

# ***The Research of Culture-bounded Terms in the English Translation of Red Sorghum from the Perspective of Relevance Theory***

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**Abstract:** Winning of the Nobel Prize for Literature gave Mo Yan an international reputation. And the study of Howard Goldblatt's translation of Mo's work has become a trend. Previous studies have already taken various perspectives to research Goldblatt's translation texts, focusing on his translation strategies and the effects in the western world. As *Red Sorghum* is among the most popular novels of Mo Yan in the western world, this essay will take it as the research material to reveal Goldblatt's translation strategy of Explicitation from the perspective of the Relevance Theory, and thus to conclude a feasible approach for translators to disseminate Chinese literature and culture to be seen and heard by the world. It creatively combines Explicitation in stylistics and the Relevance Theory to categorize the effects of the translation in three types: add dramatic effects, enhance the tone and make the words more vivid. The findings indicate that Explicitation is a feature of Goldblatt's translation work and it does take positive effects on the dissemination of Chinese culture, providing the target readers the highest contextual effect with the lowest processing efforts.

**Keywords:** *Red Sorghum*, Goldblatt, Explicitation, the Relevance Theory, culture-bounded terms

## **1. Introduction**

Chinese literature's international distribution is crucial for fostering goodwill toward China, increasing Chinese culture's soft power, and strengthening the country. There is no denying, however, that Chinese literature continues to occupy a marginal and underdeveloped place in the world of literature, and there is still much to be done to promote Chinese local literature across cultures. In 2012, Mo Yan, a leading figure in Chinese literature, won the Nobel Prize for Literature, which increased the stature of Chinese literature worldwide and made the translation of Chinese literature a hot subject in academic circles. Most of Mo's novels have been translated into multiple foreign languages, including nearly 20 translations of *Red Sorghum*.

Among all the translation versions, Howard Goldblatt's English translation is the most influential and crucial one. Goldblatt was born in 1939. He served in the Chinese army in Taiwan, China, and studied Chinese systematically during his military service. Later, he studied Chinese literature at Indiana University, and eventually received a doctorate degree in Chinese literature. So far, more than

60 excellent works by Chinese writers have been translated into English by him. Goldblatt has translated more Chinese novels than any other translator in history, and is praised by Professor Xia Zhiqing as “Chief translator of contemporary Chinese literature” [1]. Goldblatt's translation is not confined to word for word translation, but focuses on cultural conversion, which is generally referred to as “translation with transformation”. It is because of his flexible translation method that Chinese literary works go abroad and become popular in Western countries. Accepted and loved by English readers, he has made great contributions to the spread of excellent Chinese literary works around the world.

So this essay takes Goldblatt's translation of *Red Sorghum* as the object of study to research his translation strategy. As Chinese is a high-context language, how does Howard Goldblatt translate the words and sentences which contain implicated meaning and make the book popular in the English world? Also, Explicitation is inevitable in translation process. Appropriately adopting of Explicitation contributes to expressing the original author's communicative intention for translators. Based on the relevance theory, this study chooses Goldblatt's *Red Sorghum* as the case to explore the Explicitation in application, and further illustrate the reasons why the Explicitation occurs and the effects of translation in the target language context. “When a translation goes foreign, winning the recognition of foreign experts and the response of foreign readers is the key to the success of overseas work communication” [2].

This study has following purposes. For one thing, it aims at discovering how Goldblatt uses the Explicitation in translation. For another, it will explore the causes for the application from the perspective of the Relevance Theory. It aims at showing how to translate *Red Sorghum* more successfully and to provide some lessons for other translators to translate Chinese novels.

This essay combines the Relevance Theory with Translation Stylistics to demonstrate Goldblatt's strategy. As there are only 6 articles focus on the translation of Goldblatt's *Red Sorghum* now from the perspective of the relevance theory which research of the translation strategy of culture-bounded terms [3-8], this essay will combine the Relevance Theory with Translation Stylistics to reveal the application of The Explicitation in it. It will also show why this translation version can achieve the optimal relevance.

## 2. The Relevance Theory and Explicitation

The Relevance theory, proposed by Sperber, D. and Wilson, D. [9], is considered as one of the important theories in the cognitive pragmatics. The Relevance theory is a study built on cognitive pragmatics that seeks to describe how people communicate with one another. It is a deduction and summation drawn from human communication activities. If the translator wants to achieve the successful communication, he should ensure the reader can get his informative and communicative intentions. Finding the optimal relevance between the source language and the target language is therefore part of the process to acquire these. The degree of the optimal relevance is dependent on processing efforts and contextual effects, claim Sperber, D. and Wilson, D [9]. At the same degree of communication, the reader will receive more relevance and greater contextual effects if they exert less processing efforts [9].

Explicitation is an obvious stylistic feature of Goldblatt's translation. Vinay & Darbelnet claim that Explicitation is the act of stating the content of the initial text in a more precise manner [10, 11]. Guttinger [12] points out that the target text with Explicitation is usually lengthier than the initial one. Common Explicitations include the addition of clarifying phrases, the explicit expression of implicit meanings, and the addition of connectives to make writings more logical and understandable to readers from other countries [13]. Explicitation is seen from two different angles in the west. One is antagonistic: Even though the translator employs Explicitation to clarify the original text's meaning to the intended audience, there are instances when it is just a helpless gesture (an inevitable result of

translation mediation). Regardless of the cause, the outcome is the same: “The translator extends the target text into a semantic redundancy that the original does not have” [14]. While in accordance with the opposing viewpoint, it is acknowledged that adding some redundancy to “elongate” the information can make the translation simpler to understand [15].

This essay follows the perspective of the Relevance Theory to reveal Goldblatt’s translation strategy in providing English readers with optimal relevance. Lin has thoroughly explained the relevance theory, pointing out that translators need to provide foreign readers with optimal relevance in which the readers use the least processing efforts to reach the best contextual effects [16]. Most translation researches focus on domestication and foreignization. Only a few take Explicitation as the strategy of translation works nowadays. So this article will incorporate it into the relevance theory to answer the research question.

### 3. Explication in Goldblatt’s Translation

Howard Goldblatt’s English translation of *Red Sorghum* was produced for more than 20 years, and was highly accepted overseas, becoming one of the research hotspots in the academia. Researches on his translation of this text is pivotal as it can provide a model for other Chinese literature translation.

This paper, focusing on expressions of Goldblatt’s translation, will analyze the effects of these words with Explicitation in certain contexts. The article will take the method of intensive reading and compare Goldblatt’s expressions and the original words in Mo Yan’s work. As Goldblatt’s words and sentences varied, the essay will classify them into three types according to their manifestations: add dramatic effects, enhance the tone and make the words more vivid.

#### 3.1. Add Dramatic Effects

哑巴是余司令的老朋友，一同在高粱地里吃过“**抻饼**”的草莽英雄[17]。

Mute was one of Commander Yu’s old bandits friends, a greenwood hero who had eaten **fistcakes** in the sorghum field [18].

In *Red Sorghum*, Mo uses a large amount of dialects to depict the and characterize the residents of Gaomi county. This sentence is in the beginning of the novel, introducing Mute and the reason he limped. “吃抻饼” in Shandong dialect means the bandits rob others’ belongings. It shows Mute and Commander Yu’s deep friendship. As later in the text, Mute and all the other comrades would die for combatting with Japanese, this depiction can cause a contrast in comparing with Mute’s death. Goldblatt translates it into “fistcake”, which means the cake is won by fighting or robbing. With “bandits” and “greenwood hero” in the sentence, the readers can easily understand the connotation. In addition, this coined word is also humorous, causing the same effect with Mo’s expression.

余司令说：“**你好大的命**[17]。”

“**The heavens have smiled on you,**” Commander Yu said [18].

In the original text, the author wants to convey that Wang Wenyi was lucky to be safe in such a critical situation. In Western Christian’s concept, “death” can easily make the translator think of God and heaven. It means Wang was really lucky. And in the context of the translator and target readers, it is also emphasized that it is possible to see heaven only when someone is close to death. This dialogue appeared when Wang Wenyi was hit by Mute accidentally on his ear, and Commander Yu bandaged him. At this time Commander Yu was to stimulate Wang Wenyi’s fighting spirit, letting him not be afraid. Western readers can’t understand the original Chinese expression, so the Goldblatt translates it into a more understandable one. And it also creates humorous effects.

The text is the product of a specific environment, which experiences artificial transformation and selection. And so does literary text, which also experiences selection and self-variation, and finally realizes the cross-cultural travel of text meaning. In this process, the translator acts as the “ferryman”,

“reformer” and “builder” of the text. In other words, the translators are adapting the exotic cultures into the readers’ local cultures through translating. Thus, they must take some changes in the forms and expressions of the original texts to cater to the readers’ tastes. Mo Yan’s use of dialects in the original work can be easily understood by Chinese and makes them feel familiar and kind, while the English readers cannot comprehend the real meaning. If Goldblatt translate the first example directly into “Qiabing”, the Western readers would not only fail to identify the connotation, but also take the text as a boring novel. Goldblatt, however, as a master in language, creatively humorously translate it into “fistcake” which can dispel foreign readers’ confusion. Also in the second example, he chooses a more familiar expression, related to the God, to let the novel approach the target readers.

### 3.2. Enhance the Tone

他跟着后来名满天下的传奇英雄余占鳌司令的队舞去胶平公路伏击敌人的汽车队[17]。

My father... was joining the forces of Commander Yu Zhan’ao, a man **destined to** become a legendary hero, to ambush a Japanese convey on the Jiao-Ping highway [18].

This is the very first sentence of the book. In this translation, Goldblatt add “destined to”, which means becoming a hero is the destiny of Yu Zhan’ao. This has enhanced the tone, making the result that happens in the future more absolute. As in the book, “I”, the grandson of Yu Zhan’ao had thought about the question that “whether a hero is inborn or made?” And his answer is inborn. Therefore, Goldblatt’s translation “destined to” is entirely appropriate.

Influenced by the idea of Yin and Yang in ancient Chinese philosophy, Chinese people tend to view the world as a whole of Yin and Yang opposites, believing that everything in the world is dualistic. The unity of Yin and Yang has given birth to the holistic thinking of the Chinese people. Therefore, the Chinese emphasize the unity of relevance. And ancient Greek philosophy is the origin of Western culture. The logical speculation and rational spirit in Greek culture gave birth to the rational thinking mode of Westerners. So precision is one of the hallmarks of the modern Western way of thinking. This habit of precise thinking makes them take care to explain everything clearly. Chinese aesthetic experience tends to be intuitive. Chinese pay more attention to the artistic or spiritual experience than the appearance and image. In the form of thinking, integrity is more prominent. In Western culture, Westerners follow a rational way of thinking, usually starting with perceptual cognition and then rising to rational cognition. In this process, the rational factor is always dominant. Therefore, Goldblatt explicates the logical relevance between the present and the future to make the text more acceptable for western readers, achieving the optimal relevance.

### 3.3. Make the Words More Vivid

中年人说：“您老，犯不着跟这跟**糟木头**生气[17]。”

“Revered one,” the man said, “that **stinking blockhead** isn’t worth getting angry over [18].”

This sentence was put forward by a middle aged man being caught by the Japanese and working together with Uncle Arhat. His shrewdness of judging the situation and ingratiating himself with the overseer was in a great contrast with Uncle Arhat. And he used “stinking blockhead” to depict Uncle Arhat in order to save him by belittling him. Here, “糟木头” in Chinese means stupid. But there is no equivalent in English. Goldblatt translates it to “stinking blockhead”, which exists in the target language. By this, foreign readers can understand it easily. Under the whip of the overseer, Uncle Arhat swallowed his dignity. But this fear gradually dissipates with the development of the plot, Uncle Arhat, inspired by the middle-aged man who escaped in a night, gathered all his courage to escape the cage. So this sentence saved Uncle Arhat from the overseer’s whip.

你奶奶年轻时**花花事儿**多着咧[17].....

When your grandma was young she **sowed plenty of wild oats** [18].

The original Chinese expression reminds readers of idle playboys, with derogatory meaning. Given that many people considered that Uncle Arhat, the long-term worker in Grandma's family, may have had an affair with Grandma. It can be inferred that this depiction refers to Grandma's private life, which was not in accordance with the standards of that time. "Sow wild oats" means to be wild in life, especially when it comes to sex. Goldblatt does not translate it into "flower things" which retains the original implicit connotation. Instead, he adopts Explicitation to find similar expressions in English, so that readers could better understand it. This translation conforms to the reading habits of the target readers, which is conducive for them to understand the characteristics of grandma.

In the two cases, the translator puts the original author Mo Yan in front of the target readers (i.e. western readers) and lets them have a direct dialogue. As Goldblatt himself understands Chinese and the source text from Mo Yan's point of view, while the target readers do not and only understand the text without effort after the translation process making it into their native language. At the same time, after adopting the stylistic method of Explicitation, that is, adding "stinking blockhead", a cultural image familiar to Western readers, to minimize the disturbance of readers' peace and let Mo Yan approach Western readers.

#### 4. Conclusion

According to the Relevance Theory, communication is an ostensive-inferential process involving information and communication intention. Ostensive is to express the author's point of view obviously, and inferential is to get the author's communicative intention by a combination of contextual effects. Thus, Goldblatt adopts Explicitation to meet the expression habit of readers while trying his best to be faithful to the original author's intention, to strengthen the readability of the translation version and to achieve optimal relevance.

This paper follows the usual way of translation stylistics studies, namely, taking the translated text as the focus of attention, the original text with analogical relation in the target language as the norm, and comparing the two texts to explore some features of the translated text which are different from the original one. In general, Goldblatt not only caters to the needs of Western readers, accurately conveys the unique cultural information in the original text to them, and achieves optimal relevance, but also effectively promotes the dissemination of Chinese literary works in the West, which is worthy of reference for other translators. Translation is a kind of intensive work, which requires a large amount of accumulation. Therefore, only after the author's creative rendering with emotions, these initially pale text symbols can be vivid, and resonate with the readers. And correspondently, only after the emotional resonance of the work with the author, and combined with the cultural background of both regions, the translator can produce an excellent translation recognized by readers.

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