

A Comparative Study of the English Versions of the Poem *QingMing* from the Perspective of Interpersonal Metafunction

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Article History

Received: 23.08.2018

Accepted: 06.09.2018

Published: 30.09.2018

DOI:

10.21276/sjhss.2018.3.9.4



Abstract: Poetry is one of the essence of Chinese literature and poetry translation is the most complicated and controversial one in literary translation. Under the theoretical framework of Halliday's systemic functional grammar, this article analyzes the selected versions of English translation of the Chinese poem *QingMing*. We focus especially on interpersonal metafunction and find that mood and communicative role have interpersonal significance. This study examines the applicability of the systemic functional linguistics in poetry translation analysis and puts forward some suggestions on poetry translation.

Keywords: systemic functional grammar, poetry translation, interpersonal metafunction.

INTRODUCTION

As an essence of Chinese culture, studies on poem translation has been widely concerned about by scholars. Previous study on poem translation can be generally classified into four categories: the first is the study on analyzing artistic conception and image of the poem from the aesthetic perspective like Zhangyi, Mayu; the second is the poetic translation criticism under the framework of functional linguistics such as Li Genfa; the third is based on the theory of psychology and cognitive linguistics like Shu Dingfang, the fourth is translation criticism on the basis of equivalence theory like Ma Xiaoyan[1].

The development of linguistics brought about a new perspective for the poem translation. Metafunction is one major component in Halliday's systemic functional grammar which includes ideational metafunction, interpersonal metafunction, textual metafunction[2]. However, poetic translation criticism under the framework of functional linguistics in China is not objective which is usually based on one's subjective inference and experience. Huang Guowen firstly applied the functional linguistics to poem translation and probed into the guiding significance of functional linguistics to translation studies. Later, the applicability of the functional linguistics is proved by Zheng Yuanhui & Miao Xingwei [3]. They attempt to evaluate the translations of Shakespeare's 18th sonnet in terms of mood, modality and evaluation and discover the process of constructing interpersonal meaning, and make an effort to theorize and criticize poetry translation. Yu Qian appreciates the English poem *A Red, Red Rose* from the perspective of systemic functional grammar and draws the following conclusion that the reference should be taken into consideration in the translating process. Otherwise, the interaction among the poet, the image in the poem and the reader

could not be built, which will cause the failure of expression of feeling[4].

Studies on poem translation under the framework of interpersonal metafunction only account for a small part. This article tries to analyze different English versions of Chinese poem *QingMing* from the perspective of interpersonal metafunction and compare them to find out the most appropriate way to show the vague relations among the roles in the poem.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Halliday points out that whenever we use language to interact, we are establishing social relationship with each other [5]. During this process, we take turns at speaking, and at the same time take on different speech roles in the exchange. The interpersonal metafunction is the reflection of interaction in the clause. The interpersonal component of the grammar is the part where we describe all the options that we have in expressing interpersonal meanings. The basic speech roles are: giving information, demanding information, giving goods and services, and demanding goods and services. The

choices in the mood system realize speech functional categories of statement, question, command and offer. A statement gives information and thus is usually realized by declarative mood. A question demands a response to open information and it is realized by interrogative mood. A command asks for goods and service and is realized by imperative mood. An offer gives goods and services and most of it can be realized by declarative mood[6].

Halliday thought that mood is one of the embodiment of interpersonal metafunction. Mood includes two parts: subject and finite which can be expressed by interrogative or declarative form. It is very important to find the subject and finite when we analyze the mood. Generally, subject can be acted by nouns and it can also be acted by words or phrases which possess characteristics of noun, even minor sentence. The finite is to restrict the proposition. There are three kinds of primary tense: past, present and future.

It is the interpersonal metafunction that determines our choice of different styles of speech: formal, consultative, casual, or intimate. This depends on the social relationship of the language users. Halliday thought that terms of address are elements independent of the thematic structure of the sentence, which is neither a subject in the mood system nor a predicate or a residual component. The use of terms of address can directly reflect the interpersonal relationship between the speaker and the listener. It is an important factor to embody the relationship, intimacy, emotional attitude and social status of participants in verbal communication. On the one hand, terms of address directly changes with the participants' intimacy and social status, on the other hand, the participants' intimacy and social status also influence terms of address [7].

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The Chinese poem *QingMing* is named after one of Chinese twenty four solar terms and created by the famous poet Du Mu of Tang Dynasty. This poem mainly describes the scene of spring and movements of people. Scholars' opinions on the interpretation of *QingMing* are divided. Some think it shows an outing in spring and some thinks it expresses one's sadness in spring while others think that it is mourning for family. We choose three different English versions of *QingMing* according to the popularity of the English versions and authority of the translator and compare and analyze them under the guidance of the theoretical framework of interpersonal metafunction.

Mood

The first sentence in the Chinese poem shows the date and weather, all the chosen versions use present tense and declarative mood to describe the weather on that day. The English versions differ greatly in the

translation of the date of *QingMing*: "The Pure Brightness Day(Wu)", "the rainy season in Spring(Yang&Dai)", "the Mourning Day(Xu)". *QingMing* is not only one of China's twenty four solar terms, but also a special day on which people will mourn their family and friend. The former two versions merely express the features of this solar term while Wu's version conveys the significance of the specific date.

The second sentence in the Chinese poem directly expresses people's grief on this special day. All English versions choose declarative mood to provide such emotion to the reader and present tense to show it. However, difference choice of the subject causes various feelings of the readers. Wu chooses "I" to give readers a role in the poem thus the distance between readers and the poet is narrowed. As the story develops, readers can easily hold the same feeling as the poet. In contrast, "Travelers" in Yang&Dai's version and "The mourners" in Xu's version merely convey a message about the scene in the spring to readers. Readers are not included in the scene and they can only know the way people look on that day but cannot empathize and understand people's sorrow.

The third sentence in the Chinese poem is the interrogative sentence which demands location information from others. All English versions choose present tense but not all of them use direct question. It differs greatly because the translators cannot draw a unanimous conclusion on who asked this question. It can be appreciated from the following two angles:

First, the translators interpret this interrogative sentence from the angle of the poet. Namely, they think the poet is the questioner. In Wu's version, the direct question is used. In Yang&Dai's version, the indirect question is used. It is clear that both the direct question and indirect question are the most truthful to the Chinese poem in form and succeeds in reflecting the emotion of the poet. The poet wanted to be drunk to ease his sadness on the special day.

Second, The translators think that the poet is not involved in the conversation, in other words, the poet is only a narrator and reports the question to others. Xu's version chooses a quote. Quote is something directly reported. Compared with the report, it is a more objective way to project not only the meaning but also the wording. The reporter is the bridge between the invisible speaker and listeners(readers)[8]. Therefore, readers themselves are involved in the situation in the poem so they can also feel the sorrow of the people in the poem. But the empathy in Xu's version is not as strong as the former two versions, because readers are just involved in the situation instead of playing a role in that situation[9].

The last sentence is an answer to the previous question, so all the versions choose declarative mood to provide information. The subject chosen in these versions are similar: “He(Wu)”, “He(Yang&Dai)”, “A cowherd(Xu)”. Every one of them is able to express the meaning clearly.

Terms of Address in English Versions of *QingMing*

Different choice of terms of address expresses different meaning of the translators. There are three participants in verbal communications: the speaker is the addresser (first person), the listener is the addressee (second person) while the reporter is an outsider (third person).

The argument of the terms of address is shown from the translation of the second sentence of the poem. The difference of the English versions is whether the poet should be included among the sad people or not. In addition, in the third sentence, translators cannot reach a consensus on whether the questioner is the poet or the sad people in the poem. There are two obvious roles in the poem: “行人(xing ren)” and “牧童(mu tong)”, and only the former one can be thought as questioner. There is also an ongoing discussion about whether the questioner and the cowboy know each other. Interpersonal metafunction can be applied to deal with these arguments.

In the chosen three English versions, people generally infer that the “mourner” is thought as the questioner, but the word “his” used in Xu’s version shows that the questioner is not the “mourner”, otherwise, the word “my” will be used here. Therefore, we infer that the outsider is the questioner. Who is the one being questioned? Xu’s version puts indefinite article “a” before cowboy instead of definite article “the”, so it shows that the questioner doesn’t ask some certain cowboy for information. We still cannot find the person questioned. It is known that Chinese poem is characterized as concise language and rich artistic conception and the readers should add their own appreciation in the blank left by the poet. Although this translation is in accordance with the original Chinese poem in which the questioner and the one questioned are not pointed out clearly, Xu’s version fails in making the content of the poem clear for the ones who know little Chinese, because English stresses the indispensable role of subject and predicate.

Version of Yang&Dai is better than that of Xu, because the roles are clearly shown in their translation, because Yang&Dai differentiate the poet and the “travelers along the road”. They thought although the poet didn’t appear in the original poem, it is the poet himself who is demanding information, so the translators used “I”. The shepherd boy is the one “I” questioned. This version is better in clarifying the relations between the roles in the poem and the readers

feel just like the poet so it can better show the aesthetics of the original poem.

Similar to the version of Yang&Dai, Wu’s version also show the roles in the speech very clearly but the vocative expression “cowboy” in the translation is informal and inappropriate. According to Biber, the vocative expression at the end of the interrogative sentence is to identify someone as an addressee or to maintain and strengthen the existing social relationship. Therefore, it is inferred that the poet and the cowboy are familiar with each other. This is not shown in the original poem. This excessive interpretation of the Wu fails in helping readers understand the relations of the roles. Therefore, It is better to avoid using vocative expression when we translate poems like *QingMing*. Before translating, the translator should have a thorough interpretation of the poem and figure out the roles appeared in that poem.

POEM TRANSLATION STRATEGIES BASED ON INTERPERSONAL METAFUNCTION

This article analyzes the different versions of translation of the Chinese poem *QingMing* from the point of view of interpersonal metafunction. Based on the listed analysis of the mood and relation of the roles in the poem, we could see the significance of interpersonal metafunction in poem translation.

Translation is not simply to copy or reproduce the original, but to construct a new meaning in the new context for the new communicative subject, which helps the poet communicate with the reader of the target language. To endow the translation with cross-cultural interpersonal meaning, the translator should first identify the mood of the original poem, then choose the proper mood of the target language and make adjustments to satisfy the readers’ expectation.

On the other hand, the different characteristics of Chinese and English require the translators to clarify the roles and their relations in the poem. Interpersonal metafunction provides a systematic theory to appreciate the existing translation versions of the poem. From the above, it can be agreed that the vocative expression should not be casually used in the translation of poetry and corresponding reference should be used appropriately to help the readers distinguish the roles.

CONCLUSION

Choice of mood and terms of address can help readers identify the relations among the poet and the characters in the poem, which avoids ambiguity and vagueness during their appreciation. The analysis in this article checks out the applicability of the interpersonal metafunction in appreciating different English versions of *QingMing*. We can draw the conclusion that if one wants to get a perfect translation which is faithful, beautiful and elegant, he shouldn’t only pay attention to

choose words or phrases, the choice of terms of address in communication and mood is also very important. Poem is a communicative event between the poet and the reader, the interpersonal meaning of it is realized through the reader's communication with the poet during his reading. The distance between the poet and readers will be narrowed and the feelings of both sides will develop simultaneously when the translator chooses proper way to express mood and relations of the roles in the poem.

APPENDIX

Chinese version: 《清明》杜牧
清明时节雨纷纷，路上行人欲断魂。
借问酒家何处有？牧童遥指杏花村。

"Qingming" du mu qingming season rain in succession, the road pedestrians want to rains. Where is the Jiewen restaurant? The Cowboy Points Heng Fa Chuen.

Version of Xu Yuanchong[11]:

The Mourning Day
A drizzling rain falls like tears on the Mourning Day;
The mourner's heart is going to break on his way.
Where can a wineshop be found to drown his sad hours?
A cowherd points to a cot 'mid apricot flowers.

Version of Yang Xianyi & Dai Naidie [12]:

In the Rainy Season of Spring
It drizzles endless during the rainy season in spring,
Travelers along the road look gloomy and miserable.
When I ask a shepherd boy where I can find a tavern,
He points at a distant hamlet nestling amidst apricot blossoms.

Version of Wu Juntao[13]:

The Pure Brightness Day
It drizzles thick on the Pure Brightness Day;
I travel with my heart lost in dismay.
"Is there a public house somewhere, cowboy?"
He points at Apricot Bloom Village faraway.

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