

On the Embodiment of Pun Translation in A Dream of Red Mansions

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Abstract

The translation of puns has long been regarded as a challenge which is often defined as “untranslatable”. The barrier in translation exists as long as social and cultural differences exist. There is no source text that is absolutely untranslatable. According to Eugene Nida’s functional equivalence theory , translators should not be confined to the language level, readers’ response and cultural background of the language should also be taken into consideration. So it provide a stable theoretical basis for pun translation. This paper aims to explore the translation of puns in A Dream of Red Mansions.

Keywords

Pun; A Dream of Red Mansions; Embodiment; Rhetoric Effects.

1. Introduction

Chinese pun, as a kind of rhetoric device, contains distinctive cultural connotation and achieves effective rhetoric meaning. Pun translation is always considered a hard core because of its special effects and distinctive cultural insights. Hong Lou Meng or A Dream of Red Mansions is regarded as a mile stone of Chinese classical novels, giving rise to a school of literature in China - Redology. This novel draws increasing interest of the scholars at home and abroad, including translators. Puns are skillfully adopted by Cao Xueqin to convey Chinese cultural information to readers. This is considered to be his superior and artistic use of language. The difficulty lies in front of translators is how to achieve the equivalent rhetoric effects of puns in target text.

2. Definition of Puns

The use of pun can be traced back more than 2000 years ago. The Oxford English Dictionary defines, a pun is the use of a word in such a way as to suggest two or more meanings or different associations, or the use of two or more words of the same or nearly the same sound with different meanings, so as to produce a humorous effect. (The Oxford English Dictionary; 1989.) In other dictionaries similar words and descriptions are used to define pun. Such as Webster defines pun as “the humorous use of a word” “sounded alike” “on two or more of the possible applications”; “a play on words”(1985:1532). In Collins English Language Dictionary (1987:1164) “more than one meaning” “same sound” “makes people laugh” are used to define the meaning of pun. And in the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, a pun is illustrated with such words as “amusing use of word” “has two or more different meanings” “with the same sound”.

As Richard Lederer explains puns in his essay A Primer of Puns: Punning is largely the trick of combining two or more ideas within a single word or expression. Puns challenge us to apply the greatest possible pressure per square syllable of Language. All the statements above define the term “pun” from its formation and from pragmatic perspective, that is to say, what kind of linguistic phenomenon can be called a pun and what functions a pun has in cultural contexts. Whatever a pun is defined, a pun distinguishes itself from any other linguistic phenomena or any other rhetorical devices with its own characteristics.

3. Rhetoric Effects of Puns

3.1. Humorous and Sarcastic Effect

One of the main characteristics of puns is the ambiguity in the meanings, which is most frequently employed to achieve the rhetoric effects of puns. The connotation of puns often consists of more than one meanings and can not be simply interpreted from the literal level, i.e. puns should be read between lines. The exact meaning of a word is determined by its context. Different contexts may lead to different meanings. If the context is unclear, or, as in many humorous and satirical stories, is made to be ambiguous on purpose, then ambiguity may be produced and a pun is created. Puns are often used in humorous and satirical texts or literature works to achieve humorous and sarcastic effects, allowing the speaker or author to express his intentions indirectly. They often use homophonic or homonymic words to indicate the deep meaning in the context. In *A Dream of Red Mansions*, many of the characters' names are endowed with certain hidden meaning. For example, 卜世仁, 王仁 and 单聘仁 are homophonic puns. 卜世仁 is the homophonic pun for 不是人, meaning "not humane"; 王仁 is the homophonic pun for 忘仁, meaning "ungrateful"; 单聘仁 is the homophonic pun for 善骗人, who is a "skillful trickster". Besides, girls name like 甄英莲 or 元春、迎春、探春、惜春 are homonymic puns. 甄英莲 is the homonymic pun for 真应怜, which means "a girl deserving sympathy"; 元春、迎春、探春、惜春 are also homonymic puns for 原应叹息, meaning a sigh for life, showing the tragic fates of the four girls.

3.2. Thought-provoking Effect

"Implicitness is another characteristic of pun which makes pun a useful technique in the literary works as clues to transfer rich implications for readers to ponder upon, hence makes pun in literary works highly Thought-provoking." (Liu Yunxia, 2009:6). Because pun always has the implied meanings, the implicitness is also an important characteristic of pun. Therefore puns are favored and frequently used in literary works or humorous writing to convey a rich implication so that the writer encourages readers to reflect on the plots and the characters and recognize the deep meanings lie beneath the words.

A Dream of Red Mansions is a typical example of the use of puns. With ingenuity, the author hid puns in such parts as poems, lantern riddles and antithetical couplets to predict the process of the whole story and different fates of the enormous characters. *A Dream of Red Mansions* is compared to be "an ocean of implied meanings". Even the names of many characters convey double meanings and implication. For example, "李纵", in which "纵" means "the white silk", indicates her colorless life as a widow. "鸳鸯", an intimate attendant of the Old Ancestress, means "loyal goose", which is the symbol of affectionate couple in Chinese tradition. The author chose this name for her to form a comparison, for in the latter part of the novel she swore never to marry anybody for the whole life to protest the ruling class of that time. More puns appear in poems or verses. In chapter 5 "游幻境指迷十二钗, 饮仙酿曲演红楼梦", the author gives a quite informative implication of his intended theme. In this chapter, there is a series of twelve songs entitled "红楼梦曲" which is the prediction of the twelve tragedies of the beautiful young girls surrounding Baoyu. In the first song, there is a line "演出这悲金悼玉的红楼梦", here "金" and "玉" are used as puns to indicate implication on three levels. First, "金" and "玉" are respectively a part of the names of the two most important female characters "宝钗" and "黛玉". So "悲金悼玉" is to mourn for the tragedy of these two characters. Second, "金" and "玉" stand for all the female characters represented by "宝钗" and "黛玉" whose names either have or have no meaning of "金" and "玉". On the third level, they stand for the "vanished splendor" that the noble

class once enjoyed. So, “悲金悼玉” can be understood as “to mourn Gold and Jade”, “to mourn the beautiful and talented girls” and “to mourn the aristocratic life that will soon go by”.

4. Translation of Puns in A Dream of Red Mansions

4.1. Translatability of Puns

The translation of puns is always considered to be extremely difficult. Many people even consider puns as “untranslatable”. It should be especially pointed out that puns as a rhetorical device is closely related to the sound and form of a certain language. On one hand, the translators should make great efforts to realize all the meanings concerning social and cultural information in the source text. On the other hand, they have to make various compensation and adjustment because of the limitation caused by linguistic and cultural differences. The obstacles and difficulties in translation exist along with linguistic and cultural differences. Awareness of this fact doesn’t necessarily create pessimistic acknowledgement of the translatability of puns. One thing is for sure that there is translatability to some extent when we come across a pun that is usually considered “untranslatable”. There is no source text that is absolutely untranslatable. According to Eugene Nida: “The readers of a translated text should be able to comprehend it to the point that they can conceive of how the original readers of the text must have understood and appreciated it.” and “The readers of a translated text should be able to understand and appreciate it in essentially the same manner as the original readers did.” to a minimal level and maximal level respectively. (Nida, 1993:117-118). We should try to convert untranslatability into translatability. In a word, the translation of puns is possible to a certain extent.

4.2. Criteria of Translating Puns

Translation is a representation or recreation in one language of what is written or said in another language. Many great translators proposed their criteria of translation such as principles proposed by Yan Fu, namely: faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance or by Lin Yutang, namely: faithfulness, smoothness, beauty. Among those criteria, the most accepted is that proposed by Mr. Zhang Peiji, one of the greatest translator in China, namely, faithfulness and smoothness. “Faithfulness” in the first place refers to representation of the content of the source text. Translator must translate the original meaning into the target text both comprehensiveness and accuracy without any distortion or casual addition or deletion of the author’s original thought. Faithfulness also requires the keeping of the original style. “Smoothness” means that the target text must be clear and readable without signs of mechanical word-for-word translation. Obscure words, grammatical mistakes, confused structure and turbid logic are not acceptable. However, It is not easy to reach the translation criteria of “faithfulness and smoothness”. When we talk about “faithfulness”, we are aware of the fact that our outcome in the hard journey of translation is only something similar to the source text. Translation is a complicated cross-cultural activity in which the loss of information is almost unavoidable. Translators frequently find themselves faced with a version which is neither “faithful” nor “equivalent” to the original. Either “faithfulness” or “smoothness” is an ideal that many translators pursue but few can achieve. Therefore we might as well turn to a new criteria for translating puns, which is the criteria of “correspondence in meaning and similarity in function”. Meanings and functions of language are two indispensable factors that are closely related to each other. Functions reflect the overall effect of a text, and the effect can only be achieved by means of the expression of meanings. The criteria of “correspondence in meaning and similarity in function” is in accordance with the traditional “faithfulness” in that they share the same connotation of conveying, to the greatest extent, the information in the source language. Functions of a text, compared to meanings, are easier to identify and determine. The determination and reproduction of meanings is the procedure in which a

translator has to make most endeavors. In the following pages, the author will focus on how to reproduce the meanings of puns in translation.

4.3. Embodiment of Puns in Translation

Translating is a process of decoding and encoding. What is conveyed in translation are referential meaning, linguistic meaning and pragmatic meaning of the linguistic signs. Nida once stated that the order of meanings to be conveyed should be in accordance with their respective importance. He further stated that in transferring information, the transfer of the referential meaning should be put in the first place. However, this is not always the case as far as literary translation is concerned. Expressive function and aesthetic function are indispensable to literature. The conveyance of these functions cannot be ignored. Furthermore, various rhetoric devices are often employed. Linguistic meaning that is expressed by means of rhetoric devices can never be ignored in the course of translation. Without the reproduction of the linguistic meaning of source texts, it will be hard for readers of target language to recognize the aesthetic effect in such aspects as meaning, sound, form and style. The humor, wit, satire or even complicated feelings that are expressed uniquely by the use of puns may not be fully conveyed, which cuts down the "faithfulness" of the translated version. A pun is no longer a pun when its linguistic meaning is not conveyed. As a conclusion, in the translation of puns, what we should first take into consideration is trying to look into the possibility of retaining the rhetoric effect of pun of the original text.

4.3.1. Embodiment of the Linguistic Meaning

There exist some cases where the original version is translated literally or directly into the target language, the same meanings of the puns are retained in the version.

Example 1: 无稽崖(《红楼梦》第一回)

Baseless Cliff (Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang)

“无稽”in Chinese means “fantastic”or “absurd”. This name appears at the very beginning of the novel and indicates that the story is a fable. In the Yangs’ translation “无稽”is translated into “Baseless” which well indicates the hidden meaning of the pun. To the target readers, it can produce the similar effect that the original text readers comprehend.

Example 2: 仁清巷(《红楼梦》第一回)

Lane of Humanity and Purity(Trans.Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang)

“仁清”and“人情” share similar sounds in Chinese. “仁”means benevolence and humanity and “清” means clean and pure. “人情”refers to favor or humanity. The Yangs’ translation of “仁清” into “Lane of Humanity and Purity” not only corresponds to the literal meaning but also indicates the hidden connotation of the pun. In fact, the pun used here is being sarcastic to indifferent and snobbish people living in the lane. This has successfully conducted the ironical effect of pun.

In many other cases, the linguistic meaning in puns is hard to retain. If possible, translators should try to employ some other rhetoric means to make up for the loss of linguistic meaning, so that the rhetoric effect can be retained.

Example 3: 因这个媳妇美貌异常，轻浮无比，众人都呼她作“多姑娘儿”。(红楼梦第二十一回)

Because of her pneumatic charms and omnivorous promiscuity this voluptuous young limmer was referred to by all and sundry as “the Mattress”(Hawkes)

Here the literal meaning of “mattress” is the large, flat object which is filled and put on a bed to make it comfortable to sleep on. But its English connotative meaning is a metaphor indicating sexual activity. The “Mattress” in Hawkes’ translation is more friendly to readers, because the word “mattress” in western culture refers to those frivolous women.

4.3.2. Conveyance of Referential Meaning and/or Pragmatic Meaning

Whenever a pun is used, the user intends to express two meanings rather than one. If the two meanings of a pun refer to two words with the same (or similar) forms or pronunciations respectively, we usually render the two words literally one by one in translation. In this way the referential meaning is retained, while the linguistic meaning that exists in the original is missing. The connection between the sound of a sign and its referential meaning of a language came into being after long social practice. This inevitably leads to correspondent vacancy between two languages. Footnotes and annotations are frequently employed to help translators render the puns. In translating poems and other literary works, the equivalent translation of both referential and pragmatic meaning may be impractical. In this case, the use of footnotes and annotations provides readers with a chance to think over the indication of puns in the source language. More than 20 puns on names were explained by footnotes in Yang Hsien-yi's translation, which made the text more accurate and less wordy.

Example 1: Chen Shi-yin (甄士隐) is rendered with footnote: Homophone for "true facts concealed".

Example 2: That is why I use the other name Chia Yu-tsun. The footnote for Chia Yu-tsun (贾雨村) is: Homophone for "fiction in rustic language".

Not only has the original pronunciation been retained, but also the deeper meaning of the name has been conveyed. Annotations are frequently used in translating poems and conversations in *A Dream of Red Mansions*.

Example 3: 玉在奩中求善价，钗于奩内待时飞。(《红楼梦》第一回)

The jewel in the casket bides till one shall come to buy. The jade pin in the drawer hides, waiting its time to fly.

(Annotation: Yu-cun is thinking of the jade hairpin given by a visiting fairy to an early Chinese emperor which later turned into a white swallow and flew away into the sky. Metaphors of flying and 'climbing the sky' were frequently used for success in the Civil Service examinations) (Hawkes)

This couplet by "贾雨村" expresses his ambition in the coming examination. Here "价" refers to "贾", the surname of Jia Yu-cun (Hawkes); "时飞" is his courtesy name. Hawkes translates the couplet with the literal meaning. At the same time, he uses an annotation to make a further explanation on the hidden meaning of the original text. Example 4: 湘云使用箸子举着说道: "这鸭头不是那丫头, 头上那讨桂花油。" 众人越发笑起来。(《红楼梦》第六十二回)

Then holding up her chopsticks Hsiang-yun said, "This duck's head is not that serving-maid, How can its head be smeared with oil of osmanthus?" At last the rest laughed even louder. (Annotation: "duck's head" and "serving-maid" are both yatou in Chinese) (Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang).

Here "鸭头" and "丫头" is a pair of homophonic puns. "湘云" composes a couplet by using two similar sounding words to make fun of the serving maids. Her personality can be seen in those witty and humorous words. Yangs use "dark's head" and "serving-maid" to translate the pun literally and an annotation to make a further explanation for the highlight of the pun. But the humor in the pun is missing in the translation.

5. Conclusion

In the translation of puns, the ideal situation is to convey the linguistic meaning together with referential and pragmatic meanings. When necessary, the linguistic meaning can be compensated by other rhetoric devices. In cases where the linguistic meaning is hard to retain, translators should weigh the other two meanings and render the more important one or both

meanings. Some of the meanings and humorous effects may be lost in the process of translation. There are limitations in pun translation due to the differences lie in language and culture. The barriers in translation will exist as long as cultural differences exist especially when it comes to the translation of puns. The acknowledgement of this doesn't lead to retreat in the pursuit of better translation. On the contrary, it helps us to learn better the social and cultural function of translation, and find more effective ways to overcome the difficulties.

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