

Translating African-American English into Chinese: A Case Study of The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

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Abstract. The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn was met with great controversy once it came out. In addition to being attacked morally, some of these languages in the novel are considered inferior and “trashy”. We cannot, however, completely reject it. African-American English (AAE) is the most spoken dialect in the novel, with many phonetic and grammatical variants compared to the standard English. This paper compares and analyses the translation techniques used in three Chinese translations while examining the characteristics of AAE in Huck Finn. The study found that Cheng Shi prefers to use “yuyin feibai” to translate AAE, Xu Ruzhi primarily uses modal particles to reflect the features of spoken language and Zhang Wanli uses standardized translation. This paper hopes to provide some inspiration for future retranslation of the book.

Keywords: African-American English; Dialect; The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.

1. Introduction

Widely regarded as one of the Great American Novels, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, also known as The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn in more recent editions, was among the first in significant American literature to be written throughout in vernacular English, with all of its regional color and flavor intact. Huck’s adventures were supposed to be a sequel to The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, but the two works are vastly different, not only in style and plot, but also in target audience [1]. Where Tom Sawyer is plainly a children’s novel, the sequel is not, in which Twain shed new light on how some of the basic universal values (a white boy and a black slave becoming kindred spirits) can be also prevalent in the local (the Missouri region around the Mississippi) [2].

Both the narrator and the characters’ voices in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (Hereinafter referred to as Huck Finn) are influenced by a variety of different dialects. The author also made a clear explanation before the main text of the novel as follows:

In this book a number of dialects are used, to wit: the Missouri negro dialect; the extremest form of the backwoods South-Western dialect; the ordinary “Pike-County” dialect; and the modified varieties of this last. The shadings have not been done in a haphazard fashion, or by guess-work; but painstakingly, and with the trustworthy guidance and support of personal familiarity with these several forms of speech [1].

As can be seen from his Explanatory, African-American English is not the only dialect variants used. Although Mark Twain lived in Missouri in his early years, it is still a mammoth task to reproduce the local dialect variants completely and accurately. He clearly struggled to capture on paper the many Missourian idioms he was familiar with, as evidenced by the numerous erasures and alterations made to the original manuscript. However, his efforts in this area do not appear to be acknowledged by society although the author himself is cautious enough. He makes his position clear in a comic way: the reader should enjoy the novel without over-interpreting; even using varied dialects is to avoid “all these characters trying to talk alike [1]”. However, ever since its American publication in 1885, Huck Finn has been inevitably embroiled in controversy. The Concord Public Library in Massachusetts banned it immediately, deeming it “the veriest trash, suitable only for the slums [3].” Racist terms like “nigger” or “negro” and slangy, idiomatic expressions meant to mimic local speech are at the heart of the charges against it and its author. Consequently, all of these idiosyncrasies of language, along with the social effects and functions they entail, make translation

extremely challenging. A recent study on the translation of the book into Slovenian clearly shows that Huck Finn is translated not only at the linguistic level, but also at the social level, which may shed some light on the study of Chinese translations. It can be found by comparing the various Slovenian translations that strategies for translating racist discourse about African-Americans were influenced by current attitudes toward racism's acceptability, the significance of language in the formation of Slovenian national identity, the intended audience for the translations, and the state of relations between the cultures at play in the translation process [4].

Many of Mark Twain's works, or rather, Mark Twain himself are very popular in China. Throughout history, as China experienced tremendous social, political, cultural, and literary changes and developments, he has been held in high esteem as a humorist, satirist, humanist, sentimentalist, realist, social critic, democrat, and always a cherished friend of the Chinese people [5]. When it comes to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the novel has been retranslated continuously since it was first translated by Zhang Duosheng in 1942 under the title "Wantong liulangji". According to the statistics of scholars in the early years, from 1949 (the year of the founding of the People's Republic of China) to 2002, there are 65 retranslations of the book involving 56 translators, of which 39 are full translations, and the others are shorthand, abbreviated, rewritten, English-Chinese readings, comic books, etc [6]. Each translation has its own characteristics due to the different times and translators' habits. For example, Cheng Shi and Xu Ruzhi modified their writing styles in order to incorporate the novel's characters' use of dialects and black slang. Cheng Shi, Zhang Yousong, Xu Ruzhi, and Zhang Wanli were the most prominent translators from the period of reform and opening up to the end of the twentieth century, and that the Cheng's and Xu's versions were the most influential at the time [7].

Considering the above, this paper compares Zhang Wanli, Cheng Shi, and Xu Ruzhi's translations of the African-American English (AAE) in the original text, aiming to describe the characteristics of these three translations, explore the techniques they used, and provide reference for future retranslation and comparative research.

2. The African-American dialects in *Huckleberry Finn*

Table 1. Phonological features in Jim's speech [2, 11].

	Features	Examples
1	deletion or vocalization of the vibrant /r/ or /l/ phoneme after a vowel	'do' instead of 'door'
2	palatal glides	'de yuther' instead of 'the other'
3	substitution of the voiceless dental fricative /θ/ with the voiced labiodental /f/	'sumf'n' instead 'somethig'
4	substitution of the voiced dental fricative sound /ð/ with a voiceless 'd'	'den' instead of 'them'
5	shortening of final consonant clusters	'chile' instead of 'child'
6	deletion of initial unstressed syllables	'crease' instead of 'increase'
7	substitution of the negative prefix 'un-' with 'on-'	'oneasy' instead of 'uneasy'
8	realization of [ɪŋ] as [in] in present participle and other alteration of final unstressed [in] for [ɪŋ]	'callin'' instead of 'calling'

If standard language can be seen as "correct", then non-standard language may be "less correct" by most uneducated people. As a very important research part in non-standard language, dialect generally refers to the form of a language used in a certain area, and usually differs in vocabulary and pronunciation. It "manifests both the social cultural forces which have shaped the speaker's linguistic competence and the various social cultural groups to which the speaker belongs or has belonged" [8]. Notably, what for one group of people may be a dialect and thereby non-standard and low status, for others is a first language which thus has a high status [9]. Therefore, the study of dialects needs to take into account not just geographical factors, but also social and political ones.

As a variant of American English, AAE is mostly used among African-American communities. It is also known as “Black English”, African-American Vernacular English/language and so on. Due to the group’s history of social marginalization, AAE is also frequently stigmatized as inferior English. It is incorrect, however, to assume that people who speak AAE have low linguistic and cognitive abilities, because this dialect has unique syntactic, phonological, morphological and lexical characteristics that distinguish it from other English dialects [10]. In *Huckleberry Finn*, AAE is mainly spoken by slave Jim, who is hard-working, enthusiastic, honest and loyal. Through analysis, some of the phonological features in Jim’s speech are summarized as Table 1.

As for grammar, Jim’s dialect shows the deletion of copula and the use of the third-person verb form with first- and second-person pronouns, incorrect verb inflections and sentence structures, etc. Grammatical changes are to better reflect the phonological features and the social identity of the speaker. Therefore, AAE in the source text serves two purposes: establishing Jim’s identity and heightening the novel’s sense of realism.

3. Translating AAE from *Huckleberry Finn* into Chinese: a comparative analysis

As mentioned above, Zhang Wanli, Cheng Shi, and Xu Ruzhi’s translations are selected in this paper for comparative study. Their book titles differ slightly from one another due to the passage of time. Cheng’s translation was first published in 1989, and then reprinted in 2004 by People’s Literature Publishing House. Xu’s translation was published by Yilin Press in 1998 and reprinted in 2000. This 2006 edition of Zhang’s work was released by Shanghai Translation Publishing House.

After analysing Jim’s utterances which show well the image of Jim with kindness and dignity, this paper has found some characteristics of the three translations.

Unlike Chinese, which uses ideograms rather than phonetic symbols, English is a phonogram and can thus directly express the idiosyncratic pronunciation of words in written form, which brings great challenge to translation. Cheng Shi employs the technique known as “yuyin fei bai”, a type of phonetic distortion in which replaces the original characters with words with similar pronunciations, so as to reflect the non-standard nature of the speaker’s language. Nevertheless, this approach is not without flaws. First of all, the smoothness of the source text is affected by the replacement words in the brackets; however, removing the explanations from the brackets may leave the reader confused as to why the text is written the way it is. Second, there is a lack of consistency in the translation’s word replacements, which may discourage some readers. AAE’s phonetic system is systematic; for example, the phonemes “th” and “d” can replace each other. However, there are gaps in both theory and practice in the translation’s choice of alternative words.

It can be found that there are far fewer “yuyin feibai” in Xu’s translation than in Cheng’s translation to reflect the phonetic variants of the original text. To emphasize Jim’s lack of education, many homophones are used in it; however, this does not accurately reflect the phonetic qualities of the original text and impact the reading experience for readers. They probably would assume that it is Jim who pronounces the word wrongly, but in fact his original expression actually is correct according to the AAE system. Therefore, Jim’s personality may be distorted in this rendition. Notably, Xu uses many modal particles to better reflect the characteristics of spoken language, such as “ma” “ne” “a” in Chinese, which is in keeping with the lively features of the original spoken language.

Zhang’s translation adopts the technique of “standardization”, which stripped Jim’s voice of its unique qualities and replaced with a more solemn and direct tone. Although the translation reads smoothly, it is rather formal and rigid, which does not do justice to the original text’s vivid and lively language features or its profound meaning. Furthermore, Zhang clarifies the origin of some allusions, making it more accessible to Chinese readers and better conveying the cultural connotation of the original text, something neither of the previous two translators have done.

Even though these translations have their own qualities, they appear to be inadequate in AAE translation. It’s common knowledge that the translation of AAE should focus on the reproducing of

its functions. Even though lower-class characters are rarely portrayed using dialects, they are still depicted in nuanced and vivid ways in Chinese novels. The use of slang and idioms is largely responsible for creating this artistic effect [12].

4. Conclusion

This paper mainly studies the characteristics of AAE in Huck Finn and explores the translation methods in three Chinese translations. Characteristics of AAE are primarily reflected in pronunciation and grammar in Huck Finn, and its role is to shape Jim's identity and increase the source text's vividness. Comparative analysis reveals that Cheng Shi prefers to use "yuyin feibai" to translate AAE, Xu Ruzhi primarily uses modal particles to reflect the features of spoken language and Zhang Wanli uses standardized translation. Although there are deficiencies in the translation of AAE in these versions, their comparative analysis can serve as inspiration for later retranslations.

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