

A Study on How Lin Shaohua Translates 「タ形」 Tense in "Killing Commendatore"

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Abstract. This paper looks at the Japanese book "Killing Commendatore" by Haruki Murakami and the Chinese version by Lin Shaohua. It focuses on how Lin Shaohua deals with the Japanese 「タ形」 (past tense) when he turns it into Chinese. The study finds that Lin uses five ways to do this: (1) direct translation of time words, (2) using time words and small words together, (3) using small words to show tense clearly, (4) using small words to make up for tense, and (5) letting the situation show the tense without extra words. The writer built a database with 1843 example sentences. The study finds that the fifth way (letting the situation show tense) is used most often (69.8%). The fourth way (using small words to make up for tense) is second most used (23.4%). This shows that Lin's translation keeps the original meaning but also keeps the writing beautiful and smooth. This matches Lin's idea of "aesthetic faithfulness." This study can help people who do literary translation.

Keywords: Killing Commendatore, Japanese 「タ形」, literary translation

1. Introduction

In Japanese grammar, the predicate tense system includes two tense forms: past tense and non-past tense. These are the "-る" form and the "-た" ending form. Among them, the "-た" form corresponds to past tense. The "-る" form has both present tense and future tense meanings. It makes up the "non-past" tense category [1]. Chinese is a typical isolating language. It cannot show tense through verb changes like Japanese and English. This brings challenges to Japanese-Chinese translation. Therefore, this paper focuses on the tense usage of タ形. It analyzes the Chinese translation strategies for past tense shown by タ形 in Lin Shaohua's translation of Killing Commendatore under different situations. It also analyzes the reasons for using different strategies.

This study chooses Haruki Murakami's "Killing Commendatore" and Lin Shaohua's Chinese version as objects because this text provides typical language data for studying 「タ形」 Chinese translation strategies. Murakami's narrative technique in this work mostly uses first-person perspective statements and time-space interwoven memories. This causes 「タ形」 expressions to be highly dense in the text. For example, at the beginning of the novel, "I" move into a mountain studio after the May consecutive holidays. The narrative then frequently switches between present perception and past memories. The present action of the protagonist "seeing the bell in the attic" often instantly triggers memories of "that young officer from the war era once standing here." Japanese tense expression is very different from Chinese methods that rely on vocabulary and

context. This constitutes the core difficulty of translation. Through systematic comparison, this study aims to analyze how Lin Shaohua uses Chinese time adverbs, dynamic auxiliary words, and context meaning combination to transform the tense meaning carried by 「タ形」. It further explains the creative strategies he adopts to achieve literary equivalence.

2. Theory study

Past tense is an important idea in time systems. The academic definition comes from Reichenbach's time reference point theory. This theory uses three time points (speech time S, reference time R, event time E) to define past tense as $E < S$. This means the event happens before the speaking [2].

In Japanese, one way to mark past tense is verb ending change. This is the た形 (ta form). For example: 「書く (write, base form) → 書いた (wrote, past form)」 「話す (speak, base form) → 話した (spoke, past form)」. You can see た形 works like English "-ed" ending. Japanese language expert 工藤真由美 (Kudo Mayumi) used Reichenbach's three-time model. She said the core meaning of Japanese 「タ形」 is the separation between event time (E) and speech time (S). Kudo Mayumi points out that Japanese 「タ形」 does not just mark past tense. It also uses "before and after" time logic. In complex sentences, it shows the time level between events [3].

In contrast, Chinese does not change verb shapes to show tense. Studies show Chinese is a typical isolating language. Its past tense system is very flexible and depends on context. Time adverbs and auxiliary words are the main tools [4]. At the word level, time adverbs (like "yesterday," "once") can directly show time information. In sentences, they clearly show the action happened in the past. For example, in "He had class yesterday," the verb "have" does not change shape. The time information comes only from the adverb "yesterday" [5]. At the sentence level, dynamic auxiliary words like "了" and "过" are not strict tense markers. But their position in the sentence is very important for past tense meaning. Yang Zhanbo points out that when "了" sticks close to the verb (like "ate food"), it stresses the action is finished. When it sits at the end (like "He ate food"), it marks the whole event is done. This position difference changes the meaning focus: the first one highlights the result, the second one highlights the ending. Also, "过" often shows experienced past (like "He has been to Beijing"). Its meaning function complements "了." This further enriches how Chinese expresses past tense [6]. This interaction between word level, sentence level, and meaning shows Chinese tense system depends on context and is highly flexible.

Based on these differences between Japanese and Chinese tense systems, this paper focuses on how Lin Shaohua handles the past tense meaning of 「タ形」 when translating Murakami's "Killing Commendatore." It summarizes what Chinese translation methods he uses and why.

3. Research method

The writer mainly uses corpus research method. The writer built a special Chinese-Japanese parallel corpus for this study. This corpus has 1843 example sentences. These sentences use Japanese verb past tense 「タ形」 as predicate in Murakami's "Killing Commendatore." It also has Lin Shaohua's Chinese translations. The corpus gives data for counting numbers. It also gives real evidence for analysis.

4. Result analysis

By analyzing 1843 samples using 「タ形」 as past tense marker in the corpus, the writer divides them into five types. The division is based on: does the Japanese original have clear time marker

words? Does the Chinese translation use time marker words or auxiliary words?

Table 1. Five Chinese translation strategies used by Lin Shaohua in "Killing Commendatore"

Category	Japanese Source Contains Temporal Marker	Chinese Translation Contains Temporal Word	Chinese Translation Uses Aspect Particle (了/过/着)	Translation Strategy	Sample Size	Proportion
1	Yes	Yes	No	Literal translation of temporal word	42	2.3%
2	Yes	Yes	Yes	Combined use of temporal word and aspect particle	82	4.5%
3	Yes	No	Yes	Use of aspect particle to mark tense	0	0%
4	No	No	Yes	Aspect particle compensates for tense	432	23.4%
5	No	No	No	Tense implied by context	1287	69.8%

4.1. Direct translation of time words

In this case, the Japanese original already has clear time adverbials (like 「今日」 [today], 「...時代」 [...era/time], 「...前に」 [before...], 「昨日」 [yesterday], 「去年」 [last year], etc.). The Chinese translation keeps these time words.

Example 1:

Original: 美大に通っていた時代、私はおおむね抽象画を描いていた [7]。

Translation: 美大上学时代，我大体是画抽象画的 [8]。

Example 2:

Original: 私がその家にやってきたのは五月の連休明けだった [7]。

Translation: 搬来这房子是在五月連休结束后 [8]。

Analysis: In the strategy of direct translation of time words, Japanese and Chinese time markers match completely. They clearly tell readers the event happened in the past. In all samples, this strategy appears 42 times, making up 3.2%. This shows when Lin Shaohua handles sentences with clear time adverbials, he uses the most basic and direct matching strategy. This method is clear and easy to understand. It fits Chinese readers' habit of getting time clues from words.

4.2. Using time words and auxiliary words together

In these translation examples, Chinese not only keeps the original time words but also adds dynamic auxiliary words like "了" "过" "着." This creates a "double insurance." It makes the completion or experience meaning stronger.

Example 3:

Original: 夫人を亡くしてから十年ばかり、そこで気楽な一人暮らしを続けていた [7]。

Translation: 夫人去世后约十年来，始终一个人在那里悠然度日 [8]。

Analysis: In the original, 「夫人を亡くしてから十年ばかり」 is a clear time adverbial ("about ten years after his wife died"). It gives a clear time frame for the whole event. The predicate

「続けていた」 is the 「ていた」 form of 「続ける」. It has both "past" and "continuous" meanings. It shows the state of "continuously living alone for ten years in the past." Lin's translation handles this very well. First, it fully keeps the time words "about ten years after his wife died." This sets up the past time background. Second, it picks the adverb "始终" (always/from beginning to end) to match the continuous meaning of 「ていた」. The word "始终" is not a typical aspect auxiliary word like "着, 了, 过." But its core meaning of "from start to finish, continuously" functions the same as "着" here. It strongly emphasizes the continuous and unbroken nature of the action in the past time period. Together with the time words, they form a double method to express past continuous aspect. This shows Lin Shaohua does not mechanically copy. Instead, he deeply understands the original aspect meaning. Then he uses natural and flexible Chinese words to make creative transformation.

This study found 82 examples using this strategy. It makes up 4.5% of the total. This shows although the translator does not use this strategy often, he uses "double insurance" in specific cases to strengthen the original aspect meaning. This shows his flexibility.

4.3. Auxiliary words make tense clear

In the studied corpus of Lin Shaohua's translation of "Killing Commendatore," no examples were found where: the Japanese original has clear time marker words, but the Chinese translation completely omits them and only uses auxiliary words like "了" "着" "过" to carry past tense information. Time adverbs (like "after," "for ten years") are the main tools for Chinese to fix event time and build time clues. Lin Shaohua's translation strategy shows he highly values keeping and making clear the original time information. He never omits it easily. This insistence on form and function matching ensures the translation is accurate and readable. This is another show of his "aesthetic faithfulness" idea.

4.4. Auxiliary words make up for tense

This case means the Japanese original does not provide clear time adverbials. Its past tense meaning is fully carried by the 「タ形」 form of the predicate verb. Lin Shaohua's translation strategy is to actively add auxiliary words like "了" "过" to convey the action's tense.

Example 4:

Original: おれの代わりに車が息を引き取ってくれたのだ、と私は思った [7]。

Translation: 你是替我断气了，我想 [8]。

Analysis: In the original, 「思った」 uses 「タ形」 to show the mental activity "think" happened in the past. The translation adds the completion marker "了" after the verb "die" ("died"). This clearly anchors the whole event's tense in the past. It ensures accurate delivery of time information.

Example 5:

Original: 車を処分してもらうお礼に、テントと寝袋とキャンプ用品はその修理工に進呈した。

Translation: 作为帮我处理车的谢礼，我把帐篷、睡袋和野营用品赠给了那位修理工。

Analysis: The original verb 「進呈した」 (gave/presented) ends with 「タ形」. The translation uses "赠给了." Here, "给" introduces the object. "了" marks the action's completion and realization. Together, they turn Japanese past tense form into Chinese typical sentence pattern for expressing completed past events. The tense information is clear and unmistakable.

When the original lacks time adverbials, Lin's translation adds auxiliary words like "了" to make up for the tense function of Japanese 「タ形」. This strategy has 432 examples, making up nearly one quarter. This shows when the original lacks time adverbials, Lin Shaohua tends to actively add auxiliary words. This clear grammar method compensates for Japanese 「タ形」's tense function. This is his key method to achieve "functional equivalence."

4.5. Context implies tense

In these translation examples, the past tense meaning expressed by Japanese 「タ形」 in Chinese fully depends on context. No clear time markers are used.

Example 6: Original: 学校で暴力を振るうことができず、そのぶんの鬱屈を家で晴らしているようだった [7].

Translation: 情形似乎是在学校无法行使暴力，就在家发泄相应的郁闷 [8].

Example 7: Original: 額が広く、髪がまっすぐに美しく、体つきに比べて耳が大きかった [7].

Translation: 宽额头，头发漂亮，一泻而下。相比于体形，耳朵偏大 [8].

Analysis: Context implying tense is the most widely used strategy by Lin Shaohua in translating "Killing Commendatore." This strategy appears in 1287 examples, making up nearly 70%. Its very high use frequency shows that Lin Shaohua pursues simplicity and smoothness in translation when the time logic can be known from context. The translator dares to maximally trust and use Chinese "meaning combination" mechanism. This fully confirms Lin Shaohua's overall translation tendency of "literary quality first" and "domestication" in many interviews and self-explanations. This is also an important show of his "aesthetic faithfulness" idea.

5. Conclusion

This study builds a special corpus. It compares the Japanese original of "Killing Commendatore" with Lin Shaohua's Chinese version. It analyzes and summarizes five expression strategies for Japanese 「タ形」 past tense in Chinese. When precise time information needs to be conveyed, Lin Shaohua chooses "clear" strategies (like types 1, 2, 3, 4). When context is clear enough and pursuit of writing simplicity is needed, he dares to use "hidden" strategy (like type 5). The study shows Lin Shaohua's translation strategies are flexible and change according to specific situations. They heavily depend on Chinese context's meaning combination. Behind this is also the translator's consistent "aesthetic faithfulness" translation idea.

Lin Shaohua pays great attention to "aesthetics" in the whole translation process. He tries to make beauty the "ballast stone" of literary translation practice. The translator's final goal is to achieve higher level "equivalence" — letting Chinese readers get reading experience and literary aesthetic feeling as close as possible to Japanese readers.

Lin Shaohua's translation practice shows that excellent literary translation is not just language change. It is also the second birth of beauty in the target language. His handling strategy for Japanese past tense is a microcosm of his overall translation idea. That is: be "faithful" to the original, take "aesthetics" as the goal, and finally achieve the literary value of the translation itself. Therefore, Lin Shaohua's translation of "Killing Commendatore" has high reference value for future literary work translation.

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