An Empirical Study on Abstract Translation of MA Theses by English Majors: Based on the MA Theses From 5 Universities in Jiangxi Province

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Abstract

The abstract is an exercise of intelligence, an abbreviated, concise, accurate representation of the thesis, and so is the translation, or the English version of the Chinese abstract, as far as the MA theses are concerned. The study is an empirical research of abstract translation of MA theses by English majors from 5 universities in Jiangxi Province. By spotting and categorizing the common mistakes in the English abstracts of the theses, the study proposes some countermeasures to minimize the deficiency in abstract translation, in the hope that the approach taken in this study could show potential for further research and pedagogic applications.

Key words: Abstract translation; Common mistakes; countermeasures; Pedagogic applications

1. INTRODUCTION

This retrospective observational study is spurred by the personal experience of the author who yearly instructs 10 master theses of her own postgraduates and anonymously reviews about a dozen more of master theses from other universities. It is found that there are some mistakes in abstract translation common to the students from all the different universities so it would be conducive to the improvement of abstract translation to categorize and analyze the errors in the hope to minimize or eliminate them, hence promoting the quality of master's degree theses at large.

2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

The sample abstracts for the study are randomly taken from the MA theses in recent 5 years by English majors from 5 universities in Jiangxi Province, the research directions of the authors covering literature, linguistics, translation and second language teaching. The 5 universities concerned are Jiangxi Normal University, Nanchang University, Jiangxi University of Finance and Economics, Nanchang Aeronautical University and Gannan Normal University. Twenty samples are adopted from each of the universities, comprising a small database of 100 Chinese abstracts and their English versions. The errors in the abstract translation are firstly diagnosed and categorized before a focalization analysis and the presentation of some countermeasures in pedagogy.

3. TYPICA ERRORS IN ABSTRCT TRANSLATION

3.1 Chinese English

"Mother tongue interference" has been the most frequently referred source of errors when accounted for from an interlinguistic perspective, as can be seen in Corder (1971). Some English abstracts are characterized by Chinglish, neglecting the fact that what is correct and natural in Chinese may not accord with natural usage in English. Evidently resulting from word for word and clause for clause transformation from Chinese into English, a considerable number of English abstracts abound with

errors such as comma splices, dislocation of word order, improper collocation, overuse of verbs, etc.

The above mentioned errors are luxuriantly exemplified by examples such as "After the proposal of Memetics, many scholars try to apply it to their research fields, among which the Finnish scholar, Chesterman, put forward the theory of Translation Memetics," which puts the identity of a person before his name as in Chinese while the correct way of expression should have been"…Chesterman, a Finnish scholar,…"; "the whole novel conveys Lessing's deeply concern about the white woman's living predicament under the colonization, sympathy for oppressed South Africans and strongly condemning for European colonization." in which both the underlined adverbs should be in their correspondent adjective forms as "deep" and "strong" and likewise, "According to the causes, the author suggests that the teacher should stimulate students' autonomous learning, train students' learning strategies, cultivate students' ability of using learning strategies and encourage them to do self-evaluation." In which the underlined "suggestions" should be "suggests".

Another classification of errors conspicuously stemmed from mother tongue interference is comma splices, connecting two or more clauses with comma as in Chinese. For instance, in "Mansfield Park is the fourth novel of Jane Austen, it was written on February, 1811." instead of linking the two clauses with "and", the author merely uses a comma in the place, as is often the case of Chinese expression. And the same is true in

> Owing to its accession to WTO, the successful hosting of Beijing Olympic Game and Shanghai World Expo, China, with its long history and profound culture, opens its arms to people all around the world, an ever-increasing number of foreign tourists come to China, which brings the new opportunity and challenge to china's tourism.

Where there is no connective between the former clause and the latter clause "an ever-increasing number of foreign tourists come to China…." This category of errors coincides with Chinese convention of expression to link clauses with commas without a connective indicating the grammatical relation between the clauses.

Another type of errors resulting from negative mother tongue transfer is dangling modifiers. "There is another group of modifiers that are illogical not because of faulty placement but because of faulty grammatical relations with other elements in the sentence" (Pinkham, 2007, p.283). This kind of modifiers is traditionally called "unattached" or "dangling". As in "Through the combination of theory and practice, Skopostheorie possesses the guiding significance to the C-E guides' commentary translation", the prepositional phrase "through…" is illogically attached, with its logical subject being Skopostheorie, which is inappropriate. The sentence should be revised as "Through…, it is found that Skopostheorie possesses…."

All these above presented errors are caused linguistically by the inherent systematic differences or similarities between the source and the target languages and ideologically by the difference between Chinese and Western thinking modes.

3.2 Incoherence and Incohesion

Nida, the American translating theorist, pointed out in his translating meaning that "so far as English and Chinese are concerned, the most important difference in linguistically is the contrast between hypotaxis and parataxis" (Nida, 1982, p.16). Hypotaxis and parataxis are two ways of arrangement of language; the former is mainly adopted in English and the latter Chinese. According to the American Heritage Dictionary, Hypotaxis is defined as "the dependent or subordinate construction or relationship of clauses with connectives, for example, I shall despair if you don't come". Parataxis, in The World Book Dictionary, is defined as "the arranging of clauses one after the other without connectives showing the relation between them. Example: The rain fell; the river flooded; the house washed away." Hypotaxis is inherently the grammatical norm in English, hence the cohesive ties like relatives, connectives, prepositions and so forth are overtly seen in English sentences, while in Chinese "the grammatical meaning and logical relationship are often hidden between the lines" (Lian, 1993, p.54). Therefore, in translating the Chinese abstract into English, students should analyze the function and meaning of the original text at first, identify the sentence structure and form, and then express the implicit grammatical meaning and logical relationship by overt connectives. According to Halliday and Hasan, grammatical cohesion includes reference, substitution, ellipsis and conjunction; lexical cohesion consists of reiteration and collocation (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). Coherency and cohesion can be realized by varying devices, synthetical adoption of which makes a virtually coherent, concise and clear discourse.

Quite a number of English translations of abstracts in the database are found lack of integrant connectives between clauses, resulting in their English abstract in poor cohesion. Thereinto, linking two clauses with comma is one of the most typical errors. For example, "Doris Lessing was a famous British woman novelist, she was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2007, the summer before the Dark is one of Lessing's award-winning series written in 1973." is poorly cohered without any connectives between clauses. If we modify it into "Doris Lessing, a famous British woman novelist, was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2007, and The Summer before the Dark is one of her award-winning series written in 1973", it is not only more coherent with the connective word "and" between the last two clauses as well as the pronoun "her" in place of "Lessing's", but also more concise.

Meanwhile, there are some abstracts seemingly coherent while virtually wordy and incoherent. For example, in "Ian McEwan's Atonement is a very good novel and it is nominated the 2001 Booker Prize. It is selected for "one of the top ten books in 2002" by the New York Times and the Times, moreover, it has the access to the National Book Award for People in the next year. However, many people study this novel from the angle of meta-fiction, narrative theory and historical novel", the translator adopts certain cohesive devices, namely, substitution of "Ian McEwan's Atonement" by the pronoun "it", but "it" appears too frequently in this paragraph. The first sentence can be modified into "Ian McEwan's Atonement is a very good novel and nominated the 2001 Booker Prize." In the second sentence, "it" appears again, which can also be omitted since ellipsis is one of cohesive devices and this sentence could be modified into "Selected for 'one of the top ten books in 2002' by the New York Times and the Times, it has the access to the National Book Award for People in the next year". As for the third sentence, "However" as an adversative conjunction is used inappropriately here, since there exists no transitional relationship between the preceding sentence and this one, whose subjects and arguments are not at the same point. Another example reflects the same problem, like "According to Chen Xinren's classification, this study adopts quantitative and qualitative analysis, for the purpose of investigating the situation of English majors' using DMS in argumentative writing.", where the reference of "Chen Xinren's classification" is inexplicit, and "this study adopts quantitative and qualitative analysis" has no logical relation with the preceding clause.

However, there are still some relatively coherent abstracts by students, whose writings are fluid and logical. For instance, in "Readers actively participate in reading the novel, and finish the realization of the meaning by the use of content repository and textual strategy. Therefore, the third chapter analyzes the uncertainty in construction of indeterminancy, and readers have a hand in filling in the 'blanks' in the guidance of the implied reader. Thus, the fourth chapter dissects in depth reading process and implementation procedure of the significance when the author constructs Briony's atonement.", the author summarizes the main idea of each chapter, and gives a clear clue of the relationship between chapters. Varying cohesive devices are adopted, including coordinating conjunction "and", connectives like "therefore", "thus", "when" and so on.

3.3 Grammatical Errors

Some abstracts abounds with simple grammatical mistakes as the wrong use of articles, the plural or singular form of a noun, the part of speech of a word, a lack of concord between the subject and the verb (predict), etc. As in "The author hopes this research can enrich the readers' deep

understanding of functionalist translation theory and more attentions be paid to the study of subtitle translation." the abstract and uncountable noun "attention" should not be added "s". This kind of grammatical mistakes reflect the student's poor mastery of the property and plural or singular form of a noun.

As for subject-verb disagreement, the sentence "In (the) second part the author explains the concrete research procedure…. In the third part, the author discusses and explains the result based on the data and data analysis." demonstrates the student's ignorance of the subject "the author" as the third person singular, which leads to the lack of "-s" after the predict "explain", "discuss and explain". "The subject in this research is 68 middle school English teachers in Meizhou, Guangdong." Here the predicative "68 middle school English teachers" are plural, so "is" should be "are". "The research data indicates that learner autonomy of senior high school students stay at a relatively low level." in which "stay" should be "stays". "In motherland, Charlotte's Web was respectively translated by Kang Xin in 1979, Xiao Mao in 2000 and Ren Rongrong in 2004." where "were" should be "was".

Some students attach little importance to the definite article and they often miss out it. In "Western scholars have studied situation comedy from 1970s, while Chinese experts undertook researches from 1990s.", the definite article is missing, so "situation comedy" should be "the situation comedy" and there should have been an "the" preceding "1970s". Besides, the voice is often misused, as in "this writing skill is also conformed to Austen-novel's consistent style", the voice should be active instead of passive, and so "is also conformed to" should be corrected into "conforms to". What's more, some abstracts fail to transfer the verb into gerund, for example, "Aiming at solve this problem, the author tempted to find out the correlation between Speaking Strategies and Oral Proficiency of Junior Middle School English Teachers.", "solve" should be "solving" after the preposition "at".

The collocation of preposition in some phrases is often misused. "It designs to apply the method of poetry translation into the analyzing of prose, which, in some degrees, will add some enlightenments for the widespread learners and scholars in the future", in which "into" should be "to", and "in" should be "to". The reason may be that students fail to master the phrases. Another type errors could be that non-finite verbs are used as predicate verbs. For instance, "Chapter three analyzes the employment of postmodern narrative strategies in the novel from four aspects, which including non-linear narrative, indeterminacy, metafiction and black humor.", in which "including" as a participle is taken as the predicate. The student hasn't mastered the use and differences of participle and predicate. In addition, if the word "which" is deleted, the attributive clause becomes

a present participle phrase, which is also grammatically right. As in "comparing the seal's fate and Kate's destiny, revealing the contradiction between ideal and reality", two present participle phrases are connected by a comma, which cannot be called a sentence since there is neither a subject nor a predicate in it. The one who makes such a mistake fails to master the basic structure of a sentence. The word order is another mistake, for example, "Chapter Two explores what is postmodernism and the characteristics of postmodern narratives", in which "what is" is interrogative word order, so it should be changed into a statement order for this part serves as an object clause, that is, "what postmodernism is".

3.4 Original Text Oriented Errors

Some errors are inherent in the Chinese version of the abstract, not in the translating itself. In the first 9 sentences of an English abstract, four take "this thesis as the subject. Tracing the cause, it is found that in the Chinese abstract, the subjects of the four sentences are benwen (本文) or benyanjiu (本研究), so the English version is misled.

Some sentences are redundant for repeated expressions in the same sentence, as in "Xu Yuanchong is a famous Chinese translator, who is well-known for his "Three Beauties" "Principle", "famous" and "well-known" refer to the same meaning, but these two clauses emphasize different points. It is clear that a large quantity of translations with high quality make a translator, and those who propose some translation theories are identified as translation theorists. A translator is not necessarily a translation theorist, and vice versa. Xu Yuanchong as a translator is not famous for his "Three Beauties" Principle but mainly for his substantial translations of Chinese classics. Therefore, these two clauses fail to retain logical consistency.

As for "<u>Finally</u> the novel <u>ends</u> with Mansfield's purification to the other three places and the success of its own sublimation, and the success of Fanny, who finally gets her happiness.", "finally" is obviously redundant here since the predicate "ends with" implies closure. "The Summer before the Dark <u>mainly focuses</u> on Kate's confusion in the pursuit of ideal and freedom and her final return in a summer holiday." is also a cumbersome statement for the phrase "focus on" indicates mainly doing something. While in Chinese, such expressions are common since they are used as intensifiers. However, some students fail to distinguish the pragmatic nuances between Chinese and English, resulting in their tautology in the translated abstracts.

4. CAUSE ANALYSIS AND COUNTERMEASURES

In a nutshell, all the above mentioned categories of errors may be generated by a poor English proficiency or a timely shift from Chinese thinking mode to a western one.

Specifically, substantial numbers of students fail to grasp English grammar, especially morphology and syntax. In addition, some students regard translation theories uninstructive even useless in translating, resulting in their poor translation. In fact, considerable Chinese traditional and western translation theories contain highly instructive principles and strategies for translation practice, like Yan Fu's three criteria of translation, Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory, German Functional Translation Theory, Gutt's Relevance-theoretic Translation Theory, Paris School's Interpretative Theory, and so forth. Quite a number of students fail to grasp the essence of "faithfulness" and mistake "word-for-word" translation and formal correspondence as faithful translation, leading to their translated abstracts full of grammatical and logical errors. Furthermore, Chinese thinking mode differs greatly from that of English, and some students have little knowledge of the differences between them, hence their incoherent and illogical English translations. As in cultivated Chinese thinking mode all long, without enough studies and trainings in English thinking mode, most Chinese students write and translate merely in a fixed way.

Students are advised to closely study linguistic differences between Chinese and English, especially their sentence structures. Word for word translation is not recommended in most situations. It's highly recommended that the translation practice should be strengthened and the teacher gives timely feedback and explanations. Improving students' writing and translating skills brooks no delay. Firstly, enhancing students' analyzing ability. A qualified translator should be a good analyzer of the original language in syntax, semantic and grammatical structure, grasping the content and form of the discourse. Secondly, cultivating students' logic analysis capability. Some students have a large vocabulary but have difficulties in constructing words logically, which can be attributed to a lack of logic analysis capability. The arrangement of sentences and structures in a text always go in a certain logical direction, including juxtaposition, progression, causality, transition, comparison, etc. Grasping the logical relationship between clauses, sentences, and paragraphs contribute to constructing sentences and discourses in a clear and logical way.

CONCLUSION

It can be said that expressiveness as an inherent requirement is widely recognized in the west and east. Thus improving students' writing skills in the target language should be taken as the top priority. In addition, some students are lack of systematic academic writing training, resulting in their translations' being over colloquial. As a consequence, the academic writing course should be placed at the top in the translation teaching curriculum. Finally, translation theories should be attached more importance to, as most of which are proposed based

on substantial translation practices and discussions about practical problems in translating. Systematic study of translation theory definitely facilitates students' theoretical consciousness and reflections over their translations.

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