The Application of House’s Translation Quality Assessment Model in Chinese-English Translation

-- Take English translation of Ba Jin’s Carpenter Lao Chen as an Example

Jianbin Zhu1, a, Zisheng Dong1
1Guilin University of Technology, Guangxi Guilin, 541006, China
a2017135@glut.edu.cn

Abstract: This article analyses the theoretical basis behind Juliane House’s translation quality assessment model, illustrates its operation, and verifies the application of this model to English translations of Chinese prose works by assessing the quality of Zhang Peiji’s English translation of Ba Jin’s Carpenter Lao Chen, and evaluates the quality of the translation. Overall, the source text (ST) of Carpenter Lao Chen and the target text (TT) are functionally equivalent, and the translation is an overt translation with a high quality.

Keywords: Translation quality assessment model, Theoretical basis, Analysis and assessment.

1. Introduction

The research of translation theory has made rapid progress in the late twentieth century, achieving remarkable results (Li Xiaolin, He Shaobin, 2010). Different views of translation produce different translation standards, methods and strategies. While Juliane House’s Translation Quality Assessment Model and its revised version, Translation Quality Assessment, A Model Revisited, put forward a systematic translation quality assessment model based on theories such as systematic functional linguistics and discourse analysis from a new perspective.

This article first analyses the theoretical basis behind House’s Translation Quality Assessment Model, by which explains how this model is formed. The assessment of the quality of the English version of Carpenter Lao Chen translated by Zhang Peiji verifies the effective application of this model in the translation of Chinese prose chapters. On the one hand, the feasibility and operability of this model are demonstrated, and on the other hand, the translation quality of this English version is evaluated.

2. Theoretical Basis Behind the Translation Quality Assessment Model

Behind the seemingly off-the-cuff evaluation lies the thinking, inquiry and understanding of the nature of the subject. To make evaluation, right or wrong, is not arbitrary or random, but needs to be based on certain criteria in light of an understanding of the nature of the recipient, i.e. how the recipient is defined. This is also true for the evaluation of translation quality.

The complexity of the issue is evident from the fact that different translation views have brought out different definitions of translation, which in turn have resulted in different translation strategies and approaches. Consequently, different translation quality conceptions and assessment methods are born.

After the 1970s, translation quality assessment has attracted scholars’ attention and has made certain developments (Li Xiaolin, He Shaobin, 2010). The neo-hermeneutics of translation studies, which believes that meaning comes from language users and that texts have no core meaning at all, will see translation as intuitive and interpretive; the behaviorists/functionalists of translation studies will base translation assessment primarily on reader response and cultural norms of the target language, thus seriously ignoring the ST; postmodern, deconstructive and linguistics-based schools of translation will use contextual or discourse analysis methods (text-and-discourse-based methods) contained in separate linguistic units to assess translation (Si Xianzhu, 2005). These models can now be broadly classified into two main categories: quantitative and non-quantitative models. House’s description-interpretation model favors the latter (Wu Guangjun, 2006). House Juliane argues that the key issue in assessing the translation quality is to figure out the nature of translation.

In addition, translation circle has long identified “equivalence” as formal, lexical and syntactic equivalence. While House argues this is such a narrow view that it denies the ambiguity between the linguistic units of different languages. She believes that “equivalence” refers to the remaining of meaning between two languages, and semantic, pragmatic and textual equivalences are crucial to translation (Tang Jun, Wang Yan, 2011). Therefore, House defines translation as “Translation is the replacement of a text in the source language by a semantically and pragmatically equivalent text in the target language” (House, 1977: 30).

Based on what is discussed above, the key word is abstracted - meaning remains unchanged. The term “meaning” here refers to semantics, pragmatics and texts. In the framework of Halliday’s three metafunctions of language, “semantics” corresponds to the ideational function, “pragmatics” to the interpersonal function, and “texts” to the textual function. The “textual function” is an internal function that organizes and coordinates words and sentences, and can be regarded as an auxiliary function. It is important to note that the terms “text” and “language” are the same concept here, because of the subject. Actually, language exists in many forms, such as spoken language, written language and body language.
language, etc. In short, “language ≥ text”. As the specific subject in this article is the English translation quality of a Chinese prose and “text” is the actual existence of “language”, “text” and “language” here are actually the same subject from different perspectives. That is, “language = text”, and thus “language function = text function”.

What is “text type”? In Theory of Language: the Representational Function of Language, Karl Bühler, a German linguist, divided the language functions into representation, expression and appeal. Then, Katharina Reiss, in Translation Criticism: Prospects and Limitations, divided text types into content-focused texts, form-focused texts and appeal-focused texts, and later renamed informative text, expressive text and operative text respectively. Since the previous section has explained that “language = text” and “language function = text function”, Bühler’s language function can be regarded as a text function. Thus, it is as follows:

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 1.** The three functions under “language metafunction” do not completely correspond to the three categories under “textual function”.

The “Mode” in figure 1 depends on the text function, which in turn depends on the language metafunction. Since “language function = text function”, it can be concluded that “representation” corresponds to the “ideational function”, and “expression” and “appeal” correspond to the “interpersonal function”. Here it is stressed that as one of Halliday’s three language metafunctions, the “textual function”, is based on an intra-linguistic mechanism that organizes and coordinates words and sentences. Bühler’s linguistic functions, on the other hand, go beyond the word-by-word and are intended to analyze the purpose and emotion of the text, which is extra-verbal. Therefore, as shown in Figure 1, the three functions under “language metafunction” do not completely correspond to the three categories under “textual function”.

The term “unchanged” here refers to “equivalence”. As shown in Figure 2, House proposes the following eight dimensions to grasp the “equivalence” of the ST and the TT.

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 2.** House proposes the following eight dimensions to grasp the “equivalence” of the ST and the TT.

This is the original version of the translation quality assessment model proposed by House, in which the ST and the TT are analyzed to see if the eight dimensions presented in Figure 2 match each other and if the same functions are obtained in the same way. The higher the degree of conformity is, the better the quality of the translation is.

However, the original version was criticized, such as the lack of statements on the nature of translation, the complexity of the analytical classification, the lack of terminology and poetic, literary texts in the case studies. House then introduced the theories of functional linguistics and discourse analysis, incorporating her previous dimensional classification into the register (field, tenor and mode) proposed by Halliday. Finally, she proposed a revised version of the translation quality assessment model. As shown in Figure 3, the revised version of the model contains a systematic comparison of the ST and the TT.
In addition to what Halliday has stated, a number of other factors are added to the “register” here. In Figure 3, “Register” refers to the subject matter and social action. “Tenor” refers to the participant relationship, including the author’s provenance and stance, social role relationship and social attitudes (formal, deliberative or informal styles). “Mode” refers to the medium (spoken or written) and the degree of participation (monologue or dialogue).

As “Register” is limited within the linguistic level, House incorporates “Genre” into the revised model, whereas “Genre” can interpret the deep structure of a text. “Register” covers the relationship between the “text” and the micro-context, while “Genre” is the macro-context that connects the text to its cultural background. Language reflects the features of the register, which in turn reflects the genre, and ultimately the text function (Tang Jun, Wang Yan, 2011).

2.1. House’s Translation Quality Assessment Model

1. A profile is produced of the ST register.
2. To this is added a description of the ST genre realized by the register.
3. Together, this allows a ‘statement of function’ to be made for the ST, including the ideational and interpersonal component of that function (in other words, what information is being conveyed and what the relationship is between sender and receiver).
4. The same descriptive process is then carried out for the TT.
5. The TT profile is compared to the ST profile and a statement of ‘mismatches’ or errors is produced, categorized according to genre and to the situational dimensions of register and genre; these dimensional errors are referred to as ‘covertly erroneous errors’, to distinguish them from overtly erroneous errors’, which are denotative mismatches or target system errors.
6. A statement of quality’ is then made of the translation.
7. Finally, the translation can be categorized into one of two types: overt translation or covert translation.

3. The Quality Assessment of The English Translation of Carpenter Lao Chen by House’s Translation Quality Assessment Model

3.1. Analysis of the ST

Carpenter Lao Chen was written by Ba Jin in 1934 and later compiled into his collection of essays, Confessions of Life. The ST depicts Lao Chen, a carpenter with an ordinary background. He is a skilled craftsman, kind and honest, but he fails to get rid of poverty and escape the bizarre and tragic fate, like his father. As a biographical reminiscence, full of lyricism, this article integrates narration and lyricism: feelings express with the narration, plots develop with the emotion, and reality and imagination coexist. It expresses Ba Jin’s strong sympathy and regret for Lao Chen, the carpenter, as well as his pain and helplessness for laboring people who lived in the old society suffering a tragic fate.

3.1.1. The Register of the ST

In the ST, the register refers to the subject matter and social action. The author, Ba Jin, recalls the life of Lao Chen, and does not limit himself to recounting past events, but also to describing Lao Chen’s actions and details.

First, vocabulary. The vocabulary in the ST is simple and unpretentious, with no ornate rhetoric and very few of the four-character patterns customary in Chinese writing. It is no wonder that Ba Jin is regarded as a modern Chinese writer who likes to talk about himself to his readers the most, always with affection and frankness.

Example 1

ST: 连眼珠也不转一下。
TT: My eyes riveted on him.

Example 2

ST: 老陈和他的徒弟的工作使我的眼界宽了不少。
TT: The work which Lao Chen and his apprentices did was a real eye-opener to me.

The STs of both example 1 and example 2 are simply everyday words. The characters are brought to life in a way that is both authentic and heartfelt. In addition to this, the ST also uses a mixture of language that reflects the context of the times, such as “丘八（两部分的 Chinese character ‘兵’, which means ‘scampish soldier’)” and “吃粮（have to go
soldiering for food）” and so on.

Second, the syntax. Most of the sentences are short, or of appropriate length. These sentences still keep with the author’s affable tone and chatty reminiscence of the past, which can be seen in example 3 and example 4.

Example 3

ST: 他 平 日 在 店 里 。但是他也常常到相熟的公馆里去做活, 或者做包工,或者做零工。

TT: He usually worked in his own shop. But from time to time he was employed by some rich people he knew well to work at their residences, either as a hired hand on contract or as an oddjobber.

Example 4

ST: 又 过 了 几 个 月 他 的 店 终 于 关 门 了。我 也 就 看 不 见 他 的 踪 迹 了。

TT: Several months later, his shop closed down for good and I lost all trace of him.

Third, text. The ST is a reminiscent prose, featuring strong articulation and easy to read and understand.

3.1.2. The Tenor of the ST

The tenor refers to the participant relationship, including the author’s provenance and stance, social role relationship and social attitudes, as well as the author’s time, geographical location, social status and personal views on the subject.

Firstly, the social role relationship. As the two main characters, Ba Jin, the author, is the young master and Lao Chen, the carpenter, is the contractor or odd jobber. It is clear that they are not the employer and the employee in the old society, but “special” friends.

Example 5

ST: 过 惯 了 这 种 单 调 的 生 活 以 后, 无 怪 乎 我 特 别 喜 欢 老 陈 了。

TT: Because of this monotonous life, it was no wonder that I developed a particular liking for Carpenter Lao Chen.

Example 6

ST: 家 里 的 人 看 见 我 对 老 陈 的 工 作 感 到 这 么 大 的 兴 趣, 并 不 来 干 扰 我, 却 嘲 笑 地 唤 我 做 老 陈 的 徒 弟, 父 亲 甚 至 开 玩 笑 地 说 要 我 送 到 老 陈 那 里 学 做 木 匠。但 这 些 嘲 笑 都 是 好 意 的, 父 亲 的 确 喜 欢 我。

TT: My folks, however, showed no sign of disapproval when they found me so much interested in Lao Chen’s work, but only teasingly called me an apprentice of his. Father even said jokingly that he was going to apprentice me to Lao Chen. All that was the well-meaning remarks of an affectionate father.

The friendship between Ba Jin and Lao Chen is close but not intimate, which can be perceived in Example 5 and 6. Ba Jin was born in 1904 and studied at home under the tutorship of an old scholar of the Qing Dynasty in 1909. Ba Jin had already become acquainted with Lao Chen when he was only five years old, and he was still in a state of ignorance about the ways of the world. The interaction between them undoubtedly adds a special touch of forget-the-age to their friendship.

Secondly, the author’s provenance and stance. The author’s nostalgia for Lao Chen is evidently shown in the writing.

Example 7

ST: 他的店起初还能够维持下去, 但是不久省城里发生了巷战, 一连打了三天, 然后那两位军阀因为别人的调解又握手言欢了。老陈的店在这个时期遭到“丘八”的光顾，他的一点点积蓄都给抢光了，只剩下个空铺子。这以后他虽然勉强开店, 生意却很萧条。

TT: At first, he could somehow scrape along. Soon street fighting broke out in the provincial capital, lasting three days until the dispute between two warlords was settled through the mediation of a third party. In the course of the fighting, soldiers looted Lao Chen’s shop until it was empty of everything. After that, nevertheless, he still managed to keep his shop open though business was bad.

The story can be deduced from the years 1909 to 1925, when China was divided by warlords, imperialist forces were fighting, intellectuals were in a precarious situation, and the laboring people were in dire straits. On the surface, the author expresses his regret and sympathy for Lao Chen, but in fact, he expresses his sadness and helplessness for the working people who have suffered in such a society. Lao Chen’s smiles after suffering hardships can arouse readers’ sympathy, lament and even strong empathy with those people.

Furthermore, the social attitude of the ST is informal. The writing is brief and simple, with clear wording. The frequent use of colloquial speech reveals a strong sense of life, by which the emotions are naturally expressed.

3.1.3. The Mode of the ST

The mode refers to the medium and the degree of participation.

Example 8

ST: 生活的经验固然会叫人忘记许多事情。但是有些记忆经过了多少时间的磨损也不会消灭

TT: Lots of things are apt to fade from memory as one’s life experiences accumulate. But some memories will withstand the wear and tear of time.

Example 8 is in the style of written language. The participation is complex, with a number of monologues by the author and conversations with Lao Chen. The monologues advance the plot and the dialogues reflect the characters’ personalities and psychological states.

3.1.4. The Genre of the ST

The ST is a biographical style of reminiscent prose. Prose is a genre of narrative literature that expresses the true feelings of the author and is written in a flexible manner. Carpenter Lao Chen is a biography based on the life of Lao Chen, and the author’s true feelings are expressed between the lines.

3.1.5. The Textual Function of the ST

As shown in Figure 1, textual functions are representation, expression and appeal. Meshed with functional linguistics, the textual functions can be divided into ideational function and interpersonal function. First, ideational function. By recounting the childhood memories of Ba Jin, the conversations he had with Lao Chen at different times and the news of Lao Chen’s death, the ST demonstrates Ba Jin’s sympathy and for Lao Chen and those Lao Chen-like people who have been treated cruelly by the times. Second, interpersonal function. The ST expresses the author’s true feelings through narrative and lyricism, in order to arouse strong empathy in readers and give them food for thought.

3.2. Comparison of the ST and the TT

3.2.1. Comparison of the Field

Firstly, the vocabulary. Generally speaking, the TT is accurate in the use of words, but there are a few mismatches. For example, the word “秀才(xiucai)” is translated into “old scholar”. Lao Chen lived in an era of backwardness, when the
social system was lagging behind. The term “秀才” originated from the reform of the official selection system by Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty, which originally meant outstanding talents, and it also reflected a specific social system. Therefore, there is no semantic equivalence between the “old scholar” and the “秀才”. Besides, there is also a problem of cultural loss. This term is so important for readers to understand the particular social landscape of that time, so an additional translation can be used to explain the concept. This is a covert error. The same problem arises with the word “吃粮(had to go soldiering for food)”. The translation of this word is “had gone soldiering”, which is seen by Westerners as something to be honored and proud of. In the ST, “吃粮” was a choice that people had to make in order to survive during the war, so “吃粮” here is full of helplessness and bitterness. By this comparison, the word “had gone soldiering” in the translation does not equate with “吃粮” in terms of lexical meaning, and there is also a problem of cultural deficiency. The solution to this problem is the same as above.

Example 9
ST: 老陈的店在这个时期遭到“丘八”的光顾, 他的一点点积蓄都给抢光了, 只剩下一个个空铺子。
TT: In the course of fighting, soldiers looted Lao Chen’s shop until it was empty of everything.

The term “丘八” was a derogatory term used at that time to refer to a soldier’s gangster. However, the word “soldiers” in the translation is just a neutral term. Although the rest of the sentence, such as “looted” and “empty of everything”, shows the evil of the soldiers here, the translation of this word alone is not satisfactory.

Secondly, the syntactic. In the TT, most of the sentences are segmented and ordered according to the format of the ST, but there are cases where several short sentences are combined into one long sentence.

Example 10
ST: 我那时注意的，并不是他本人，倒是他的那些工具：什么有轮齿的锯子啦，有两个耳朵的刨子啦，会旋转的钻子啦，像图画里板斧一般的斧子啦。这些奇怪的东西我以前全没有看见过。
TT: What attracted my attention, however, was not the man himself, but the tools he used, such as the saw with toothed blade, the plane with two ear-like handles, the revolving drill, the hatchet that looked like the broad axe in drawings -- things entirely strange to me.

The last sentence is an expression of Ba Jin’s feelings towards the various rare objects, and the author has used the paraphrase as a complement to the whole sentence, making the translation compact and thematic. There are also cases where the order of the sentences is changed.

Example 11
ST: “为什么不该学做木匠？做官有什么好？修房子，做家具，才有意思啊！我做木匠，我要给自己修房子，爬到上面去，爬得高高的，”我看见他不相信我的话，把它只当做小孩子胡说，我有些生气，就起劲地争论道。
TT: Somewhat annoyed by the way he shrugged off my words as childish nonsense, I argued heatedly.

Furthermore, the translation is informal in terms of social attitudes, with the same general narrative as the ST, combining emotion in the scene, the events and the dialogue.

3.2.2. Comparison of the Tenor
Firstly, the social role relationship. Ba Jin and Lao Chen are the young master and the contract worker or odd-job worker with different identities under the feudal system, and they are friends with complicated feelings close to each other, but not intimate due to their different backgrounds. This also leads to the author speaking to Lao Chen in a straightforward and sincere manner, while Lao Chen replies mostly in a respectful and disciplined manner. For example, in the ST, Lao Chen calls Ba Jin “少爷”, which is translated into “young master”. This is an appropriate translation that reflects the difference in status.

Secondly, the author’s provenance and stance. The TT accurately conveys the main idea of the ST, highlighting the author’s nostalgia, sympathy for Lao Chen and the laboring people who are in the same situation as Lao Chen.

Example 12
ST: 在那么多的木匠里面，偏偏是他跟着他父亲落进了横死的命里圈。这似乎又不是偶然。总之，一个安分守己的人就这样地消灭了。
TT: Why did Lao Chen, of all carpenters, die such a violent death like his father? In short, an honest man has thus passed out of existence.

The ST is declarative, but the translation uses the question “Why did...?”, which strengthens the tone and expresses Ba Jin’s indignation at the unjust fate that befell Lao Chen, and finally condenses into a sigh of helplessness.

Furthermore, the translation is informal in terms of social attitudes, with the same general narrative as the ST, combing emotion in the scene, the events and the dialogue.

3.2.3. Comparison of the Mode
The written style of the ST is well preserved in the translation. In example 8, “wear and tear” is an English idiom, which is consistent with the style of the ST.

Example 13
ST: 我看见他不相信我的话，把它只当做小孩子胡说，我有些生气，就起劲地争论道。
TT: Somewhat annoyed by the way he shrugged off my words as childish nonsense, I argued heatedly.

Furthermore, as shown in example 13, the “shrugged off” is also used in order to be consistent with the style of the ST. The ST was written in 1943, and the certain features of this period can be revealed by the scholars’ speech and action.

In example 5, the use of “乎(hu)” in the ST is a particular mark of the petty-bourgeois intellectuals of the 1930s. However, the translation reads “it was no wonder that I developed a particular liking for Carpenter Lao Chen.” The
special charm of the ST is lost. This mismatch is a hidden error, but it is important to note that this is an inherent difference between Chinese and foreign cultures, a gap that cannot be bridged.

In the ST, the participation does not change, but some declarative sentences used in the ST are translated with the questions, which strengthens the expression of emotion, resonates with the reader and increases interaction with readers.

3.2.4. Comparison of the Genre

The genre of the TT is the same as that of the ST, and the TT is also a biographical reminiscent prose.

3.2.5. Comparison of the Textual Function

The textual functions of the TT are basically the same as those of the ST. The narrative is well-structured and detailed, and although there is room for improvement in some of the vocabulary, the ideational function remains overall equivalent. In addition, the expression of feelings of the TT is no less than that of the ST.

3.3. Translation Quality Statement

Through comparisons of the register, tenor, mode, genre and textual function, the ideational and interpersonal functions of the TT are generally equivalent to those of the ST. There are only three minor mismatches in terms of the register, no obvious mismatches in terms of the tenor, and one mismatch in terms of the mode. Most of these mismatches are caused by the inherent differences between Chinese and foreign languages and cultures. What is more pleasing is that the use of some words with ambiguous sentimentality and cultural absence is compensated for by the translator with other words or phrases with strong sentimentality. On the whole, the TT is basically equivalent to the ST in terms of semantics and pragmatics, and the original textual functions are fully reserved in the translation. Therefore, the translation is of very high quality.

3.4. Classification of Translation

An overt translation is a TT that does not purport to be an original. In an overt translation, the translator should convey as much as possible the original ideas and style of the sender. While a covert translation is a translation in which the text has the same status as the original in the translated language and gives the ST functional equivalence in the TT. It is no longer a translation of the ST from a pragmatic perspective, but a recreation (Gui, Renna and Zhou Youya, 2009). After the previous analysis, the textual function of the TT is basically the same as that of the ST, and this translation should be an overt translation.

4. Conclusion

The author has traced the roots of House’s translation quality assessment model, and briefly analyzed the theoretical basis behind it.

Through the assessment the quality of Zhang Peiji’s English translation of Carpenter Lao Chen according to the operation process of Juliane House’s translation quality assessment model, the following conclusions can be drawn: firstly, the translator has accurately conveyed the information of the ST, and the wording is well-crafted. Although there are a few cultural bearing words that cannot be equated due to the inherent differences between Chinese and foreign cultures, in general, the ideational and functional equivalence between the ST and the TT has been basically achieved. Secondly, Zhang Peiji, the translator, has retained the writing style of the ST while accurately conveying the information, has handled the relationships between the characters in an appropriate manner, and has expressed his emotions in a way that is even better than the original. In addition, the syntax demonstrates the care for readers that translators should take into account. The interpersonal function of the text is fully equivalent in the translation. In conclusion, Zhang Peiji’s English translation of Ba Jin’s Carpenter Lao Chen is of very high quality and is an overt translation.

Through the analysis, it is concluded that the model is highly operational. The linguistic analysis is reasonable and meticulous. This model is practical and feasible in the practice of Chinese-English translation, and it can provide a reference for the quality assessment model of prose translation.

Acknowledgment

This work is supported by the 2021 Teaching Reform Project of Guangxi Undergraduate Education (2021JGB212).

References


