The Translation Strategies of Culture-loaded Words in Lu Xun's Novels: A Sociological Perspective

Ke SU¹,∗ and Ning YAN²,a

¹School of Foreign Languages Education, Shangdong University of Finance and Economics, P.R. China
²School of Humanities, Kunming University, P.R. China
∗suker1979@163.com, ataozhiyaoyao1979@163.com

Keywords: Lu Xun; Social translation; Bourdieu; Culture-loaded words; Translation strategy.

Abstract. Lu Xun is known as one of the greatest 20th century Chinese literary figures, whose works have been translated into many languages. Based on the translation strategies of culture-loaded words and social translation theories, this paper discusses the influence of source texts, authors, target readers and economic factors on the translation strategies of translators.

Lu Xun's Literary Works and the Culture-loaded Words in Them

During Lu Xun's lifetime, he wrote 33 novels, which were published in three collections and translated into more than 50 languages including English, Japanese and Russian, etc. By 2010, a total of 18 domestic and foreign scholars had translated Lu Xun's novels into English and published them in newspapers and magazines at home and abroad. On the one hand, Lu Xun's novels have such influence because of the artistic value of the works themselves; on the other hand, the novels contain rich traditional Chinese cultural elements, and the existence of a large number of culture-loaded words contributes to the national and artistic characteristics of his novels. At present, our country is strongly advocating Chinese culture to go out, and translating Chinese literature has become one important way to promote Chinese culture. It is of great academic value to discuss the translation of culture-loaded words in Lu Xun's novels against the background of the introduction of Chinese literature abroad.

Culture-loaded words refer to the words, phrases and idioms that mark the unique things in a certain culture. These words reflect the specific ethnic groups in the long course of history accumulated gradually, different from other nations, as well as their unique way of activities [1]. According to Nida's classification of culture-related words, they can be divided into ecological, linguistic, religious, material and social culture-loaded words. Due to the nationality and uniqueness of culture-loaded words, cultural and historical background conflicts and word meaning gaps between different languages are inevitable in translation. When talking about the relationship between language and culture, David Catan states: "Language is deeply rooted in cultural reality. Language can only be explained by constantly referring to its deeper context [2]." That is to say, when studying or translating languages, people must grasp the cultural context and connotation behind them in order to achieve a better understanding.

Social Translation and Bourdieu's Practical Theory

The concept of "social translation studies" was put forward by Holmes in 1972, who pointed out that social translation studies is an interdisciplinary cooperation between sociology and translation studies, and is concerned with the socio-cultural attributes of translation. Subsequent scholars not only pay attention to the linguistic factors in the text, but also pay more attention to the contextual factors outside the text, such as society, culture, ideology, gender, etc. Since the 1990s, Bourdieu's sociology of field, habitus and capital theory began to be applied in translation studies, seeing translation as a kind of social activity, "to explore the translation activities and social environment,
social condition and the relationship between social and historical change," putting emphasis on "the influence and restriction of social factors on the translation process, translation strategy, the spread and acceptance of translations" [3].

Bourdieu's theory of practice broke the opposition between subjectivism and objectivism and organically combined social environment with individual action. The three core concepts in this theory are: field, habitus and capital. Field refers to "social space with specific operating rules" [4]. Habitus refers to the set system formed by the actor in the interaction with the field. Habitus of behavior is not only shaped by the field, but also affects the field [5]. Capital refers to the qualifications possessed by the actor in the field, including economic capital, cultural capital, social capital and symbolic capital [6]. According to Bourdieu's theory, practice is the result of the joint action of habitus and capital in a specific field. In translation practice, the translator's family background, educational experience, work life and social activities determine his unique social trajectory in social space, and the interaction between social trajectory and environment is gradually internalized into the translator's habit, which has an impact on his translation practice.

Comparative Analysis of Translation Strategies

Translation strategy refers to "a translation method consciously adopted by the translator to solve a problem encountered in the process of translating a text segment into another language" [7]. Influenced by living environment and other factors, each ethnic group has its unique cultural characteristics in the historical process, which are condensed in the culture-loaded words. The translators of literary works with profound national marks, such as Lu Xun’s, have to make necessary adjustments of translation strategies, so as to keep a balance between the field, habitus and capital, as well as the source text, writers, translators, translation and markets. Among the English translators of Lu Xun's literature, the Yangs, William Lyell and Lan Shiling are the most influential ones, because they choose the most suitable translation strategies according to their own cultural field and give full play to their main initiative, thus forming their own unique translation characteristics. From the perspective of source text, author, target reader and cultural capital, we will discuss the influence of translator's field, habit and capital on translation strategy in translation practice.

The Influence of the Interaction between Translator, Source Text and Author on Translation Strategy

The Yangs’ translation of Lu Xun's novels was commissioned by Foreign Language Publishing House to introduce and promote Lu Xun's literary works to the western world. As a translator, the relationship between Yang Xianyi and Lu Xun is a passive task relationship, allowing little room for personal choice. As sinologists living in the western discourse space, Lyell and Lan chose their translation with the subjective will. Lyell believed that "Lu Xun's unique view of reality as an artist was gained through pain and failure. He is both indignant and compassionate about Chinese society, with deep love and sense of responsibility. Part of Lu Xun’s greatness lies in his very independent and firm views on Chinese and western culture..." [8]. For the adequate translation of Lu Xun’s works, he not only used Zhou Zuoren's memoir to analyze the characters and their relationships in Lu’s novels, but carried on a thorough research of Lu Xun. It is his interaction with Lu Xun across time and space that helped Lyell grow aware of Lu Xun’s independent cultural viewpoint and writing style, and hence translate based on a cultural researcher’s perspective, reproduce the original style by adjusting his translation strategy, and stay loyal to China's cultural characteristics.

Original: 祥林嫂？怎么了？我又赶紧的问。“老了。”

The Yangs’ translation: “Hsiang Lin’s Wife? How was that?” I asked again. “She’s dead.”

Lyell’s translation: “What about Sister Xianglin?” I asked apprehensively. “She’s aged away.”

This is a scene in Lu’s novella Blessing where “I” asked the maid about Sister Xianglin. There is no description of the emotional state of "I" in Yang's translation, which makes readers unable to grasp my concern and guilt for Sister Xianglin. According to the conventions of Lu town and traditional Chinese cultural etiquette, it is not appropriate to say "dead" and other unlucky words at the end of the
year. This is an example of sociocultural loaded word, showing the influence of traditional etiquette on people's words and conducts. Therefore, in Lyell’s translation, it is translated as "aged away" and footnotes are added to explain this unique culture to the readers. In Yang’s translation, the translator translated it as "dead," which could not convey the rich connotation of customs and social psychology of this culture-loaded word.

Lan admits that she loves Lu Xun's works and has systematically studied his work before translating his novels. She believes that "Lu Xun is a universal writer" [9]. This is her conclusion after studying and translating Lu's works and interacting with the author. This understanding also explains the ultimate goal of her translation of Lu's novels—to see Lu Xun's novels accepted by more English readers, so that English readers can have a fluent and accessible translation of Lu Xun. Only in this way can the value of Lu Xun as a universal writer be appreciated. Based on her understanding of Lu's works, she often deviates from the mainstream translation norms and adopts literal translation or foreignization methods to deal with linguistic and cultural issues.

The Influence of Negotiation between Translator and Target Reader on Translation Strategy

When the Yang translated Lu Xun's works, there were no sufficient negotiation between translator and readers. Because he works for the Foreign Languages Bureau, the official translation and publishing agency responsible for promoting Chinese culture to the English-speaking world outside China, the targeted audience is very broad and not specific. "We translate not only for Americans or Australians, but also for English-speaking readers in Asia and Africa, so we don't know who our readers are," he admits [10]. By contrast, Lyell and Lan Shiling have a clear idea of the target readers of their translation practice. As a scholar specializing in the study of Lu Xun, Lyell intends to provide accurate and reliable English translations of Lu Xun's novels for Chinese courses in American universities, and to help relevant scholars and researchers understand Lu Xun, which leads to his adoption of the academic interpretive translation method aimed for accuracy and readability. When it comes to the ancient poetry, classical Chinese and literary language as well as culture-loaded words in the novels, Yangs’ translation usually adopt the method of free translation focusing on the meaning of the sentence, whereas Lyell’s translation will use the method of literal translation of the original sentence, complemented with comments to explain the meaning of citation and the source of allusions, for example:

Original: (一边的对联已经脱落, 松松的卷了放在长桌上,)一边的还在, 道是"事理通达心气和和平".

Yangs’ Translation: but the other was still hanging there, bearing the words: “By understanding reason we achieve tranquility of mind.”

Lyell’s translation: its mate still hung on the wall and read: Having completely penetrated the principle of things, the mind becomes serene 6.

Footnote 6: An important Neo-Confucian concept which divided the universe into form, or principle (li), and substance (qi). Contemplation of "forms" led to serenity (the influence of Buddhist meditation is apparent) and would eventually result in enlightenment. The narrator, we should remember, views these ideas as outmoded claptrap.

The quote "be sensible in matters, calm in spirit, and peaceful in spirit" comes from the Collection of Analects of Confucius written by Zhu Xi, which means that if you understand how to deal with matters, you will be able to understand the Confucian way and maintain a stable and harmonious state of mind. Yangs translated it as "understanding reason" and simply explained the meaning of this sentence. Even readers who do not understand Chinese culture will have no difficulty in understanding it. Lyell literally translated it as "the principle of things" and explained not only the nouns "principle" and "substance" as well as the whole sentence, but also the attitude of "I" in the story towards this sentence as "outmoded claptrap." Comparing the two versions, it can be found that Yangs’ translation is simpler and easier to understand, while Lyell's translation is closer to the original text and contains more information.

Lan Shiling translated all of Lu Xun's novels, with the intention to make the ordinary English readers outside academic circles able to read and understand Lu Xun and Chinese culture. What’s
more, the Penguin Publishing House is hoping to have a best-selling book. In this negotiation of the translator and the target readers, Lan Shiling has given priority to acceptability of the translations, adopting the method of reproductive faithfulness and expressiveness to improve the flow of text. Facing the richness of culture-loaded words and Chinese historical literary quotes in Lu Xun’s works, she generally chooses to preserve the original literature field power, aiming for faithfulness and expressiveness, giving priority to domestication strategy, for example:

Original: 单四嫂子在这时候，虽然很希望降下一员天将，助他一臂之力，却不愿是阿五.

Lan’s translation: Although Mrs Shan had indeed been hoping that Heaven would send down a guardian angel of some kind, her strong preference would have been for someone other than Ah-wu.

The Chinese phrase “tianjiang” (heavenly general) refers to a general with magic power who guards the heaven in Chinese mythology. It is often used to describe a powerful army. Here, Lu Xun uses it to mean someone who could protect his sister-in-law. Lan did not directly translate "divine/heavenly troops." Instead, she translates the image "guardian angel" familiar to ordinary readers in Britain and America through domestication, which not only accurately conveys the semantic connotation of the original text "protector and guardian," but also keep readers' reading cost to a minimum.

The Influence of the Negotiation between Translator and Economic Capital on Translation Strategies

Economic capital here mainly refers to the capital side that provides financial support for translators. The Yangs work for the Foreign Language Bureau. Their translated works were the publications of the official organizations, which represent the official position and national image. Therefore, translators are restricted by the sponsors of the organizations and can only follow the original texts. "For a long time, we have been limited by the working environment in the past, so our translations are more limited and less interesting," Gladys Yang once complained [11].

Original: 阎罗大王只好把你锯开，分给他们.

Yangs’ translation: The King of Hell will have to saw you into two and divide you between them.

King Yama is a religious culture-loaded word. In early Buddhist mythology, King Yama is the only king in the underworld. The so-called underworld is widely known as the "hell" in the west. Therefore, the translator directly translated "the King of Hell," faithful to the original text, without adding or subtracting.

Lyell is a freelance translator of Lu Xun's works. Therefore, in his translation practice, the translator’s personal subjectivity is fully displayed and sometimes even usurp the translator's identity, which has caused some researchers to criticize him. "Notes interrupt the flow by distracting the reader from the text; if a literary work is over-annotated, it becomes sociologist material." Lyell loved to speak for the author, and sometimes over interpreted or misinterpreted. For example, it is stated in the drama that the author and people in Lu town are all from the same family and share the same family name, but he does not specify the name of the village. Lyell boldly translates it as "[...] For everyone in the village had my mother's maiden name Lu, and thus we were all related." Such assumptions and over interpretation can be risky and unreliable, since translation cannot be equated with academic research.

Lan Shiling translated the complete works of Lu Xun on the commission of the bookseller. With the rise of overseas "new sinology" in the 1980s, Britain began to attach importance to Chinese literature. The Classics Department of Penguin Press recognized this opportunity. In 2008, it commissioned Lan Shiling to translate the complete works of Lu Xun and publish them in the series Penguin Classics Library, because Lu Xun's books are selling well. Penguin Press pursues the commercial value of the translation. As the funded translator, Lan Shiling should pay attention to the fluency and interest of the translation, and should not express too much personal opinions. In the interview, she mentioned that she sought to give English readers fluent and accessible translations of Lu Xun's works, so she “will not bring dialect into the translation” [12].

Original: “那个‘娘滥十万人’的叫你‘逃生子’?”

Yangs’ translation: “Who the devil is calling you a bastard?”
Lan’s translation: ‘Who called you a bastard?’

Aigu’s husband complains to Qidaren that Aigu insults him by calling him a "taoshengzi" (bastard), a charge Aigu denies by asking a rhetorical question to express her anger about being wronged. "Nianglan shishiwanren sheng" is a culture-load word and a slang in Shaoxing dialect. It insults the person in question by implying that his/her mother is an easy woman. Aigu's use of the swear word in rhetorical questions is as much an expression of anger as it is a clarification and a curse: if there is an insult to her husband, she and her mother are the ones to blame. In the translation, the original rhetorical sentence pattern was retained in both versions. The Yangs translated this crude phrase into "the devil," which can be used in questions to strengthen the tone in English. Lan's translation omits the expression. The retention of rhetorical sentence pattern is enough to express the aggrieved feelings of Aigu. A literal translation may cause misunderstanding by readers. In contrast, Lan’s treatment is more concise and clearer, facilitating the reader's reading and understanding.

**Conclusion**

Focusing on the English translation of Lu Xun's novels, this paper makes a comparative analysis of the impact of the field of social translation, habit and capital on the translator's translation practice, which is helpful in understanding the rationality and complexity of social translation from different perspectives. It is impossible to have a definitive translation. The coexistence of multiple versions of the same original work and the retranslation of the work indicate that the ecological balance and text transplantation by translation should be dynamic and evolving. Both writers and translators have their own limitations. If we can make up for our own shortcomings while drawing on others’ strengths, we can make further progress in literary creation and translation. This has a considerable practical significance for the cultivation of translators and the sound development of translation criticism.

**References**


