

A Study of Untranslatability and Strategies in English-American Literary Translation under Bassnett's Theory of Cultural Translation

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Abstract: Literary works are the carrier of a nation's history and culture and the embodiment of a nation's cultural image. There are significant differences between English and Chinese cultures. In the context of cross-cultural communication, good translation of British and American literary works is helpful to promote cultural exchanges. At present, there have been many academic achievements in the study of English and American literature translation, and some of them have paid attention to differences in cultural backgrounds, but few studies combine with foreign translation theories. On the basis of previous translation research results, this paper will use Bassnett's theory of cultural translation to assess and analyze the translation methods of English and American literature. This article analyzes the importance of translation based on cultural differences in the process of English-American literature to Chinese versions translation and the untranslatability caused by cultural differences. In addition, British and American literature are analyzed from various angles, like mythological and religious vocabulary, living customs and living environment, and differences in thinking by using many practical examples.

Keywords: British and American literature translation, cross-culture perspective, Susan Bassnett, cultural translation

1. Introduction

With the introduction of British and American literature, the translation of British and American classics has become an important topic in English language research. Translation is a form of language transformation, which refers to the act of using one language to explain another language. In the process of translating British and American literary works into Chinese versions, the translators are not only supposed to translate the original content, but also fully and accurately express the themes and emotions of the works. However, due to the differences between Chinese and English cultures, there are often various difficulties in the translation of British and American literary works, such as different ways of language expression and different folk customs. If the translator does not take these factors into account, inappropriate translation may occur, resulting in the original meaning being changed. In order to improve the accuracy of the translation of British

and American literary works, translators should not only consider the language factors, but also the cultural background, literary style and other factors when translating British and American literary works, so as to fully reflect the translation value of the literary text. Domestic translation studies have also paid attention to these problems, such as the Chinese Translation Studies published in the last century [1].

There have been several advances in the translation of British and American literature in recent years. Almost all renowned works of American and British literature have been translated into multiple editions as of this point. But there is still potential room for development, particularly in the areas of deciding between domestication and foreignization, assisting readers with the cultural context of the original text, facilitating cross-cultural reading dialogue. So, strengthening the study of masterpiece translation from the perspective of British and American culture is important in this regard for practical reasons.

The reason why English-American literature is selected as the sample of analysis is that English-American literature is the work of native English speakers, and the written language is original and authentic, which can better reflect the social environment and living conditions of English native speakers. Moreover, literature is a category of culture, which is more suitable for applying Bassnett's theory of cultural translation. Moreover, literature is also quite special. Although the literary language is difficult to define, it is a consensus in academia that it is different from daily language, so it is more likely to encounter difficulties in translation. Additionally, literature is an understanding of association and imagination, which are constructed in close relation to people's daily lives and cultural environments. Differences in association and imagination result from various cultural environments. As a result, readers from various cultural backgrounds explain the same book in various ways. Additionally, since different literary styles provide distinct challenges in practice, it is more worthwhile to research.

This article aims to explore the Chinese translation of British and American literature by using Bassnett's theory of cultural translation. Based on several core concepts of her theory, this article will discuss the emergence of untranslatability in a cross-cultural context. It is illustrated with appropriate passages from classical English literature.

2. Literary Differences

Bassnett is a contemporary British translation theorist and comparative literature scholar, belonging to the cultural translation school. She proposed cultural turn in translation studies[2]. The similar point of view is also proposed by André Lefevere [3][4]. The cultural shift was proposed by the cultural school in the 1970s, focusing on issues at various cultural levels. Her translation theory is summarized as follows: Traditional translation studies are carried out from the linguistic level, while literary language is different from ordinary language, so the study of literature as a special language should turn to the cultural level. Moreover, communication and cultural exchange are the core of literary translation. The principles of translation should meet the needs of the culture and the needs of different groups in a certain culture. Therefore, Translation Studies should pay attention to cultural differences and historical background, and consider literature in the larger system of human culture, so as to promote communication in literary translation. Because the original text exists in the special cultural background, the translation has certain untranslatability. In summary, her theory is more in favor of Lawrence Venuti's alienation view. Bassnett's translation theory has some research results in China, but have relatively less attention. This article tries to make a supplement in this field.

The advantage of her theory is that she has been engaged in comparative literature research for a long time. Compared with traditional translation theories focusing on linguistic perspective, she pays more attention to the culture behind literary works, which provides a new way of thinking for

those engaged in translation practice. This article will try to explain it in practice. However, her theory also has shortcomings. Most Western scholars pay attention to the translation between European languages and use foreign languages for the elaboration and examples of translation theories. Bassnett is no exception. She pays little attention to Chinese-English translation, which leads to the possibility that the practicability of the details of the theory may be greatly compromised in the practice of Chinese-English translation, but some concepts still have merit. Moreover, she pays less attention to the translation of novels, which leaves room for research in this area.

In Bassnett's *Translation Studies*, she quoted Popovic[~] in which Popovic[~] pointed out that cultural untranslatability refers to the lack of contextual features relevant to the source text in the target culture. Catford also says that context will guide the reader to choose the appropriate features of the situation. The problem here is that readers will have an idea of the word based on their cultural background and apply this particular perspective accordingly. Popovic[~] tried to define untranslatability without differentiating between language and culture. For the latter, he also gave a similar view, because of the lack of circumstances to find the appropriate language to express [2]. Next, the paper will analyse cultural translation in terms of the differences between cultural contexts, life scenes and cultural connotations.

2.1. Mythological and Religious Vocabulary

The main sources of influence in European literature are myth and legend, the Church and the Bible. Firstly, ancient Greek and Roman culture is the main source of European civilization. Myths and legends were widely circulated and rewritten at that time. Tragedy and comedy also had a great influence. These myths and legends have become one of the literary materials for later generations. In addition, the Christian Church once controlled the spiritual life of Western Europe for a long time, which had a great impact on the inheritance and development of Western European ideology and culture. Moreover, the Bible has an important influence on the literature and art of Western Europe, and many materials of literature and art creation come from its historical legends and mythological stories. Such stories are called allusions in Chinese literature. However, Chinese and English allusions are very different from each other, and difficulties are often encountered in translation.

Take *Moby Dick*, one of the great works of American literature, for an example. The first sentence of the book is "Call me Ishmael". This sentence is so confusing to those who do not live in English countries. Because Ishmael is a character in the Bible and Christian culture is almost absent in China. The name is not only a name but a kind of symbolization. The name means "outcast" in the Bible, and in the text, the sailor is the only survivor of the final battle. Similarly, the name of the captain is also special in meaning. The author deliberately adopted the name of the sinister revenge king in the Old Testament as the name of the captain, reflecting the extreme irrational revenge psychology of the captain.

For example, the same "*Moby Dick*" passage about the final battle uses a famous mythological allusion. An excerpt from the original work is "A gentle joyousness—a mighty mildness of repose in swiftness, invested the gliding whale. Not the white bull Jupiter swimming away with ravished Europa clinging to his graceful horns; his lovely, leering eyes sideways intent upon the maid; with smooth bewitching fleetness, rippling straight for the nuptial bower in Crete; not Jove, not that great majesty Supreme! did surpass the glorified White Whale as he so divinely swam." [5].

The Greek mythological allusion used here is the story of Europa. A Phoenician princess in Greek mythology. In myth, Zeus, who loved her, turned into a white, strong, noble, and magnificent bull and took it to another continent, which was later named Europa, which is now Europe. This myth is well known in Europe and has been the subject of numerous artists of later generations.

Quoting this myth, the appearance of the white whale is described vividly and vividly. Highlight it is strong and white.

Leaves of Grass, a masterpiece of the American poet Walt Whitman, includes this excerpt:

Taking myself the exact dimensions of Jehovah and laying them away,

Lithographing Kronos and Zeus his son, and Hercules his grandson [6].

This paragraph is already difficult for readers who do not know the background of Western culture. Because Chinese people are not very familiar with many gods of ancient Greek mythology. So, it is difficult for them to imagine what Kronos, Zeus, and Hercules look like and what they stand for.

2.2. Living Customs and Living Environment

Western culture, represented by English, focuses on fishing and animal husbandry, while Chinese culture has long focused on agriculture. This will inevitably lead to different tendencies in language and vocabulary. There are many words and idioms related to fishery and animal husbandry in English, which are determined by their living environment and customs. While it is hard to avoid difficulties in the process of translation, even if the translation is done, it will feel strange to Chinese readers.

For example, there are a lot of descriptions of fishing in *The Old Man and the Sea*, and similar descriptions can also be seen in *Moby Dick*. This has caused some difficulties in translation, because China is a country with an agricultural civilization, and the description of fishing is not rich enough, and the description of navigation is even less. To say the least, even with relevant words, it is difficult for readers to imagine specific situations, because such situations are relatively rare in our lives. Specifically, the descriptions related: with the various parts of the ship, the division of labor of the crew, the types of Marine life, the fishing tools scene and so on. This is hard for some Chinese readers to imagine.

Moby Dick has this line: Be dumb, man! Stand by the braces! Hard down the helm!—brace up! Shiver her!—shiver her! So; well that! Boats, boats!” [5]. Some words like “stand by the braces”, “brace up”, “shiver” are translated into Chinese like “转帆”, “锁船桁”, “滑车轮”, which may be unfamiliar to Chinese readers.

Another example is the famous poem *Ode to the West Wind*. The poem, written in 1918, expresses Shelley’s enthusiasm for revolution and his belief in ultimate victory. Shelley conveyed his strong feelings about the time by comparing west wind to a herald indicating the spring, so that everyone who read it was greatly inspired to fight for their freedom and equality. In his poem, Shelley sang the praises of the strong west wind. The West Wind, the central image of the whole poem, presents a powerful image of the destroyer, expressing his desire to get away from reality and enjoy unlimited freedom. At the same time, he also expressed his critical attitude towards the ugly social reality at that time and his firm confidence in the bright future of mankind. Nevertheless, the westerly wind in Chinese literature often presents the feeling of desolation. For example, Ma Zhiyuan, a famous poet in Yuan dynasty, described west wind as follows, “On Ancient Road in Western breeze a lean horse goes.” Besides, Yan Shu, a famous poet in Song dynasty, also had similar poem called “Last Night the Western breeze blew withered leaves off Trees. “This is not consistent with or even contrary to the high feelings in Shelley’s poems [7]. In Chinese poetry, the west wind is a sad and dreary symbol.

2.3. Differences in Thinking

For some of the same things often mentioned, English culture and Chinese culture have corresponding words, but the cultural connotations behind them are not the same or even quite

contradictory. Just take some animals for example. In China, the dragon is a symbol of holiness and auspiciousness, while it is widely regarded as a symbol of evil abroad. According to the Bible, the evil dragon has seven heads and ten horns, and it comes down to earth at the last judgment. It has the power to captivate people. The Chinese dragon, on the contrary, is closely related to the imperial power because ancient Chinese emperors had rules to embroider dragons on their clothes and no one else had the right to do so, so the dragon is positive in most Chinese contexts.

Another example is that Western phoenix and Chinese fenghuang in the strict sense is not a reference. Phoenix and Chinese fenghuang are very different, and they both become the load of the divine bird of many of the respective national culture elements, the two cultural symbol for carrying forward and spreading their respective national traditional culture is very important, so either from the perspective of the level of translation, or from the perspective of cultural cognition, this phenomenon is not only to erase both in a particular culture under the background of unique meaning, It will also make them lose their cultural identity by osmosis [8].

Some symbolic characters of animals are unique to our native culture, while they are not given special meanings in other cultures. For example, the metaphors of silkworm generally describe the tireless devotion by great figures. More widely seen in Chinese culture are the poems “Spring silkworm till its death spins silk from lovesick heart”. However, in the eyes of westerners, silkworm is just an ordinary worm, which has no more metaphorical connotation than the image of spinning silk. Additionally, crane is also a symbol of longevity in Chinese culture. There is a Chinese idiom called “Turtle and Crane mean longevity”. Mr. Chen Duxiu also used related animals to name his descendants, which is the simple wish of the traditional Chinese elders for the longevity and safety of their children. But for Westerners, the crane does not evoke this kind of association [9].

In addition, facing the same ocean image, the meanings behind it are different in the east and the West. Western literature originates from ancient Greece. In Ancient Greece, the birthplace of Western civilization, the land is small and the sea is large. People are closely related to the sea and depend on each other. The *Dover Beach* by Matthew Arnold, etc. all eulogized the magnificence and greatness of the sea with great enthusiasm. The first connotation of “sea image” in Western aesthetics is magnificence. The second connotation is to show people’s valor and tenacity and highlight the greatness of heroes by describing the struggle between man and the sea. *The Old Man and the Sea* and *Moby Dick* are such works. A famous sentence in *The Old Man and the Sea* is “But man is not made for defeat,” he said. “A man can be destroyed but not defeated”. Moreover, such works are often accompanied by tragic descriptions, and the protagonists are often tragic heroes.

Unlike Western people who admire the sea and regard it as a hero, Chinese people who have lived in the vast continent for a long time are not familiar with the sea. There was no self-contained system of Marine literature in ancient China, and there were few descriptions of the sea. Chinese literature often described the water in rivers. The sea (or water) in Chinese literature is often associated with fairyland, morality, seclusion, bosom friends and so on. For example, from *A Happy Excursion*, written by a Chinese philosopher called Chuang tzu, there is a prose, “In the northern ocean there is a fish, called the Kun, I do not know how many thousand li in size. This Kun changes into a bird, called the Peng. Its back is I do not know how many thousand li in breadth”. And from *The Analects of Confucius*, standing by a stream, the Master Confucius said, “Time passes away night and day like running water”. In addition, Li Bai, a famous poet in Tang dynasty, wrote a famous Ancient Chinese poem called *Mount Skyland Ascended in a Dream — A Song of Farewell*. The first verse of the poem is “Of fairy isles seafarers speak, Mid dimming mist and surging waves, so hard to seek”. Another poet named Bai Juyi had a similar poem called *The Everlasting Regret*, one verse of which is “He learned that on the sea were fairy mountains proud, which now appeared now disappeared amid the cloud”. Therefore, from ancient Chinese people’s perspective, the sea is often mysterious and philosophical. This very different interpretation is an

obstacle for Chinese readers to read Western literature. The cultural conflict like the meaning behind the sea leads to untranslatability in translation.

3. Solutions

Bassnett prefers the “alienation” view of how to solve problems in untranslatability. She believes that alienation can preserve the characteristics of the national culture, rather than close to the target language. For example, the English idiom “as poor as a church mouse” literally translates to “不名一文”. It has a similar meaning to the Chinese word, but the literal translation is closer to the original works. Besides, the study of world literature translation is supposed to be applied in the cultural context. According to Ette, this means that the process of globalization requires different cultures to coexist, accept their differences and encourage mutual respect [11].

Bassnett’s examples of how to make it communicative while tending to alienate seem to be based on translations between European languages. Here are some suggestions in light of her theory.

Most of the previous scholars have talked about literal translation and free translation, and the relevant researches have been in-depth. This article only discusses the untranslatability caused by cultural differences. When the translator meets the situation that neither literal translation nor free translation can solve, he can write notes and pictures to assist readers to understand the cultural context.

Annotation is a good way to solve the problem. Annotation can also encourage readers to understand the culture behind the English language and thus have a deeper understanding of the text. The reason why using annotations in literary translation is better than paraphrasing is that interpretation will destroy the readability and vividness of literature to a great extent, so interpretation is the “enemy” of literary translation, because the language will lose its flavor after interpretation [11]. Moreover, over-explanation will cause readers to misunderstand the article, or cause the situation of gilding the lily. For example, the title of O Henry’s famous novel *The Gift of the Maggie* is an issue worth discussing in translation. *Magi* is the image of the Biblical story, which has the meaning of redemption and sacrifice. Some translations refer to it as a sage and translate it into “贤人”. Such translation treatment that seems to consider the cultural background of readers is actually gilding the lily. Because the sage refers to different things in Chinese and English contexts. The virtuous people in Confucian culture are more embodied in one’s morality, ambition and ability in Chinese context, and less contained in the Western culture of the mystery and humanitarian. Such treatment will lead to misunderstanding strangeness for Chinese readers [12].

To sum up, it is better to use annotation under the situation of the allusion. For example, at the end of Li Jihong’s translation of *The Old Man and the Sea*, a very noticeable change is a large number of annotations and pictures have been added to help readers better understand this classic literary work [13]. For another instance, if a Chinese person is asked to imagine a pirate, he or she will most likely come up with some scenes from *Pirates of the Caribbean*, because pirate culture is absent in China, and images like movies are much more vivid than literature. In the same way, illustrations are necessary to improve the audience’s understanding of the text content in literary translation.

It is also important to notice that the definition of annotation should contain weights and measures like time, distance, temperature, money, and other units of measurement. Because of the difference in nations and era, annotations are necessary in some texts. For example, shilling has been abolished in Britain, but some previous British literary works also mention it. It is even hard for contemporary British people to understand how valuable one shilling is, let alone a Chinese

reader. So, by maintaining the original form of the text, literary texts can serve as a means of communication in this way.

4. Conclusions

English literature has its own unique cultural context; how to preserve these cultural meanings and allow readers to understand these kinds of literature during the translation process is a challenge that translators must face and overcome. Bassnett proposes the existence of untranslatability in translation, which is beneficial for translating English literature into Chinese versions. Based on her theory, this article offers some suggestions for the translator, such as the use of annotation and illustration.

Contacts and exchanges between countries are becoming more frequent as cultural exchanges and integration in the world deepen. The translation is becoming increasingly important as a medium of cultural exchange and communication. British and American literature plays an important role in disseminating British and American culture. Translation of English and American literary works not only promotes the exchange of Eastern and Western cultures but also promotes the creation and development of Chinese literary works. In a cross-cultural context, translators should actively promote cultural exchange and communication, maintain a respectful attitude toward writers and literary works, use appropriate and effective translation strategies, convey cultural characteristics of the source language to target language readers, and improve their translation skills.

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