Original Paper

Lyell's Views of Translation in the Perspective of Thick Translation—*Cat Country* as an Example

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Abstract

As China's first science fiction novel, Lao She's satirical novel Cat Country has been welcomed by readers as soon as it was released in its first English translation. The success of this novel's foreign translation cannot be separated from the translator William Lyell's "thick translation". By describing the explicit and implicit thick translation methods of Lyell's translation of Cat Country, analyzing the translator's thick translation skills under the characterization of thick translation, the principle of truth-seeking in translating culture, and the translation guideline of serving the readers of the translated language, the article reveals the basic rationale of the successful translation of Lyell's translation, which will serve as a reference for the foreign translation of Chinese literature, and better serve the translation practice and theoretical construction.

Keywords

cat country, thick translation, Lyell, view of translation

Lao She, is formerly known as Shu Qingchun, whose 1932 satirical science fiction novel *Mao Chengji* occupies a special place in Lao She's rich and famous literary works. The novel's special subject has long received polarized evaluations, which has made it an object of close attention in the literary world for a long time. *Mao Chengji* is considered to be the first science fiction novel in China, in which Lao She utilizes the creative techniques of satire and constructs a realistic picture of early China, making its literary and social documentary value not to be ignored.

In 1970, Sinologist William A. Lyell published the first full English translation of *Mao Chengji* as *Cat Country: a satirical novel of China in the 1930's* (hereafter referred to as *Cat Country*). So far, scholars' interest in *Cat Country* has mainly focused on its literary features, while little attention has been paid to its translation studies, and the existing studies have only focused on the body part of the translation from the aspects of culturally loaded words (Wen, 2015), the concept of origin (Yang &Yuan, 2019), and the

translation strategy of verbal irony (Zhang, 2023), ignoring the research beyond the body text, and no researcher has yet explored the body of the text and its internal subtexts from the perspective of thick translation.

1. Introduction

William A. Lyell, the translator of *Cat Country: A Satirical Novel of China in the 1930's*, is not only a literary scholar, but also a Sinologist. He taught at Stanford University for thirty years and was a popular professor of Chinese. Lyell is very good at Chinese and has published some translations of modern and contemporary Chinese novels, such as Diary of a Madman and Ah Q Zheng Zhuan. Lyell's translations of Lu Xun's works have always been highly scrutinized by the translation community. However, the translation of Cat Country seems to have gone unnoticed. 43 years later the New York Review of Books published a review of *Cat Country in China: When the Cats Rule*, which affirmed the *Cat Country: A Satirical Novel of China in the 1930's* contemporary significance. There are fewer changes to the characters and plot in Lyell's translation, but the translator has also added endnotes, chapter headings, and an introduction to the source text by IAN JOHNSON.

The study written by Howard Goldblatt (1985, p. 117) and translated by Li Ruyi mentions that *Cat Country* is considered to be the best of all the English translations of Lao She's works, and as a classic translation of modern Chinese novels, this translation is well worth reading not only with consideration of the readers, but also in line with the original text's Chinese expressions, preservation of Chinese Chinese culture, and other features. In addition, Lu Juwen (1986, p. 124) demonstrates the value of *Mao Chengji* and its English version by comparing the thoughts of some famous scholars, including Pons of France, Dr. Gala Endres of Hungary, Tsuneo Hinoshita of Japan, and Howard Goldblatt and Chih-ching Hsia of the United States. Lu Chouwen (1986, p. 124) refers to Howard Goldblatt, who argues that *Cat Country* has a double value. On the one hand, Goldblatt sees *Cat Country* as a landmark of modern political writings in view of the dilemmas facing China in the 1930s. On the other hand, Lyle's excellent translation skills and translation strategies cultivate *Cat Country* as a model for future translators to study and to consult.

2. Overview of Thick Translation

The concept of "Thick Translation" originated from the anthropological term "Thick Description", which has been widely concerned by the translation community since it was proposed. The concept of " Thick Translation" was first proposed by American scholar Kwame Anthony Appiah, which refers to "adding auxiliary materials such as paraphrases and notes to the translated text, and placing the translated text in a deep linguistic and cultural context of the source language, and these auxiliary materials are intended to supplement a large amount of cultural background knowledge of the source language, so that the readers of the source language can accept the original text more quickly and better when they read the translated text. These auxiliary materials are intended to supplement a great deal of cultural background

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knowledge of the source language, so that the source language readers can accept the information conveyed by the original work faster and better in the process of reading the translated text, so that the reading effect of the readers can be optimized" (Appiah, 1993, p. 810). Later on, Maira Cowie and Mark Shuttleworth supplemented Appiah's theory of thick translation on the basis of the possible forms of thick translation strategy in the translated text, and believed that any expository text material containing a large amount of cultural information in the source language can be regarded as an application of the theory of thick translation, and not only confined to the material of the annotation and introduction, they emphasized more on the thick translation strategy and the application of the theory of thick translation. They emphasize the cultural aspect of the thick translation strategy, that is, to help readers improve their knowledge of the cultural background of the source language. They believe that the use of these expository texts is to better enrich the cultural background and linguistic context, reflecting the cultural communication function that can be realized by the thick translation strategy (Cowie & Shuttleworth, 2014, p. 171).

Since thick translation entered China, domestic researchers have carried out rich studies on thick translation, further elaborating the connotation of deep translation, enriching the connotation of the extension of deep translation, exploring the methods of building the cultural context of the communication of the translated text, so that the connotation of deep translation has been extended from the introduction and notes to the combination of various strategies and methods inside and outside of the text, such as folder notes, endnotes, footnotes, preface and postscripts, in-text explanations, introductory remarks and foreword, testimonials, etc., which enriches the operational methods of deep translation. Regarding the classification of thick translation, Cao Minglun (2013, p. 117) puts forward two classifications: explicit thick translation (adding commentaries and notes, etc., to the translated text) and implicit thick translation (adding vocabulary not found in the original text without changing the original meaning). Unlike other thick translation theory researchers, most of the existing deep translation studies in China only focus on the introduction, preface, recommendation words, endnotes, notes and footnotes outside the text, and few scholars pay attention to the translator's behavior inside the text. Therefore, this study applies the explicit thick translation strategy and implicit thick translation strategy proposed by Cao Minglun, and finds that Lyell's translation of *Cat Country* employs two implicit depth translation strategies, namely, adding adjectives and expository sentences, as well as three explicit thick translation strategies, namely, adding annotations at the end of the text and adding titles which reflects Lyell's translation skills of combining various translation methods, the principle of truth-seeking in translating culture, and the translation concept of serving the readers of the translated language, which promotes the dissemination of *Cat Country* and serves as a model for other translators to learn from.

3. Thick Translation in Lyell's Cat Country

The implicit and explicit thick translation strategy used by Lyell in *Cat Country* are as follows.

3.1 Implicit Thick Translation Strategies

In *Cat Country*, the implicit thick translation strategies used by Lyell mainly consists of adding some adjectives and expository sentences without changing the original meaning.

Example 1.

ST: 我的朋友可以毫不迟疑的指示我，但是他，他……噢！我的好友，我自幼同学的好友。

TT: My friend could have determined our location without the slightest hesitation, but my friend . . . my friend, my poor childhood friend!

Example 2.

ST: 不能不吃呀，有毒气，不吃迷叶便会死的呀……

TT: And the atmosphere contains a slow-acting poison that the reverie leaves

protect against ...

In Example 1 above, we can clearly see that the translator added the adjective "poor" when he mentioned my close friend who was killed in a plane crash, which added background information to the reader and also drew the reader closer to the characters of the novel. In Example 2, Lyell translates "poison gas" as "atmosphere contains a slow-acting poison", adding the adjective "slow-acting", which supplements the lack of information about the source language of the Chinese loaded word 'poisonous gas' and informs readers of the chronic toxic component of 'poisonous gas'.

Example 3.

ST: 按照我的亡友的计算，在飞机出险以前，我们确是已进了火星的气圈。

TT: According to my late friend's calculations, we were already in the Martian atmospheric envelope before the accident occurred; *if he was right, then I must indeed have landed on the planet Mars.*

In Example 3, due to Lao She's own strong literary style and the fact that Chinese is a language of meaning, the structure between sentences in *Mao Chengji* is not so compact, and Lyell adds the explanatory sentence "if he was right, then I must indeed have landed on the planet Mars" in order to supplement the hidden information between the structures of the Chinese translation and make it easier for the readers to understand the translation.

As an intermediary between the two languages, Lyell takes care of the difference between the source language and the target language when translating, and applies the implicit translation strategy of adding sensory adjectives and expository adjectives and sentences within the body of the text without affecting the meaning of the original text; thus, the translation is closer to the original text, which is clear to the readers at a glance. The translator's implicit thick translation strategy of conscious addition and elaboration not only preserves the structure and meaning of the source language, but also makes the reader of the target language receive the information in a better way.

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3.2 Explicit Thick Translation Strategies

In *Cat Country*, the explicit thick translation strategies adopted by Lyell is mainly the additions of title for every chapter and the annotation.

Titles have the function of summarizing the main content of each chapter, helping readers understand the structure and content of the text, and improving the reading experience. In the main text, Lao She's original *Cat Country* has no headings between chapters, but in Lyell's English translation of *Cat Country*, titles are added to each chapter in order to "make it easier for readers who have already finished the novel to locate a particular place quickly" (Lyell, 1961, p. ix), which also can hold the translated readers' attention. It is also possible to capture the interest of the translator's readers by using the titles to entice them to continue exploring.

The annotations used in Lyell's translation of *Cat Country* are mainly endnotes, and the method of endnotes provided by Lyell is different from the usual endnotes in that Lyell takes into account the reading experience of the target readers and arranges the endnotes in the form of a separate appendix to be placed after the whole translation. In fact, Lyell's endnotes echo the synopsis and social background of *Mao Chengji* that he mentions in the translator's preface, and both of them are subordinate to the explicit thick translation strategy, only in different forms. There are many culturally loaded words with Chinese characteristics in *Cat Country* (e.g., words such as the Book of Desperation, paper money, and tofu cubes, etc.), and Lyell adds many notes in his translation in order to avoid the problem of the translation readers' comprehension obstacles due to the incorrect translation of the culturally loaded words, although the content of the notes is more familiar to the readers of the original language of the source text, but it is a note on unfamiliar vocabulary to the readers of the translated language, which also a supplement and explanation of the corresponding background knowledge.

Example 4.

ST: 莫非男女授受不亲，在火星上也通行?这个猫人闹了半天是个女的?

TT: Could it be that the rule set down by our ancient Chinese sages proscribing physical contact between members of the opposite sex when things are given or received was practised here on Mars too?

Note: ancient Chinese sages proscribing physical contact between members of the opposite sex: As set down in classical Chinese texts such as the Book of Rites, one of the Five Classics traditionally believed to have been authored or edited by Confucius.

The Four Books and Five Classics mentioned in Example 4 represent the books of the Chinese Confucian classics. Among the Five Classics, the Confucian classic *Li Ji* contains a wide range of ethical, political and social philosophies. Among them, "male and female are not close to each other" is regarded as one of the important principles of interaction etiquette in ancient China. This principle emphasizes the need to keep a certain distance between men and women, and stipulates that men and women who are not husband and wife are not allowed to engage in such behaviors as speech, direct contact or exchange of objects. This regulation reflects the strict definition of the boundaries between men and women in feudal society, and is a kind of constraint on the relationship between men and women in ancient times, aiming

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to maintain the order of feudal rule. In his translation, Lyell translates the cultural connotation of "male-female bondage is not intimate" and provides a detailed explanation of its historical origin in the notes, which provides readers with the necessary cultural background knowledge and helps them to have a deeper understanding of the text.

In his English translation of *Cat Country*, Lyell adopts the explicit thick translation strategies of adding titles and annotations, trying to balance the dual needs of being faithful to the original work and serving target readers. The titles and notes added by the translator not only show the rich history and culture of *Cat Country*, but also greatly enrich the background knowledge of the translated readers, which helps them better and faster understand the political situation and culture of China at that time through the novel, and illustrates the understanding and respect for other cultures that the thick translation mode demonstrates.

4. Analysis of the Translator's View of Translation under the Use of Thick Translation

Thick translation, as a kind of academic translation, optimally reproduces the value of the original text, and Lyell combines the implicit thick translation strategy and explicit thick translation strategy in his translation of *Mao Chengji*, which is closely related to his own translation skills and translation view. The implicit thick translation strategy of adding some adjectives and expository sentences and the explicit thick translation strategy of adding chapter headings and notes are characterized by Lyell's translation skills of integrating various translation methods, the principle of truthfulness in translation culture and the translation concept of serving readers are also worth studying.

4.1 Translation Skills of Integrating Multiple Translation Methods

In the process of translation, what kind of translation methods should be used to make the translation close to the original text and maximize the message of the translation is a problem that the translator has to consider. After comparing the original language version of *Mao Chengji* and the English translation of Cat Country, the author finds that in addition to the basic literal translation and free translation, Lyell also uses the methods of transcreation and composite translation. It is worth mentioning that when translating "discount his words", Lyell translates the slang phrase "take something with a grain of salt", which means that one cannot fully believe what one has heard, so that the translation is as close as possible to the original text. When Lyell translates "Cat Lafuszji", he combines phonetic and direct translations, and translates it as "Cat Lafuszji" to imply that stupid cats only follow others' example but not innovate.

In the process of translation, due to the differences of different cultures and languages, the lack of information in translation is inevitable. In translating *Cat Country*, Lyell combines various translation methods to avoid cultural misinterpretation, which helps readers to further understand the target text.

4.2 The Principle of Truth-Seeking in Translation of Culture

Before Lyell translation of *Mao Chengji*, James E. Dew had already translated and published a English translation of *Mao Chengji*, but in this translation, the text was selectively cut down, the structure of the

source text was drastically changed, and the Chinese cultural vocabulary in the original text was intentionally cut down and not translated by the translator.

Lyell chose to retranslate *Mao Chengji* because the persecution and death of Lao She at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution stimulated the interest of overseas academics in the study of Lao She and his works in translation, and also because Lyell was dissatisfied with James's practice of arbitrarily abridging the cultural information of the original text and intentionally misinterpreting the original work (Li, 2013, p. 190). As a literary scholar who studies Chinese culture, Lyell's basic professional ethics ask himself to follow the principle of truth-seeking when translating culture, and his translation of Cat Country also carries the burden of cultural translating. In Lyell's Cat Country, the thick translation method of adding notes is used to reproduce traditional Chinese culture. As Lyell himself says in Diary of a Madman and Other Stories, "The translator should endeavor to provide sufficient information to ensure that the reader receives essentially the same understanding or misunderstanding as the translator. Secondly, translators should take steps to ensure that their translations appeal to as wide a readership as possible, not just those who are already knowledgeable about Chinese history and culture." (Lyell, 1990, p. xlii), Lyell's own principle of truth-seeking pursued when translating culture is evident.

4.3 Translation Guidelines for Serving Readers

The translator plays the role of mediating between the original text and the target text, and likewise plays the role of a bridge between the translated text and the readers of the target text.

In Lyell's English translation, Lyell writes a preface for the translation, in which the storyline of the novel and the main characters are roughly introduced, and Lyell gives his own evaluation of the characters in the novel, and his interpretation provides the readers of the translated text with the "expectant field of vision" in the aesthetics of acceptance, which produces a "pre-comprehension" for the readers before they read the text formally. Lyell also talks about the original text in the translator's preface, indicating that his translation is based on Lao She's *Mao Chengji*, published by Morning Glory Publishing Company in 1949, which provides a convenient search for researchers and readers who want to read the book in a bilingual context. In the translation, Lyell adds titles for each chapter, which facilitates the reader to read the framework more clearly; in order to further serve the readers, Lyell annotates some elements of customs and culture, mythological characters and other elements of his own translation, so that the novel realizes the value-added significance of the text and helps readers to remove obstacles to their reading comprehension.

5. Conclusion

In Lyell English translation of *Cat Country*, he combines a variety of translation techniques, adheres to the principle of truth-seeking in transmitting culture, and adheres to the translation guideline of serving readers, combining the implicit thick translation strategy of adding a few adjectives and expository sentences, and the explicit thick translation strategy of adding chapter headings and notes, which has made Lyell's English translation of *Cat Country* a highly popular one. Lyell's English translation of *Cat*

Country is very well received. The success of Lyell's English translation undoubtedly proves that thick translation is a fruitful translation method, and at the same time, the use of thick translation also requires that the translator must have the spirit of dedication to be able to play on the basis of the translator's rich historical and cultural literacy. Only when the translator improves his own cultural literacy can the translator combine the translation with the specific historical and cultural contexts and realize the maximization and optimization of the translation.

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