satin” refers to a weave pattern; the material could be silk or synthetic fibres such as polyester. Tigress, as the daughter of a rickshaw-yard owner, is assertive, capable, and from a well-off family; given the historical setting of the novel, she would most likely have worn silk. In Chinese culture, silk is an expensive material, and readers can immediately perceive the vast gap between Tigress, dressed in silk, and Xiangzi, clad in plain indigo blue cotton. Both renderings let readers grasp this social disparity, but Shi’s choice is probably more precise.

Example 5:

Original (Chinese): 他自居老虎，可惜没有儿子，只有一个三十七八岁的虎女——知道刘四爷的

就必也知道虎妞。

Shi's translation: He liked to think himself as a tiger and only regretted having no son but only a "tiger" daughter of thirty-seven or eight. Anyone who knew Fourth Master Liu was sure to know his daughter, Tigress.

Goldblatt's translation: He liked to think of himself as a tiger, but he had produced no male cub. He had an unwed daughter of thirty-seven or eight, and anyone who knew Fourth Master Liu knew his daughter, Huniu—Tiger Girl.

In old-society Beijing dialect, “爷” is a respectful form of address for a male master, employer, or a man of wealth and power—a term loaded with connotations of identity, status, and hierarchy. Both translators render it as “Master”, an appellation that, in Western culture, servants use for their employers or apprentices for their instructors. This conversion effectively allows target readers to perceive the original cultural implications of deference and rank. From the cultural dimension, both versions successfully convey the critical portrait of Fourth Master Liu, representing a sound transplantation of cultural values. The author then immediately describes Tigress as competent and fiery-tempered, a woman of thirty-seven or eight whom no man dares to marry. Goldblatt adopts a transliteration-plus-explanation approach, rendering “虎妞” as “Huniu—Tiger Girl”, thereby preserving both the phonetic features and the intrinsic meaning of the name. Shi, opts for free translation with “Tigress”, indicating a tiger-like woman—strong-willed, and assertive. Both versions effectively transmit the cultural connotations of the original and achieve a regeneration of cultural information across different texts.

4.3 Adaptive Selection in the Communicative Dimension

The communicative dimension is the highest dimension of translation, focusing on whether the target text can realise the intention and function of the original in the target socio-cultural context. For literary works, the core communicative intention is the reproduction in the target text of character portrayal, emotional attitudes, and social relationships from the original. All the translator's choices at the linguistic and cultural dimensions ultimately serve this overarching communicative purpose.

Example 6:

Original (Chinese): 不喝就滚出去；好心好意，不领情是怎着？你个傻骆驼！

Shi's translation: If you're not going to drink, then get out! What's the matter with you? Don't you know when someone means well by you? You stupid camel!

Goldblatt's translation: Then get the hell out of here! Don't you know when someone's being nice to you, you dumb camel?

Tigress dominates their relationship and is the controlling party; she wants to overwhelm Xiangzi through humiliation and commands, forcing him to submit. The original sentence is highly colloquial, its clipped wording mirroring her impatience and anger. For “滚出去”, Shi uses “get out” with short syllables that suit the abrupt tone, while Goldblatt inserts “the hell”, intensifying her fiery temper in English. Shi also adds the implied “what's wrong with you” to clarify the context. As for “傻”, Shi's “stupid” has a heavier phonetic weight than Goldblatt's “dumb”, yet the latter better captures the blend of scolding and affection

inherent in the Beijing dialect term. In terms of communicative effect, Shi's version is more complete, preserving all original information and employing more short sentences to restore the conversational rhythm. However, Goldblatt proves more emotionally precise, conveying both Tigress's urge to control Xiangzi and her contradictory intimacy. His translation thus more accurately represents the interpersonal dynamics and achieves the goal of cross-cultural communication.

Example 7:

Original (Chinese): 他真想一下子跳下去，头朝下，砸破了冰，沉下去，像个死鱼似的冻在冰里。

Shi's translation: What he really wanted was to dive off the bridge, smash through the ice and sink down to the bottom to freeze there like a dead fish.

Goldblatt's translation: Why not just jump headfirst, crash through the ice, and sink to the bottom to freeze in the water like a dead fish!

This is Xiangzi's desperate mental activity after being forced into marriage by Tigress. Shi adopts a literal translation, basically following the original information and narrative style, while Goldblatt transforms the sentence pattern, using the rhetorical question "Why not just" to turn the declarative sentence into Xiangzi's inner monologue, making readers more empathetic and evoking emotional resonance, as if they were experiencing Xiangzi's despair and loneliness firsthand. Goldblatt translates the key verbs "砸" and "沉" as "crash" and "sink", enhancing the expression of Xiangzi's despair and bringing the emotional intensity closer to the original. From the communicative dimension, Goldblatt's translation more completely conveys Xiangzi's inner despair to the readers, preserves the structural and lexical features of the original language, reproduces the lyrical function of the source text, aligns with English readers' reading habits, and relatively better achieves communicative equivalence between the original and the target text across different cultural contexts.

5. Conclusion

This paper has conducted a systematic analysis from the three dimensions of Eco-translatology—the linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions. The findings reveal that both Howard Goldblatt's and Shi Xiaojing's translations have their respective merits. Overall, Goldblatt's translation is more complete, whereas Shi, based on her background as an interpreter, employs precise and incisive wording, though the quality of her translation is somewhat uneven.

From the linguistic dimension, Shi would consult Beijing natives and sometimes supplement the implicit meanings of the original; her word choices are more flexible, the translation is fluent, and semantic expression is accurate. However, she occasionally omits some passages, and her sentence structures can be lengthy and awkward; she tends to adopt a foreignization strategy. Goldblatt, by contrast, places greater emphasis on preserving source-language information, striving to maintain the syntactic structure and colloquial features of the original, resulting in a translation that is accurate and complete. Nevertheless, his lexical choices for conveying emotions may be less impactful than Shi's version; he leans towards a domestication strategy. On the whole, both translators demonstrate an accurate

understanding of the original text. From the cultural dimension, both translators attend carefully to the translation of culture-loaded words, introducing idiomatic English expressions to varying degrees, and successfully achieving cultural transplantation from the source text into the target text. From the communicative dimension, Shi's translation essentially follows the narrative mode of the original, achieving the communicative effect intended by the author. Goldblatt, however, makes some syntactic adjustments, which may make the communicative effect more aligned with the reading habits of English readers, and his wording for certain subtle expressions of interpersonal relationships and psychological states is more precise.

This suggests that translators need to fully consider the reading habits of target-language readers, gain a thorough understanding of the source culture, comprehend the original text, and satisfy the needs of various factors in the translational eco-environment as much as possible, striving for perfection and realising the value of translation.

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