

## Cultural Compensation of Translation From the Perspective of Relevance Theory

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### Abstract

This paper analyzes the instruction of the relevance theory for cultural compensation in translation to avoid cultural default. Relevance theory is originated from cognitive linguistics and the translators' initiatives are crucial to its function. There are several strategies in relevance theory to ensure the translators to find the optimal cultural relevance in translation and make the TL readers to get the equivalent effect with the SL readers.

**Key words:** Cultural default; Cultural compensation; Relevance theory; Initiative

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### INTRODUCTION

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Translation is a kind of communication with its distinguished feature of cross-language and cross-culture. Simply speaking, translation is not only a bilingual activity but a bi-cultural activity as well. With the tendency of cultural communication and integration, the issue of cultural conversion and transformation is put into the wide concern. The discrepancy of language in culture reflected in translation is not a simple issue of equivalence at the linguistic level, which is especially true for literary works' translation. Consequently, the debate between the "translatability" and "non-translatability"

of literary translation occupies an important position in translation research domain. "Translatability" refers to the translatable degree in bilingual transformation which can be proved accessible by the various translation activities from the ancient Buddhist sutras translation to the present translation studies. From the perspective of cognition, the understanding of objective things for people is kept in their cognitive mechanism as conceptual meaning in the form of some certain symbols. People from different cultural and regional background have different conceptual symbols that can be transformed equivalently under some specific and necessary conditions and this is one of theoretical supports of "translatability". Nevertheless, the translatability based on this theory has its limitation or is even viewed idealized to some degree because, for one point, people's cognitive mechanism and its access system are extremely complex and the translation activities under some realistic conditions are restricted by various elements such as history, education, cultural customs, social conventions, etc. for another point. Since any two speakers have no absolutely identical referential meaning and associative meaning to the same vocabulary, grammar and discourse feature, loss and deviation occur in language communication (Nida, 1964). Accordingly, translation has its feature of "non-translatability" from another point of view of the unavoidably massive loss during transformation. Substantial translation practices show that the translation strategy of compensation can decrease this loss maximally and enable the target language readers to appreciate the translated literary works with original content and original flavor to the greatest extent. Studies show that the compensation strategy can be divided into several types and categories according to different application and purpose and this paper attempts to analyze the cultural compensation principle of translation in cross-cultural communication from the perspective of relevance theory.

## 1. CULTURAL DEFAULT: THE PRECONDITION OF CULTURAL COMPENSATION

In the process of communication, to achieve the expected communicational purpose, the participants of any discourse should share the common background knowledge and pragmatic presupposition. The cultural background knowledge refers to the fundamental assumptions, beliefs, thoughts, political and historical background knowledge which are deeply rooted into the culture and shared by people of the same language-cultural background. During the communication among participants under the same cultural background, these factors are usually seldom defined or described since they are too fundamental and obvious to be interpreted furthermore. The pragmatic presupposition is basically one of the important components of background knowledge, the consensus loss of which may cause the failure of communication and this is especially true of the cross-cultural communication. Translation, as a type of cross-cultural communication, enables people from two different lingual backgrounds to communicate by virtue of translators' translation activities. In this conversion process, the comprehension of the translated text for receivers depends on the translators' transmission, while in many cases, the TL (target language) readers misunderstand the translated text or even don't understand eventually in that the translators cannot comprehend thoroughly the original cultural background and content that the SL (source language) text wants to show on account of different pragmatic presupposition nor can they successfully and precisely convey the original connotation and ideas in their translated text on account of the discrepancy of cultural background knowledge. Consequently, for literary works, some cultural content that is obvious for the SL readers is hard to comprehend for the TL readers and the lingual transformation of translation may unavoidably cause the loss of culture or called cultural default.

Default is the absence of the shared relevant cultural background in the communication between writers and their intended readers, the cause of which is that the participants of the communication have the common background knowledge and pragmatic presupposition so that their relevant memory can be activated by the specific context, and the purpose of which is the explicit expression and the high communicational efficiency. In terms of the absent parts concerned, those relevant to the inner-discourse information are called "contextual default", and those relevant to the outer-discourse cultural background are called "cultural default". The content of cultural default cannot be accessed by means of the discourse analysis and it is stored in people's memory in the form of schema. In the process of cross-cultural communication, due to the difference of the cognitive environment, the relevant schemas are absent from the

memory and this cultural default frequently results in difficulties in utterance comprehension (Zhang, 2012). In translation activities, the cultural default occurs on account of the inherent cultural discrepancy between two languages and translators' self-accomplishment. Accordingly, how to dispose of the cultural default in the SL text shows its great importance and attracts great concern. The purpose of translation is to let the TL readers get the same effect as the SL readers. The relationship between the receivers and the translated text should be basically equal to that between the original receivers and the original information (Nida, 1964). Thus, in order to let the TL receivers have the same effect, the cultural default in translation must be compensated.

Translation compensation principle is an efficient way to solve the discrepancy between inner-language and outer-language by means of providing some certain compensation for the default information in the translated text. *Study on Translation Compensation* compiled by Xia (2006) is the first specialized academic work on translation compensation strategies domestically in China. This book researches and sorts out the related discussion and exposition in China and western countries and puts forward to several principles for translation compensation. In this book, Xia (2006) makes a relatively authoritative definition and points out that

Compensation mainly focuses on the means of TL with the other auxiliary means of language which conform to the TL standards, and compensate the predictable loss or the loss that has occurred according to translation purpose and its text style.

Consequently, the translation compensation strategy, aiming at enabling the TL readers to receive the information connotation and cultural appreciation transmitted by SL at the maximum degree, is a type of strategy of compensation at each level, in which the linguistic compensation, cultural compensation and aesthetic compensation are included. Cultural compensation focuses on the cultural default during the course of language conversion. There are various instructive principles and study perspectives for cultural compensation, among which the relevance theory is proved to be efficient and having active and instructive function to the cultural compensation.

## 2. RELEVANCE THEORY AND CULTURAL COMPENSATION

The difference between literary artists and ideologists consists in that the literary artists express their emotion and create the artistic conception applying concrete images while the ideologists apply the abstract concepts to act on people's logical and cognitive system. The utterance system of literary language cannot be illustrated by the common semantics. The semantics of literary language is a field of aesthetic experience composed of feeling, emotion, imagination and memory

and this is a domain totally about images with the morphology and syntax of general linguistics as its outer elements and with the writers' spirit as its inner element (Gong, 2012). Accordingly, for literary works, the story plots and the language contents transmitted are the outer elements and the inner elements are the connotations transmitted by the creators in virtue of the outer elements based on their self cognitive system. Translation is basically supposed to express all the elements related to the literary works in the form of another language and also give consideration to the TL readers' acceptance ability and the accuracy, aesthetic value and artistic value of the translated text. This requires the translators to give play to their cognitive initiatives and apply efficient translation skills and theories. As a matter of fact, the relevance theory originated from cognitive linguistics displays its efficient instructive function for cultural compensation in translation by means of the translators' initiatives.

### 2.1 Relevance Theory Originated From Cognitive Linguistics

Literary translation has the elements of lingual conversion and cultural transformation involved eventually. The SL literary works apply their domestic cultural images, the accuracy of which depends on the creators' cognition of their own cultural tradition, and the degree of domestic acceptance of which depends on whether they are created from the standpoint of their own receivers. In translation, the different cultural background requires the translators to make comprehension and cognition deep into the SL culture, recognize and analyze the relevant cultural images transmitted from the original works and apply translation skills to exhibit them with the target of arousing the TL receivers' own cognitive system of cultural images with the greatest equivalence. Consequently, translation is an activity closely related to cognition. In the dissertation *Translation and Relevance: Cognition and Context*, German scholar Ernst-August Gutt (1991) combined the relevance theory of pragmatics and the general theories of cognitive linguistics together and put forward to relevance translation theory. Gutt (1991) transferred the core opinions of the relevance theory into translation studies and analyzed translation activities from the perspective of cognitive pragmatics that provided a totally new standpoint and a new approach for people's comprehension of translation essence.

Chinese scholars also made their own efforts and exploration for translation studies in light of cognitive linguistics. In view that the cognitive elements are essential and unavoidable in translation process, according to the relevant feature of cognitive linguistics in translation and based on the fundamental theories of cognitive linguistics, Professor Wang (2005) published an article named *translation view of cognitive linguistics*, elaborating "cognitive translation view" and analyzing

the necessity and feasibility of constructing translation theories from the perspective of cognitive linguistics. Wang (2005) pointed out that

Translation is a cognitive activity on the basis of the cognitive subjects' participation in the multiple interactivities with the background of realistic experience. Translators should make all efforts to transfer and express the reflection and projection of various meanings transmitted by original language and discourse in the TL text by virtue of their deep and thorough comprehension and should outline and describe the cognitive world and realistic world that the authors want to transmit.

In cognitive linguistics, the studies on language function especially the cognitive studies of languages in communication process are the vital content of cognitive linguistic research. Therefore, the cognitive pragmatics occurs accordingly and its theoretical foundation is the relevance theory.

In terms of relevance theory, a translation activity can be viewed as a dynamic cognitive process to elaborate SL which is related to the mental mechanism. This process is an interactive one among the authors of the original text, translators and the receivers of the translated text and also a communicational one with two rounds involved. In the first round, the authors of the original text are the communicators and the translators are the receptors. In the second one, the translators are the communicators and the receptors refer to the receivers of the translated text. Accordingly, translators play the dual roles and act as the center of information transformation. For one point, they communicate with the author of the original text as readers, comprehend and infer the authors' intention and try to achieve the spiritual conjunction with the authors. For another point, the translators act as readers and convey the communication intention of the original authors to the readers of the translated text, based on which the translated text that conforms to the optimal expectation can be produced and the optimal relevance with the communication intention of the original authors can be achieved (Li, 2013). Consequently, the translators in translation activities enjoy important positions and play significant roles.

### 2.2 Translators' Initiatives for Cultural Compensation in Light of Relevance Theory

The relevance theory can help translators dispose of the cultural default problems between the original text and the translated text by virtue of providing the relevant and necessary theoretical supports for cultural compensation. To achieve this mainly depends on the translators' exercising their initiatives to seek the optimal relevance. The translation process, especially the process of literary translation, possesses five features—relevance, indefiniteness, variability, negotiability and adaptability. Translation process requires translators to seek relevance in the cognitive context of the original text and distinguish and dispose of the optimal relevance with the original

authors' communicational intention. Furthermore, translators are required to make dynamic adaptation with the manner of assuring the SL readers' cognitive harmony under the guidance of the optimal relevance in order to ensure that the TL readers seize correctly the intention of the SL authors and the TL readers' aesthetic expectation and acceptance ability are also satisfied. Based on this, the cultural compensation can be achieved with the optimal relevance and the cross-cultural communication can be realized successfully. During this intricate process, a lot of elements are involved such as the linguistic elements and the translators' own factors of experiences, knowledge storage, literary attainments, etc..

Analyzed from the perspective of linguistics, the language of literary text may have various comprehension and elaboration because of various semantic meanings, which result in the various acceptance of language in the frame of text language. Situations will get more difficult when the authors apply special description skills or language style. Consequently, the translators of the same literary text, even under the same interpretive community in the same socio-historical background, may just have to choose a particular way of receiving, which conforms to their characters and viewpoints on literary phenomena (Wang, 2012). This process requires translators to show initiatives according to their long-established literary ideologies and the standards of literary translation and apply appropriate skills to the cultural default to achieve successful translation.

Analyzed from the perspective of cognitive psychology, the bi-lingual transformation can be viewed as a complicated cognitive and psychological process. The comprehension of SL and the production of TL are both restricted by the psychological representation, i.e. cognitive restriction. In terms of cognition, the first step of translation is about that the translators make reaction to the stimulation from the SL text with their sensory organs. Next, translators should dispose of, explain, analyze and integrate the simulation information in their mind and then search, match and the equivalent information in TL. During this course, the translators' initiatives are needed to provide cultural compensation to the default and loss in transformation and access the correct information from their cognitive mechanism to ensure the optimal relevance.

In conclusion, the translators are the producer of the translated text and apply the most appropriate translation strategies to re-build the meaning and connotation of the original works. In order to compensate for the cultural default maximally, translators should give full rein to their initiatives to make in-depth comprehension and analysis of the social environment and cultural background of the SL works and their authors. Furthermore, translators should the TL readers' types and reading purposes into concern and choose the appropriate translation techniques and skills to make the optimal cultural relevance. From the

standpoint of cultural compensation, this process can be elaborated to be that, for one point, the translators should recognize the cultural default of the SL text, deduce the original text's intentions and transmit them with an explicit manner, and for another point, the translators should predict and infer the cognitive context and the pre-existing knowledge schemas of the TL readers in order to choose the appropriate translation strategies to make reasonable compensation for the original cultural default and build an appropriate and correct cultural context for the TL readers. Thus, the translation process is to seek the optimal relevance and make compensation for the cultural default.

### **2.3 Strategies of Cultural Compensation in Relevance Theory**

There are two key points involved in the instruction of relevance theory for cultural compensation. The first one is that the translated text should have the full relevance with the TL readers or provides the abundant contextual effect. The second one is that the expressive style of the translated text requires no unnecessary efforts its readers to understand. Thus, the relevance theory makes an important instruction—the choice of translation strategies should be beneficial for the readers to acquire the optimal relevance.

The relevance theory has a lot of operational methods and which one should be applied to compensate depends on the specific context. For instance, the literal translation method can be used to reflect the original culture directly and authentically without any translation strategies of compensation and interpretation of the condition of cultural default. Taking the translation of culture-loaded words as an example, in order to show the original meaning and feeling and transmit the SL's culture, translators are supposed to apply the literal translation method to translate some cultural allusions, idioms and proverbs. For example, “八仙过海” can be translated to be “eight immortals crossing the sea” in order to preserve the visualized language of the original text and the SL's cultural heritage. Another example is to translate “癞蛤蟆想吃天鹅肉” to be “a toad hankering for a taste of swan” to interpret the cultural connotation in the metaphor and transmit the special foreign temperament and interest. If this proverb is translated to be “a wild-goose chase”, the TL readers will definitely and easily understand its meaning and connotation while this also brings the loss of the SL's cultural color and failure in cultural communication.

Additionally, for those expressions that can cause the TL readers' puzzlement, translators are supposed to use the annotation method to acquire the equivalent context effect and remain the optimal relevance with the SL text. There are two functions for annotating the translated text—compensating the cultural discrepancy and adding the relevant historical and cultural information.

For example, in the English edition of Mo Yan's novel *Sandalwood Death*, the sentence “尽管她是一条大白蛇, 但她跟白素贞一样, 是条善良的蛇” is translated to be “Although she was a white snake, she was a good one, like Bai Suzhen, the heroine of the Legend of the White Snake.” In this sentence, Bai Suzhen is our traditional legendary figure with the characteristics of gentleness, softness and kindness which is absolutely opposite to the snakes' inherited features as trickiness and coldness. Thus, the translated sentence using the name “Bai Suzhen” without any annotation will cause misunderstanding of the TL readers and affect their integral comprehension. The same situation exists in the sentence “太阳刚冒红的时候, 就是它们见阎王的时候”. The translated sentence “The daybreak would mark the hour that they went to meet Yama, the king of Hell” also applies the annotation method. In this sentence, the author uses Yama with annotation of “the king of Hell” instead of the corresponding word “devil” or “demon” in English with derogatory meaning so as to transmit the neutral attitude of the original author and acquire the optimal cultural relevance.

## CONCLUSION

Each literary work has its connotation and artistic conception and also loads the cultural details and social background. In light of the cultural discrepancy between SL and TL, cultural default is unavoidable during the course of language transformation and transferring. The strategies of cultural compensation principle under

the instruction of relevance theory can preserve the information and connotation of SL with the optimal relevance and transmit the content and artistic conception of SL to the TL readers at the greatest level.

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