Original Paper

Exploring the Translation Strategy of the Prose "Transient Days" from the Perspective of Semantic and Communicative Translation Theory

Zongyi Zhang[1] & Guangfang Huang[2]

[1] Hubei University of Technology, Wuhan, 430068, China

[2] Corresponding author, Guangfang Huang, Hubei University of Technology, Wuhan, 430068, China

Abstract

This paper explores the translation strategies applied in the English translation of Zhu Ziqing's (hereafter, Zhu) prose, "Transient Days" through the theoretical lens of Peter Newmark's semantic and communicative translation theories. It provides an in-depth analysis of how these distinct approaches influence the translation process, focusing on lexical choices, sentence structures, and cultural adaptations. By examining the translation's fidelity to the original text and its effectiveness in engaging the target audience, the study highlights the nuanced decisions that shape the translation of literary texts. The analysis reveals the balance between maintaining the stylistic and cultural essence of the source text and making it accessible and resonant for a Western audience. This exploration contributes to a broader understanding of translation practices and the dynamic interplay between semantic accuracy and communicative clarity.

Keywords

semantic translation, communicative translation, Zhu Ziqing, Transient Days

1. Introduction

Literary translation plays a crucial role in fostering cross-cultural communication, enabling worldwide audience to explore and appreciate literature from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This process not only enhances mutual understanding but also contributes to the richness of the global literary scene (Grossman, 2010). Apart from its importance, literary translation encompasses numerous challenges, including the need to be faithful to the source text in terms of style, culture and emotion. Translators must observe the differences in linguistic structures, idiomatic expressions, and cultural contexts to produce texts that resonate with the target readers while testing the authenticity of the source material (Yang, 2019).

To address these issues, various theoretical frameworks have emerged. One notable approach is the

foreignization, which seeks to preserve the cultural core of the original work, thereby allowing readers to be in contact with the foreign culture (Sun, 2002). Additionally, theories emphasizing the translator's role as a bridge who reconstructs the literary value and aesthetic experience of the original work underscore the need for effective cross-cultural communication. Functional theories like the Skopos theory acknowledges that translators need to translate based on the intended audience and the specific uses of the target language (Gu, 2015). Although the current translation theories provide valuable insights, they also have limitations that may not comprehensively handle all the subtleties of literary translation. Foreignization has the danger of estranging the intended audience by excessively preserving cultural specifics, possibly making the work less comprehensible. Similarly, the Skopos approach, although pragmatic, may sacrifice the stylistic and grammatical accuracy of the original text to prioritize usefulness. These issues emphasize the necessity of a well-rounded methodology that effectively manages both the semantic coherence and communication efficacy of translation.

In this context, Peter Newmark's theories of semantic and communicative translation offer a practical framework for overcoming these translation challenges. Newmark differentiates between semantic translation, which emphasizes the preservation of the source text's meaning, and communicative translation, which prioritizes the effect on the intended audience (Chen & Zhang, 2008). Semantic translation is typically used in expressive texts where the original author's stylistic features are distinct. On the contrary, communicative translation is used in informative and vocative texts where clarity is paramount (Zu & Yang, 2015).

"Transient Days" is a celebrated essay by famous Chinese prose writer Zhu. Composed in 1922, the essay effectively conveys the transitory essence of time through sentimental and refined writing. Zhu adeptly captures time's ephemeral essence, emphasizing a feeling of helplessness and melancholy regarding lost moments. The essay is distinguished by its immaculate organization, clear and memorable language, and flawless integration of imagery with emotional depth. Through vivid depictions of swallows, willows, peach blossoms, and the sun, Zhu weaves a narrative that resonates deeply with the sorrow and resignation felt towards the transient nature of life.

This study, through the adoption of Newmark's semantic and communicative translation theories, explores the English translation of Zhu's prose, *Transient Days*. The major focus is on the translation strategies employed in the prose, shedding light on the translator's decisions for the lexical, syntactical, and cultural levels. This not only enables us to clearly perceive the beauty that emerges from a faithful translation of the original text but also allows westerners to experience the charm of Chinese classical literature.

2. An Overview of Newmark's Semantic and Communicative Translation Theory

Translation refers to the process or result of changing the content of one language or language variant into another language or language variant, or the accurate and complete reproduction of a text composed of language materials in another language (Xie, 2015). And in translation, the contradiction

between faithfulness to the original text and faithfulness to the translated text is an eternal theme in translation theory and practice. Considering additional significant aspects of translation, including the translator's intention, the characteristics of the audience, and text typology, Newmark (2001) delineates two modes of translation: semantic translation and communicative translation, which are regarded as more pragmatic than the theoretical discourses on translation methodologies. Semantic translation is designed to replicate the precise contextual meaning of the original text within the syntactic and semantic constraints of the target language, emphasizing adherence to the original text's meaning, style, and cultural context. Its primary objective is to maintain the integrity of the original author's intent and the text's intrinsic meaning. In contrast, the goal of communicative translation is to replicate, to the best of our ability, the impact that the original audience had on the intended audience. This approach emphasizes the readability and naturalness of the translated text, often adapting cultural references and idiomatic expressions to better fit the target language and culture (Zhong & Zhang, 2000).

Semantic translation and communicative translation have found substantial applications in various discourses, such as translation of film titles, Sichuan opera, trademarks, news headlines, and English poems. Tang & Liu (2013) maintain that semantic translation and communicative translation are interchangeable methodologies that complement each other instead of being conflicting translation principles. From the perspective of such translation theories, Wang (2021) provides examples for the study of English translations of Sichuan Opera, thereby enhancing the translation quality and facilitating the preservation, evolution, and external dissemination of Sichuan opera. Liu & Huo (2012) consider that by integrating translation skills, translator tend to convey the surface meaning of the trademark to consumers as well as evoke their cultural response more easily. Zhang (2007) deems that through the combination, such methodologies can be explicit to be found in the translation of news headlines, especially in the processes of lexical change, structural reorganization, and rhetorical application. Chen (2010) asserts that by flexible selection of such methods, English poetry translation is as faithful as possible to the style of the original poem in terms of content, while overcoming language and cultural barriers.

To be brief, these two theories are widely used in translation practice. Although these have their own unique characteristics, they are not mutually exclusive. In fact, the most effective translations generally result from a flexible combination of both theories, designed to address specific translation difficulties.

3. Analysis of Semantic and Communicative Translation Theory Adopted in the *Transient Days*

Translating Zhu's Transient Days requires preserving the original's poetic and reflective essence. The translator's challenge was to convey Zhu's subtle and complex language, which combines emotional depth with cultural nuances. This involved careful word selection to maintain the tone and resonance of the original, and thoughtful adaptation of sentence structures to replicate Zhu's stylistic nuances in English. Overall, the translation demanded a deep understanding of the original language and cultural components of the prose. The following examples are excerpted from the first volume of *Selected*

30

Modern Chinese Essays Rendered into English by Zhang Peiji (Zhang, 2007).

3.1 Restoring the Original Feature of Source Language

3.1.1 Word Choices

In approaching the translation of Zhu's Transient Days, specific attention to individual word choices was essential to preserve the exactness and emotional resonance of the original text in the target text. Below, key words from the original are analyzed to demonstrate the fidelity of the translation:

Example 1

ST: 我不知道他们给了我多少日子；但我的手确乎是渐渐空虚了。

TT: I don't know how many days I am entitled to altogether, but my hands are undoubtedly <u>emptying</u>.

Analysis: The word "空虚" is translated as "emptying". This translation conveys the ongoing process of loss and the gradual feeling of emptiness, preserving the original's sense of a slow, irreversible depletion.

Example 2

ST: 天黑时，我躺在床上，他便<u>伶俐地</u>从我身上跨过，从我脚边<u>飞</u>去了。

TT: In the evening, when I lie on my bed, it <u>nimbly</u> strides over my body and <u>flits</u> past my feet.

Analysis: "伶俐地" is translated directly as "nimbly", capturing the agility and lightness of the original description. "飞" becomes "flits", a word that also carries connotations of light and quick movement, appropriate for describing the fleeting nature of time.

Example 3

ST: 早上我起来的时候，小屋里射进两三方<u>斜</u>的太阳。

TT: When I get up in the morning, the slanting sun casts two or three squarish patches of light into my small room.

Analysis: "斜" is translated as "slanting". This choice effectively conveys the angle of the sunlight, maintaining the visual imagery and mood of the morning described in the original.

Example 4

ST: 但是新来的日子的影儿又开始在叹息里<u>闪</u>过了。

TT: But, in the midst of my sighs, a new day is flashing past.

Analysis: "闪" is translated to "flashing", emphasizing the brief and sudden nature of time's passage, similar to a flash-quick and leaving almost no trace. These examples highlight the translator's meticulous choice of words to ensure the English version resonates with the same nuance and depth as Zhu's original Chinese prose. By focusing on individual words, the translation captures both the literal and deeper emotional layers of the text, facilitating a profound connection with the reader.

3.1.2 Sentence Structures

While delving into the translation of Zhu's *Transient Days*, attention to sentence structures was crucial for maintaining the original text's rhythm and meaning in the target text. The study on the comparative aspect of syntactic structure similarity between Chinese and English highlights the impact of native language experience on second language syntactic processing, which is relevant to translation strategies

31

(Guo & Chen, 2009).

Example 5

ST: 在默默里算着，八千多日子已经从我手中溜去。

TT: Counting up silently, I find that more than 8,000 days have already slipped away through my fingers.

Analysis: This example effectively illustrates how the English translation adapts the Chinese structure, which employs a subordinate clause followed by a main clause. The original Chinese uses "在默默里算着" as a lead-in phrase. The English version translates this into a present participle phrase "Counting up silently", serving as a temporal modifier to the main clause. This not only follows the structure of the Chinese original but also aligns the logical subject across both clauses in English, ensuring grammatical precision. The translator's adherence to both semantic translation theory and the rigorous grammatical standards of English exemplifies a commendable balance in translation practice.

Example 6

ST: 你聪明的，告诉我，我们的日子为什么一去不复返呢？

TT: you the wise, would you tell me please: why should our days go by never to return?

Analysis: The original uses a rhetorical question to engage the reader and provoke thought about the fleeting nature of time. The translation faithfully reproduces this rhetorical structure, utilizing a direct address, "you the wise", followed by a request for explanation, framed as a rhetorical question. This approach not only preserves the direct and contemplative nature of the original query but also enhances the emotive appeal, inviting English readers to ponder the same existential questions. This translation strategy effectively maintains the poetic and reflective qualities of the source text, fostering a deep connection with the theme of impermanence.

Example 7

ST: 去的尽管去了，来的尽管来着

TT: What is gone is gone, what is to come keeps coming.

Analysis: In this example, both the original and the translated texts utilize two short sentences connected by a comma, which succinctly capture the ephemeral nature of time. The structure of each sentence pair in the translation closely follows the original, with each segment reflecting a direct and concise declaration about the nature of time—its departure and its arrival. The Chinese phrases "去的尽管去了" and "来的尽管来着" are structured with nominal phrases followed by a verb phrase, a pattern that is preserved in the translation. "What is gone" parallels "去的" as a nominal element, and "is gone" translates "去了" as a verb phrase. Similarly, "what is to come" corresponds to "来的", and "keeps coming" to "来着". This careful alignment of phrase structures not only maintains the syntactic integrity of the original but also its rhythmic quality, emphasizing the continuous and inevitable flow of time.

3.2 The Expressiveness of the Output Translation

In translating texts, translators must prioritize making the translation easily understandable for the

32

readers. It is imperative that the translation is consistent with the cultural and linguistic preferences of the intended audience, enhancing both the readability and acceptability of the text. This approach aligns with the principles of communicative translation theory and reflects the emphasis on "expressiveness" in Yan Fu's translation philosophy, where expressiveness involves making the text accessible and engaging for the target culture.

3.2.1 Phrase Selection

When rendering Zhu's Transient Times into another language, the translator has adeptly employed communicative translation theory to creatively transform phrases from the source text. This approach ensures that English-speaking readers can deeply grasp the original meanings and themes. Specific English phrases have been selected to evoke a deeper understanding and maintain the thematic integrity of the original text, effectively bridging linguistic gaps.

Example 8

ST: I don't know how many days I <u>am entitled to</u> altogether, but <u>my quota of them</u> is undoubtedly <u>wearing away</u>.

TT: 我不知道他们给了我多少日子；但我的手确乎是渐渐空虚了。

Analysis: The phrase "be entitled to" is typically used to denote a right or claim legally recognized and granted. In the source text "我不知道他们给了我多少日子", the translator's choice to use "I don't know how many days I am entitled to altogether" emphasizes that each day is a precious commodity, legally or universally bestowed upon an individual. This translation enriches the reader's appreciation of time's value, conveying that each moment is not just given but is a rightful allocation that one should cherish. Using a simpler alternative like "given" would not capture the sense of entitlement and inherent worth of time suggested by the original text.

The term "the quota of" refers to a legally or officially fixed allowance or share of something. By translating "我的手确乎是渐渐空虚了" as "my quota of them is undoubtedly wearing away", the translator retains the concept of limitation and scarcity associated with time. This phrase effectively mirrors the existential weight present in the Chinese text, as it suggests a finite allocation that is diminishing. The choice avoids a literal but contextually hollow translation such as "my hands are becoming empty", which might imply a physical emptiness rather than the metaphorical and existential draining of life's allotted time.

Finally, "wear away" is an English verb phrase meaning to diminish gradually through use or time, perfectly capturing the slow erosion of life's moments. The phrase "my quota of them is undoubtedly wearing away" translates "我的手确乎是渐渐空虚了" not just literally but evocatively, highlighting the inevitable passage of time and the gradual loss inherent in living. This choice aligns seamlessly with the theme and overall context of the narrative, enhancing the thematic unity and emotional resonance of the translation.

Example 9

ST: 我的日子滴在时间的流里，<u>没有声音，也没有影子</u>。

TT: My days are quietly dripping into the stream of time <u>without leaving a trace</u>.

Analysis: In the source text (ST), the phrase "没有声音" and "没有影子" are encapsulated in the translation as "without leaving a trace". This choice by the translator demonstrates sensitivity to the linguistic differences between Chinese and English. In Chinese, expressing the absence of both sound and trace separately is common, whereas English tends to condense such ideas into a single concept, as seen in "trace". This translation strategy aligns with principles of communicative translation, aiming for a more concise and idiomatic expression in English. It effectively captures the original sentiment of the fleeting nature of time without unnecessary elaboration.

3.2.2 Logical Relations

In literary translation process, managing the logical relationships between the source and target languages presents a significant challenge. In Chinese, logical relationships within sentences often exist without explicit logical connectors. Conversely, in English translations, these logical connectors tend to be explicitly present to maintain coherence. This difference underscores a fundamental contrast in how the two languages structure logic and coherence in narrative forms.

Example 10

ST: 我觉察他去的匆匆了，伸出手遮挽时，他又从遮挽着的手边过去

TT: Aware of its fleeting presence, I reach out for it only to find it brushing past my outstretched hands

Analysis: In the source text , the phrases "伸出手遮挽时" and "他又从遮挽着的手边过去" clearly represent a adversative relation, yet this contrast is not explicitly marked in Chinese. The translator uses the phrase "only to" to indicate an unexpected outcome, effectively expressing the transition from effort to unfulfilled intention. This difference illustrates that while Chinese may not use overt markers for logical relations, English frequently employs explicit connectors, such as "only to" in this case, to clarify the logical progression of thoughts.

The translator's ability to accurately recognize the differences in expression between Chinese and English highlights a clear and culturally appropriate representation of logical relationships in the translation. This adept application of communicative translation theory demonstrates the translator's proficiency in enhancing the clarity and coherence of the translated text, making it more accessible and relatable to the English-speaking audience.

3.2.3 Cultural Differences

Religious culture is shaped by the beliefs and ideologies stemming from a nation's religious practices, which manifest in distinct cultural nuances of worship and taboos. In China, the major ideological systems profoundly influencing the society include Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Conversely, In western countries, christianity and the concept of inherent human rights have a significant impact. The divergence in cultural and religious beliefs often means that certain concepts in Chinese cannot be directly translated into English using equivalent terms (Yang, 2001). To bridge these gaps,

34

communicative translation theory is employed, making the text more comprehensible to those unfamiliar with the original cultural context.

Example 11

ST: 为什么偏要白白走这一遭啊?

TT: Why should I be made to pass through this world for nothing at all?

Analysis: The Chinese phrase uses an active voice "偏要白白走这一遭", implying a personal, active decision in experiencing life. In contrast, the English translation, "be made to pass", shifts to a passive voice, subtly introducing the notion that one's journey through life is not merely a personal choice but perhaps dictated by a higher power-a reflection of Christian theological perspectives where life's journey is often viewed as determined by divine will. This translation, influenced by Western religious contexts, suggests that existence is granted by divine right, a concept resonant with Christian beliefs. By utilizing communicative translation theory, the translator effectively adapts the sentence to accommodate cultural differences, thus enhancing understanding among Western readers.

4. Conclusion

The English translation of *Transient Days*, utilizing semantic and communicative translation theories, illustrates the complex nature of translation as an balance between fidelity and adaptation. Semantic translation, with its focus on preserving the original's language and cultural subtleties, is essential for demonstrating the depth and stylistic complexities of the source text. Conversely, communicative translation emphasizes the reader's experience, guaranteeing that the translation is both comprehensible and captivating for the target audience. This study highlights the necessity for the translator to be attuned to both the original text and the cultural and linguistic background of the target audience. Ultimately, proficient translation necessitates a cohesive integration of semantic and communication tactics, customized to the particular requirements of the text and the anticipation of its new audience. By addressing these two imperatives, translators enable a profound cross-cultural literary interchange, enhancing the global literary landscape with many viewpoints and storylines. This study underscores the applicability and significance of Newmark's theories in modern translation practice, offering essential insights for translators and academics in future translation practices and studies.

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36