

Strategies of Biography Translation Under Skopos Theory

Tianhan Liu, Zhulin Han

School of Applied English, Mudanjiang Normal University, Mudanjiang, China

Abstract: Based on the Skopos Theory, the author carries out a Chinese-English translation practice on Biography of Zhou Baozhong, using various translation techniques, including free translation, supplemental translation, literal translation, etc, to analyze, summarize cases at the lexical level, sentence level and cultural level, with the hope to provide useful inspiration and reference for other scholars engaged in the historical biographies.

Keywords: Biography Translation; Skopos Theory; Translation Strategies.

1. Introduction

The translation of a historical figure's biography is of strong purpose and practicality for its function of publicity. To improve the target readers' acceptance with the appropriate English translation of the CPC historical figure's biography, under the premise of understanding the history, culture and characters' connotation, we must stand in the perspective of Skopos Theory and fully understand the differences in language acquisition and thinking mode between the social culture of the translator and the target language readers, so as to successfully spread the CPC history and culture, as well as to preserve the aesthetic feeling of Chinese language to the maximum extent without losing the principles and requirements of Skopos Theory, and then, realize the expected communication between the translator and target language readers. The text is a biography of characters, which is characterized by the fact that it cannot be fictional. If fictional goes against "documentary", it is not a biography of characters. Biography is closely related to history, and some old biographies are often regarded as historical materials. So, the other thing about biographies is that they're historical. History can be said to be one of the essential characteristics of biography. Since it is written for real people, the important events experienced by the characters, even the description of key details in the biography, should not be wrong, or it will lose the trust of readers. Biography, its description of the character image must be vivid, language and plot to naturally real.

To be fictional or not decides whether a story is a biography or not. "Documentary characteristics" is the watershed between biographies and novels. Besides, biography is closely related to history, and some old biographies are often regarded as historical materials. So "historical characteristics" is another element, or one of the essential characteristics of biography. Since it is written for real people, the important events experienced by the characters, even the description of key details in the biography, should not be wrong, or it will lose the trust of readers. In a biography, all descriptions of characters' images, language and plot must be natural and lively.

2. Review on the Skopos Theory

Hans Vermeer pointed out that translation is a discourse

produced for a certain purpose and target audience in the context of the target language. He believes that translation is a kind of cross-cultural interpersonal interaction, which should be combined with the theory of human behavior, and all behaviors have a certain purpose. Skopos theory has three principles, namely, the principle of purpose, coherence and fidelity. The method and process of translation are determined by the purpose of the translation. In the context of a translation purpose, coherence takes precedence over fidelity, but the first prerequisite of both is purpose. There are differences between the author and the target readers in cultural backgrounds, ways of thinking and customs, as well as communicative needs and expectations of the translation task. Therefore, the good translation should be based on the perspective of the target language readers. We should not only pay attention to the basic principles of Skopos Theory, but also consider readers' reading habits. Only by paying attention to the perspective of the target language readers, paying attention to both the basic principles of Skopos Theory and paying attention to the reading habits of the readers, can the translator expect to translate high-quality biographies of Chinese historical figures that "come from life but are higher than life".

3. Translation Strategies at Lexical Level

From the perspective of vocabulary, there are massive words and terms difficult to be translated in the translation task. Since Zhou Baozhong is a historical figure, the theme and background of his biography spans the whole revolutionary war in modern China, and inevitably involves a large number of proper nouns, such as battles, locations, troops, positions, historical events, etc., even younger Chinese readers will inevitably feel strange to many of the contents, let alone English-speaking readers who know little about China's revolutionary history.

In order to realize the correspondence between the linguistic units of the translation task and the homologous text, it is not competent to only convert two languages at the general technical level. When translating between Chinese and English, it is absolutely foolish to copy the definitions in dictionaries. In order to ensure that the translated text accurately expresses the meaning of the original text and conform to the expression habits of the target language,

without causing mistranslation, every time when the translator encounters a proper noun with strong history in the process of translation, the translator must understand its context and context with the help of the network platform, and then imagine its possible corresponding English words in combination with the context and logical relationship, and expand and adapt it according to the translation strategies and skills the translator have learned. It is a true feeling of “finding his congregation where thousands of degrees, when the translator looks back, that people in the lights bend” as said by predecessors.

According to Skopos Theory, translation is a purposeful cross-language and cross-culture behavior. Skopos Theory attaches importance to the study of the translation process itself and puts forward the criterion of adequacy. Adequacy is the selection of symbols suitable for the purpose of translation in the process of translation, taking the target as the standard. Based on the translation standard set by Skopos Theory, the principle of “adequacy”, the following cases are briefly discussed.

3.1. Literal Translation

Literal translation refers to the translation method that, when the language conditions of the translation task permit, the content and form of the original text are maintained in the translation task, especially the metaphor, image and national and local colors of the original text. In the fourth chapter of *Translation Theory*, written by Qiao Zengrui, a relatively complete definition of literal translation and free translation was made “Under the condition of conforming to the national norms of the target language, the translated text should be loyal to the writer’s original idea, and maintain the content and style of the original text by preserving the appearance (expression mode) of the original text. This translation method is called literal translation.”

Example 1: 我于十五年（民国十五年即一九二六年）春在西北国民军失败后重回广东，此时已深能了解中国的环境是需要革命的。（中共牡丹江市委党史研究室，2015:53）

Translation: I went back to Guangzhou again in the spring of the 15th Year of the Republic of China (i.e., 1926), when the Nationalist Army was defeated in the Northwest of China, and came to understand the urgency of the people’s revolution in China.

Analysis: This sentence is the original sentence in Zhou Baozhong’s letter to a friend. It is in the first person and has some “half literary and half vernacular” characteristics. In order to preserve the sense of instant scene, literal translation is the best choice. Generally speaking, it should not affect the understanding of foreign readers to translate it in accordance with the customary Mandarin. Only the word “十五年” is difficult to deal with, because it refers to “民国十五年”, that is, the fifteen years of the Republic of China, the customary saying before the founding of the People’s Republic of China or Taiwan compatriots, whether for Chinese or Western readers, converted into the Gregorian calendar will be better understood. Therefore, the translator did a literal translation with parenthesis in which “i.e., 1926” was inserted. In this way, the translation can not only fully convey the meaning of the original text, but also conform to the reading habits of the target language readers, so that the target language readers can obtain the same understanding effect as the original readers.

3.2. Free Translation

Each language has its own national vocabulary, syntactic structure and expression methods. When literal translation is not suitable because of the contradiction between the idea of the original text and the expression form of the content, free translation should be adopted to make the translation correctly express the content of the original text without confining to the form of the original text. Free translation is a translation method or text that only maintains the original content but not the original form (冯庆华，2008：37).

Example 2: 周保中为解放东北建立新中国及云南的建设事业，赤胆忠心，鞠躬尽瘁，“为党为人民做出了不可磨灭的贡献。”（中共牡丹江市委党史研究室，2015：52）

Translation: The contribution Zhou Baozhong made, with his loyalty and dedication in the liberation of the Northeast, the founding of PRC and the construction of Yunnan, to CPC and Chinese people, will be everlasting in PRC’s memory forever.

Analysis: In Chinese, dual phrases or idioms of similar structure and the same meaning are sometimes used repeatedly for rhetorical purposes to strengthen the expression effect. This sentence is the concluding sentence in the eulogy to Zhou Baozhong, using a pair of comments of characters with Chinese characteristics, such as “赤胆忠心” “鞠躬尽瘁”, which involves a wide range of knowledge of cultural allusions behind it. Coupled with “不可磨灭”, it makes the eulogy produce an earthshaking effect. However, in Western culture, there is no concept of four-character idioms, and the use of dual phrases is less, so it is impossible to rely on the original format of four-character idioms to achieve better expression effect. Under the guidance of Skopos Theory, the translator adopted free translation, reconstructed the sentence pattern of the original text, and applied “indelible” to the “memory of the Republic”, to help the target readers have the same feeling of the noble personality and glorious spirit of Zhou Baozhong as Chinese readers.

4. Translation Strategies at Sentence Level

Compared with the lexical level, the sentence level is of the higher requirements under the “sufficiency” principle of Skopos theory, with even more cases shown in Chinese-English translation. Chinese is a semantic language, focusing on topic and parataxis, whereas English is a grammatical (morphological) language, emphasizing “subject and predicate” and hypotaxis. Knowing contrasts and differences between them will help to improve the level of English-Chinese translation. These features of the two languages are clearly reflected in their respective sentence structures, laid the structural framework of Chinese and English sentences, and formed the difference in phrasing. In Chinese sentences, the grammatical meaning and logical relation are expressed by the meaning of words or clauses, between which there are not any linguistic forms used to connect, and the modifiers in sentences are relatively fewer and shorter. On the contrary, in English sentences, all words or clauses are connected to express grammatical meaning and logical relations by their own formal means, including relative pronouns, relative adverbs, parallel conjunctions, subordinated conjunctions, etc., resulting in much more and longer modifiers there,

complex sentence structure, as well as frequently-occurred extremely long sentences. Therefore, in the mutual translation between English and Chinese sentences, we must not be rigid or rigid, but do it flexibly according to their individual characteristics.

4.1. Division

In the process of translation, the sentence of the source language is often divided into two or more smaller units according to the syntactic characteristics of the target language, and then, these units are rearranged to make the translation more in line with the aesthetic habits of the readers. Such a technique of translation is referred to as splitting translation.

Professor Feng Qinghua once identified this translation technique in two types, i.e. “transliteration translation” and “sentence-breaking translation”, arguing that the difference is that the former refers to pulling out a phrase or word in the original text and translating it into independent sentences, while the latter refers to pulling out a clause in the original text and translating it into independent sentences. (徐秀梅, 宫钦言, 2005: 24)

Example 3: 1928年2月, 周保中接到党中央代表和湖南省委的指示, 要他组织驻在长沙的第六军十八师全师起义, 由于这项计划被叛徒出卖, 周保中率领的驻防醴陵的两个团被调回长沙改编, 他本人被解职, 调到司令部任少将军军事参议。(中共牡丹江市委党史研究室, 2015: 55)

Translation: In February 1928, Zhou Baozhong received instructions from CPC Central Committee representatives and Hunan Provincial Committee to organize an uprising of the whole 18th Division of the 6th Army stationed in Changsha. However, due to the betray of traitors, the project leaked in advance and he and his two regiments stationed in Liling was recalled to Changsha. Then the troops were reorganized and he was dismissed and transferred to the position of military advisor with major general rank in headquarter.

Analysis: English sentences need use some connectives to express transition, purpose, concession, cause or effect to express the connection between components, but Chinese sentences seldom have such connectives, because the logical connection among the sentence components is inside the sentence meanings. Such is the case in this sentence. The Chinese sentence is long, and there are no key words that can be directly used for segmentation. However, by means of “meaning group segmentation”, it can be divided into three parts. the translator did so, and adds “However” and “Then” to the translated text according to the combination principle of English sentences and the original logical relationship, so that it cannot only fully convey the meaning of the original text, but also conform to the reading habits of the target language readers, and provide the target language readers the same understanding as Chinese readers.

4.2. Combination

Sometimes the difference in structures between English and Chinese sentences can lead to the translation from a compound sentence into several single sentences so as to make the translated text compact, concise and coherent. Combination is one of the four special translation methods. It is characterized by a unified generalization of words or larger structural components within its scope. As a result, there are

still traces of the original text in the translation, and there are no traces of the original text. (乔海清, 1998: 4)

Example 4: 周保中和中共宁安县委重建了工农义务队, 在宁安一带的反日队伍中引起了强烈反响。不仅保住了这面令敌生畏的抗日旗帜, 而且有力地推动了抗日统一战线工作的发展。(中共牡丹江市委党史研究室, 2015: 60)

Translation: To keep the glorious banner of Ning'an Workers and Peasants' Volunteer Corps and enhance the further development of the Counter-Japanese National United Front, under Zhou Baozhong's leadership, Ning'an CPC Committee rebuilt Workers and Peasants' Volunteer Corps, arousing great repercussions among the counter-Japanese forces in Ning'an.

Analysis: These two sentences constituted another introduction to historical facts. Since there is no subject in the latter sentence, the synthesis of a sentence can be accepted by Chinese readers. If we use literal translation, its English translation should be given a subject, which is not easy to determine. Therefore, in translation, according to the relevance of the two original sentences, the translator advanced the last sentence and treats the translation as an adverbial clause of purpose, so as to make it more in line with the rhetorical requirements of English sentences.

Of course, we can also consider changing the last sentence into an attributive clause, but that will make the original “narration” no longer have the same importance, so that the target readers will pay more attention to the act of “rebuilding the volunteer corps of workers and peasants”. But they have already learned too much about Zhou Baozhong's revolutionary work through reading the previous paragraph, so it is hard for them to avoid thinking subconsciously that there is nothing special in this work, thus ignoring the more important content that the author really wants to express, which “引起了强烈反响” “保住了旗帜” “推动了发展”. Therefore, the translator adopted free translation, so that the translation can fully convey the meaning of the original text and conform to the reading habits of the target language readers. Thus, it can achieve the same understanding effect for the target language readers as Chinese readers.

5. Translation Strategies at Cultural Level

Skopos theory holds that to translate is to compare cultures; The translation must be meaningful in the culture of the target language and understandable to the recipient. Therefore, translation should not only focus on the differences between the two languages, but also consider the similarities and differences between the two cultures (including politics, economy, religion, history, etc.). As a biography of CPC historical figures, most of the events in *Biography of Zhou Baozhong* took place in a specific historical background. Some proper nouns in the translation task are unfamiliar even to average Chinese readers, and need to be looked up in a large number of relevant historical materials for evidence and even consulted relevant experts to be understand. As for the translated text, any mistranslation, omission or inconsistency of the important information from the translation task may cause serious consequences to foreign readers that are difficult to be restored.

Therefore, in the process of translation, it is necessary to think over the word choice repeatedly and try to make the

translation according to foreign readers' reading habits.

Domestication and foreignization are two translation concepts defined by Lawrence Venuti, a representative figure of American deconstruction, in 1995. The former is a translation strategy used by translators to minimize the "strangeness" in exotic texts in order to create a transparent and smooth translation. The latter refers to the translator's translation strategy of retaining some "strangeness" in the original text in order to exert deliberate impact on the norms of the target language culture.

It is hard to say which one is better between domestication and foreignization. How to use them in translation depends on the translator's attitude towards the identity and status of the source language culture and target language culture. If the emphasis is placed on the target language culture and the target readers' response, the domestication translation is inclined to be used. If they respect the identity and status of the source language culture more, or try to deliberately preserve its foreignness, they tend to apply foreignization translation.

5.1. Domesticating Translation

Domestication is used aiming at bring the translator into the culture of the target language, and targeting the target language readers and getting close to them. By using the customary expressions of the target language readers to convey the content and culture of the original text, it can help to improve the readability and appreciation of translated text, and achieve its reading effect so that the foreign readers can understand the original text better. There are plenty of cultural elements in *Biography of Zhou Baozhong*, the translation task. According to the principle of Skopos Theory, for the sake of taking full account of English readers' reading and appreciation habits, the translator preferred to choose domestication as the main strategy of translation.

Example 5: 这时不急起直追努力革命， 尚待何时？
(中共牡丹江市委党史研究室，2015：53)

Translation: If not rise in revolution now, when?

Analysis: The translation here might seem a little ridiculous, because it is obviously adapted from the famous motto in Emma Watson's UN speech, i.e. "If not me, who? If not now, when?" But in fact, Emma Watson's motto was also adapted from a Jewish leader, Hillel, i.e. "If I am not for myself, who is for me? And being for my own self, what am 'I'? And if not now, when?" Therefore, there is no problem to domesticate it as part of the expression of Zhou Baozhong's letter. Meanwhile, the target language readers, especially the younger generation of target language readers, need realize that CPC historical figures' biography also has a strong literary background.

5.2. Foreignizing Translation

Foreignization is the imposition of linguistic and cultural differences in the foreign text by bringing the reader into a foreign situation. It proposes translators to express the content of the original text in the way of the author using his or her native language, and manage to respect the native readers' habits by preserving the linguistic and cultural characteristics of the source language as much as possible. Foreignization strategy is more helpful to keep the distinctive features of the source language and display a good national image. However, considering the national and local characteristics of the CPC historical characters' biographies, as well as the task of translation to convey the strangeness of the source language

culture accurately and appropriately, so as to promote the communication and complementation between different cultures, the translator also used some foreignizing translation methods in this translation practice.

Example 6: 从前， 刘备三顾茅庐请来了个诸葛亮， 如今， 我们一条绳子绑来个参谋长。（中共牡丹江市委党史研究室，2015：67）

Translation: I don't know if you are clever than those so-called wise men like Prime Minister Zhuge Liang in the Dynasty of Three Kingdoms, but I am sure that I am luckier than his Master, Emperor Liu Bei, because I got you with only a rope instead of making repeated whole-hearted persuasion again and again.

Analysis: Here we see another allusion from *Romance of The Three Kingdoms*, "三顾茅庐", which is quite a long story that might be unbearable for English readers if it was explained in details. But by assimilating the key points of conversation, changing the original structure and rearranging the ways of expression, the translator managed to straighten out the complex relationship among "诸葛亮" "刘备" and "三顾茅庐" in a compound sentence not too long for English readers to bear, and can satisfy their needs to understand Chinese literature.

6. Conclusion

It proves that Skopos Theory can indeed play an irreplaceable guiding role in the translation of biographies. The skopos principle is the core of Skopos theory, that is, translation should function in the context and culture of the target language in the way expected by the target language recipient. Therefore, the translator defines their specific purpose in a given translation, and decide which translation methods and means to adopt according to this purpose.

Acknowledgments

- 1.Foreign Language Education Reform and Innovation Project of Heilongjiang Province Universities: A study on Foreign Language Education and International Talent Cultivation under Curriculum Ideology and Politics (HWX 2022019-B)
- 2.Graduate Science and Technology Innovation Project of Mudanjiang Normal University in 2021: A Practical Study on the C-E Translation of the CPC Biography "Zhou Baozhong" (kjcx 2022-132mdjnu)
- 3.Mudanjiang Normal University Humanities and Social Sciences Research Project: A Study on the Translation of Mudanjiang History of the CPC(YB2021011)
- 4.Educational Science Planning Project of Heilongjiang Province in 2021: Research on Innovative MTI Talents Training Model Based on Serving Border Economic Development (GJB1421367).

References

- [1] Andre Lefevere. Translation, History, Culture[M]. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- [2] Chang Fangbin. Research on the Translation and Dissemination of Marxism Before and After the Founding of the Communist Party of China[J]. Academic Journal of Humanities & Social Sciences, 2021(2): 17-19.
- [3] Nord Christiane. Translating as a Purposeful Activity: Functionalist Approaches Explained [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Education Press, 2001.

- [4] Feng Qinghua, A Practical Translation Course[M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Education Press, 2008.
- [5] Qiao Haiqing.Name for co-translation[J]. Shanghai Journal of Translators for Science and Technology, 1998(4): 4.
- [6] Xue Xiumei.Gong Qinyan.The Adjustment of Word Order and the Use of Punctuation -- a Brief Discussion on the Method of Subtranslation [J]. Shanghai Journal of Translators, 2005(4): 24-26.
- [7] Party History Research Office of the CPC Mudanjiang Municipal Committee, Biographies of Historical Figures of the Communist Party of China in Mudanjiang[M], Beijing: CPC History Press 2015.