

The Operation of Language in Poetry Translation

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Abstract: The translation of one literary work from its mother language to a target language is certainly a key area of research in literary studies and comparative literature. The translation of literary works, specifically poetry, is extremely flexible and requires intricate operations of language. Not only do translators have to take into account of the structural elements of a poem, but also more obscure elements such as imagery and theme. This paper will explore the key elements of poetry translation, and the indispensable constituents of a successful translation of poetry, and focus primarily on the comparison of English and Chinese poetry along with their translations. The poetry that will be examined are Sonnet 130 written by Shakespeare and its Chinese translations, The Raven by Edgar Allan Poe, and the famous Chinese poem Yellow Crane Tower. Through the examination and analysis of these poems, a clearer definition of poetry translation can be achieved.

Keywords: poetry, translation, comparison, operation

1. Introduction

The translation of literary works from one particular language to another target language has always been an intricate process that requires thorough understanding and proficient command of both methods of communication. Roman Jakobson characterized the translation of languages into three distinct categories: Intralingual Translation, Interlingual Translation, and Intersemiotic Translation [1]. Specifically, Interlingual Translation is the translation, or interpretation, of specific signs using a separate language. For instance, if one were to understand the English word “apple” in Chinese, a Chinese equivalent is necessary. In this case, the word would be “苹果”. Thus, this paper will primarily focus on Interlingual Translation as its definition lies in close proximity with the topic of translating poetry.

Poetry, one can say, is the intricate combination of figurative languages, rhetorical devices, miscellaneous structures, and idiosyncratic dictions that aims to illustrate specific images and convey meaning. Notwithstanding the fact that advanced translation tools such as google translator and artificial intelligence has brought forth great convenience and efficiency, the translation of poetry is still an extremely complex process that requires a cognitive mind due to its flexibility and its element of uncertainty. A poetry translator needs to take into account of not only structural factors such as rhyme schemes but also selecting the appropriate substitutions to convey the correct interpretations and imagery to the reader. The poem translated into the target language should be just as meaningful and as enjoyable as its original copy. Thus, interlingual translation may not be applicable to the process of poetic translation at certain times, as the translator needs to

acknowledge the flexibility of language in order to portray the poem completely and correctly.

2. Main Body

Shakespeare's Sonnets are probably some of the most influential and prominent poems in the history of English poetry, catalyzing countless different versions of translations in various languages. In his Sonnet 130, Shakespeare deviates from the conventional form of Elizabethan love sonnets, and instead utilizes parody to convey the beauty of a woman he appreciates. The original poem is displayed below:

*My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips' red:
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
I have seen roses damask'd, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
That music hath a far more pleasing sound:
I grant I never saw a goddess go;
My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground.
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
As any she belied with false compare. [2].*

This theme of satire and parody is patent in lines 9-10: "I love to hear her speak, yet well I know/ That music hath a far more pleasing sound," wherein Shakespeare visibly parodies the prominent metaphors utilized by other love poets during the Elizabethan era and emphasizes the unique beauty of his subject [2]. Hence, a poetic translator not only have to preserve the unique imageries provided by Shakespeare, but also portray the element of parody. Of course, the structural aspect of a poem is never to be ignored. Shakespearian sonnets have a structure of 14 lines, three quatrains, one concluding rhyming couplet, and a rhyme scheme of abab, cdcd, efef, and gg. Therefore, it is crucial for a poetic translator to be flexible with language in order to successfully transpose the structure into a separate language. One example of a successful translation of Sonnet 130 into Chinese is the version translated by Zongdai Liang, a famous Chinese literary scholar and poet. The following is the complete translation of sonnet 130 by Zongdai Liang in Chinese:

我情妇的眼睛一点不像太阳;
珊瑚比她的嘴唇还要红的多:
雪若算白, 他的胸就暗褐无光,
发若是铁丝, 她头上铁丝婆娑。
我见过红白的玫瑰, 轻纱一般;
她颊上却找不到这样的玫瑰;
有许多芳香非常逗引人喜欢,
我情妇的呼吸并没有这香味。
我爱听她谈话, 可是我很清楚
音乐的悦耳远胜于她的嗓子;

我承认从没有见过女神走路，
我情妇走路时候却脚踏实地：
可是，我敢指天发誓，我的爱侣
胜似任何被捧作天仙的美女。 [3].

In this translation, Zongdai Liang preserved the original rhyme scheme of Sonnet 130 in Chinese: the last word of line 1 rhymes with line 3, line 2 rhymes with line 4, and the last couplets also rhyme. Despite the successful preservation of the structural elements, Liang had to make certain modification regarding the language. For instance, the original ending of line 2 is “red,” but Liang’s translation displayed the words “婆娑” instead, which can be defined as whirling [3]. This certainly demonstrates the flexibility of language in poetry translation, wherein modification are necessary to adhere to the malleable element of language in order to successfully transform the original poem into a target language. Not only did Liang conserve the structural elements, he also portrayed Shakespeare’s theme of satire and parody in this translation. One particular word Dai used in line 14 was “胜似,” which meant to surpass, or to be superior to. This was again, an operation of language in order to better illuminate the parodic theme, for the original lines were: “I think my love as rare/ As any she belied with false compare [2]. Liang’s use of a more definite diction clearly elucidated Shakespeare’s desire to express the unique beauty of his mistress despite her seemingly mediocre descriptions.

Zongdai Liang’s translation was certainly successful in terms of both structure and meaning. However, there are also certain translations of Sonnet 130 that has failed to acknowledge the structural elements and the more obscure elements of meaning. The following is an example of that very type of translation from the internet:

我情人的眼睛多明亮，但比不上太阳的光芒。
珊瑚太红了，我的情人只是粉唇无妆
如果只有雪才算是白的，她的酥胸为什么只算是脂凝奶黄
如果头发是卷曲的，黑色的卷发就长在她头上
我见过许多美丽的玫瑰，红的和白的
但我从未见过那样的玫瑰能比她的红晕荡漾
又有哪样的香气袭人肺腑
能比我情人的气息吐露芬芳
我更喜欢听她说话，虽然我知道
音乐是最让人心怡神往
我承认，从未见过仙女飘然而过
也许就如我的情人，金步摇在大地上
上天可以作证，我的情人是绝代佳人
她的美留给人们的是一种无法比喻的梦幻的景象。 [4].

In this translation, the translator failed to satisfy the structural elements of Shakespeare’s original sonnet, such as rhyme schemes and the breaking of quatrains. The only lines that rhymed in this translation are in fact erroneous, as line 1 rhymed with line 4 and line 2 rhymed with line 3. This text failed to satisfy the abab rhyme scheme. Furthermore, the translator also failed in the proper interpretation of certain words. For instance, the phrase “roses damask’d” in line 5 of the original sonnet was translated into something completely wrong [2]. The translator misinterpreted the word “damask’d” as the description of something “beautiful”, as exemplified by the words “美丽的玫瑰,”

or “beautiful roses.” Apart from the linguistic aspect, the translation was also unsuccessful in conveying the parodic theme of the poem. Line 7-8 of this translation can actually be interpreted as “there are no perfumes as aromatic as my lover’s breath, which is a complete deviation from the original Sonnet and Shakespeare’s parodic intention. The last line of the translation was not only erroneous, but also lengthened unnecessarily. The English translation of the last line is: her beauty leaves people with an indescribable dreamlike scene. This is completely deviated from the original “And yet, but heaven, I think my love as rare / As any she belied with false compare.” [2] Shakespeare always expresses his main message through the last couplet of his sonnets, and here he clearly wishes to demonstrate the beauty of his mistress albeit the defects in her physical appearance. Hence the translation again failed in both the structural element and the element of parody.

While it is certainly important for translators to be malleable as they operate with language, there are certain elements of poetry that simply cannot be translated, or certain types of poetry that are not meant to be translated. These types of poems are mainly poems written for rhythmic purposes. One can take Edgar Allan Poe’s famous poem *The Raven* as an example. Jakobson claims that *The Raven* is “a poem created “for the express purpose of running;” and it did indeed have a great “run.” [5] In his poem, Poe utilized various literary devices such as alliteration, onomatopoeia, and repetitions/refrains to play around with words and construct a poem with musicality and stylized language. This element is most visible in stanza 4 of the poem: “But the fact is I was napping, and so gently you came rapping, / And so faintly you came tapping, tapping at my chamber door” [6]. The use of alliteration not only renders the poem a unique and structured rhythm in its read, but also provides the poem with an improved lexical appearance. The employment of alliteration in the words “rapping,” “tapping,” and “napping” is extremely difficult to be translated into another language, and the Chinese translation of *The Raven* exemplifies this phenomenon. The same lines of the Chinese translation were: “刚才我正睡衣昏昏, 而你敲门又敲得呢么轻, / 你敲门又敲得那么轻, 轻轻叩我房间的门环,” which definitely did not preserve the elements of alliteration and musicality of the original text [7]. Furthermore, the translation also failed to satisfy the original rhyme scheme, albeit conserving the element of refrain. The translator did attempt to adhere to the element of musicality by the repetition of characters such as “轻” (light), and verbal sounds from the words “昏” and “环,” which did have “hu” sound [7]. Another instance of alliteration is line 4 of stanza 11, which reads: “Followed fast and followed faster till his songs one burden bore.” [6] This time, the letter and sound “f” is repeated four times in the sentence to provide a smoother rhythm. The translation of this line is: “曾接踵而至, 直到它主人的歌中有了这字,” which only managed to convey the meaning of the lines, but not the rhythm and flow rendered by the use of alliteration [7]. Another vital constituent of the poem is the repetition of “nevermore” along with the word “Lenore.” In order to ameliorate the sound and “run” of the poem, Poe chose the name “Lenore” as it rhymes with “nevermore,” the refrain of both words throughout the poem perfects its musicality and rhythm. However, the translation in Chinese was not able to portray this rhythmic element, as the translator simply employed interlingual translation for “nevermore” and preserved the English pronunciation of “Lenore.” One more noticeable part is in fact the title itself: “*The Raven*.” Why had Poe chosen the raven as the key animal in his poem? It is interesting to note that the inversion of the word “raven” is in fact “nevar,” which both the sonic and optic element of “never.” This is therefore an obscure play on words by Poe that pertains to his goal of providing rhythm and musicality. Hence *The Raven* is certainly not a poem meant to be translated into another language, for the true appreciation of this poem lies in its mother language.

Now the focus will shift from the translation of English poetry to Chinese poetry to the translation of Chinese traditional poetry into English. As mentioned previously, the indispensable elements of poetry are its structural elements, imagery, and the underlying meaning the poet wishes

to convey. The following is a famous Chinese traditional poetry by Cui Hao entitled Yellow Crane Tower, or 黄鹤楼:

昔人已乘黄鹤去，此地空余黄鹤楼。
黄鹤一去不复返，白云千载空悠悠。
晴川历历汉阳树，芳草萋萋鹦鹉洲。
日暮乡关何处是？烟波江上使人愁。 [8].

This poem is an example of a structured poem known as the seven-character octave, where each line has a total of eight segments with seven characters in each. The rhyme scheme is a simple aaaa rhyme scheme, as the end of each line rhymes with the consecutive line. Now the English translation will be displayed below:

*A Taoist immortal once left from this place,
While riding the back of a bright yellow crane.
As light as the air, his steps left not a trace;
Just Yellow Crane Tower was left to remain.
The yellow crane gone now has never returned;
A thousand years flown by without any wings.
How listlessly clouds for its company yearned—
A gift that is hoped for, yet sky never brings.
The sunshine illumines all the trees to the north
And lights up the River Han's crystalline face.
From verdant grass, fragrance so sweetly pours forth
As parrots on river-bound isles squeeze for space.
Late shadows below stretch out long, scale the tower;
I've no yellow crane I can mount at this hour;
My home? which direction? O, I do not know,
O, misty long river, I've so far to go! [9].*

Interestingly, the translator of this poem actually altered the structure into a classic four quatrains with a rhyme scheme of abab, and each stanza is the translation of each line of the original poem. The adjustments made by the translator not only satisfied the structural element of the poetry, the rhyme scheme, but also the vital element of imagery. Despite certain changes, the English version of the poem was still able to convey Cui Hao's fascination upon seeing the great Yellow Crane Tower as well as his lamentations on the evanescence of life itself.

3. Conclusion

The most essential constituents of a good translation of poetry are the ability for the poem to run and breathe independently, while also conserving the vital elements of the original poem. A perfect translation of a piece of literary work is impossible due to the existence of certain elements that are unique to a language, thus requiring the translator to be flexible with language and operate freely in order to provide a piece that is equally as meaningful and as enjoyable as the original. This is exactly why most poetry translators are poets themselves, as they seek to amend language and cultural gaps with additions or adjustments of their own, as exemplified by the poem Yellow Crane Tower mentioned previously. There is certainly a diverseness in poetry translation, and more poetry

translators will strive to produce interesting pieces that might portray implications and obscure meanings not visible in the original work.

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