



Foregrounding Theory in Novel Translation: A Case Study of the Translation of *The Journey to the West*

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Received 19 June 2017; accepted 11 August 2017

Published online 26 September 2017

Abstract

Foregrounding is a symbolic feature of the language forms of literature. It is interconnected with the theme and aesthetic value of literary works. With the case study of *The Journey to the West* translated by Anthony C. Yu, the thesis makes an analysis of its foregrounding language from five major aspects of foregrounding phenomena, namely, lexical deviation, phonological deviation, grammatical deviation, graphological deviation and semantic deviation. It is hoped that this study could demonstrate the implication and significance of foregrounding theory to novel translation.

Key words: Foregrounding theory; Novel translation; *The Journey to the West*

Gao, Y. P., & Li, Y. Y. (2017). Foregrounding Theory in Novel Translation: A Case Study of the Translation of *The Journey to the West*. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 15(3), 28-32. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/9923> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/9923>

INTRODUCTION

Foregrounding language is an important part of literary language. It plays an irreplaceable role in the process of conveying the contents and emotion of literary works. Being a core concept in literary stylistics, it focuses on how to express and enhance the theme meaning and aesthetic value through the choice of language. For novel translation, the accurate transmission of the foregrounding language is crucial to achieve stylistic

equivalence. Foregrounding theory is of great significance for translators to pursue faithfulness and smoothness of the target text. This essay intends to make a concrete analysis of some examples extracted from the first volume of *The Journey to the West* translated by Anthony C. Yu from the perspective of foregrounding theory to reveal its applicability and instruction to novel translation.

1. FOREGROUNDING THEORY AND NOVEL TRANSLATION

1.1 Foregrounding Theory

Foregrounding theory is an old and new theory. Shklovsky, a representative of the Russian Formalism School, believed that foregrounding was a form of art deviating from norms and that the repeated appearance of anything would weaken people's sensibility to it. The art of literature was to process the routine or stereotyped language used in daily life to make people feel fresh and unfamiliar (Shklovsky, 2001).

As a core concept of stylistics, foregrounding was the symbolic characteristic of literary language forms (Zhang, 2017). Mukarovsky (2001), one of the representatives of the Prague School, argued that foregrounding was a systematic violation of standard conventions. Leech (2001) held the view that foregrounding was a type of intentional deviation from arts. Leech and Short divided foregrounding into two types: quantitative foregrounding and qualitative foregrounding. The former referred to the frequent occurrence of certain language components, and the latter meant the violation of language rules (Leech & Short, 2001). Leech (2001) further divided qualitative foregrounding into 8 categories: lexical deviation, phonological deviation, grammatical deviation, graphological deviation, semantic deviation, dialectal deviation, deviation of register and deviation of the historical period. Halliday (1973) regarded foregrounding

as a kind of “motivated prominence. He advocated judging the relationship between “prominence” and “foregrounding” from the perspective of functional analysis. If the prominent language was helpful to the comprehension and parsing of the text, then the “prominence” was “foregrounding”. Levin (1965) divided the deviation into “qualitative deviation” and “quantitative deviation”, which was similar to Leech’s viewpoint.

1.2 Foregrounding Theory and Novel Translation

For a long time, scholars at home and abroad have focused their research of foregrounding mainly on linguistics and literature. Ye (2000) first proposed that foregrounding theory can be applied to translation criticism and practice. He pointed out that translator should be faithful to the linguistic foregrounding caused by the author’s intentional violation of the original language. The overall value of literary works contains both meaning and content, as well as stylistic value (Leech & Short, 2001). And the foregrounding language is a concentrated embodiment of the stylistic value. Therefore, the translator must be keenly sensitive to the foregrounding language in the original text, and focus more on how to retain and reproduce them in translation as well as how to avoid the appearance of deceptive equivalence.

Foregrounding language occurs most frequently in poetry and novel, as they must violate linguistic conventions, otherwise it will be difficult to perceive their aesthetic value (Zhang, 1994). At present, many scholars at home and abroad have discussed the applicability of foregrounding theory in the study of novel translation. For instance, Wang (2003) analyzed the relations between deceptive equivalence and foregrounding; Wang (2004) pointed out that scholars should carefully distinguish linguistic differences from stylistic variation with poetic function in the process of analyzing literary translation. Zhao and Gong (2007) manifested the relationship between foregrounding theory and novel translation. Based on the previous studies, the present study would concentrate on the translation of the foregrounding language in the first volume of *The Journey to the West* translated by Anthony C. Yu. While analyzing concrete examples from the book, it would also further discuss the significance of foregrounding theory on novel translation both in theoretical and practical aspects.

2. CASE ANALYSIS UNDER FOREGROUNDING THEORY

2.1 A Brief Introduction to Yu’s Translation of the Novel

Anthony C. Yu is a chair professor of humanities at the University of Chicago and a Chinese-American who wants to display the optimal achievements of Chinese culture to the western world. Yu’s *The Journey to the West*

comprises four volumes, each containing 25 Chapters. In the appendices and notes, he made at the end of each book, Professor Yu introduced abundant knowledge about Chinese classics. And he also wrote a 62-page introduction to illustrate the historical origin, the author’s life, the theme and writing style of this masterpiece. Yu’s version is an important material for Chinese scholars to study the achievements of Western contemporary study on *The Journey to the West*. This is a feature that is unavailable in any previous versions of *The Journey to the West*. In the translation, Anthony C. Yu adopted foreignization method to achieve faithfulness to the original text. Besides, he added a bound of annotations so as to faithfully display the Chinese classical culture. Yu’s version is the most influential one in modern society and it greatly boosts the spread of Chinese culture.

2.2 Analysis of *The Journey to the West* Under Foregrounding Theory

As mentioned above, Leech divided the deviation into 8 categories. Based on this classification, the author will make a specific analysis of the translation of *The Journey to the West* from aspects of lexical deviation, grammatical deviation, phonological deviation, graphological deviation and semantic deviation.

2.2.1 Lexical Deviation

Lexical deviation mainly refers to the creation of new words and new meaning (Qin, 1983). There are many examples of lexical deviation in *The Journey to the West* that offer people a refreshing feeling and increase the vigor and color of its literary language.

Example 1:

The original: 但见东方天色微舒白, 西路金光大显明。(Yu, 2015, p.40)

The translation: The eastern sky began to pale with light,

But golden beams shone on the Westward Way. (Ibid., p.41)

Analysis: The “西路” here does not mean “the road leading to the west”. It is given a specific meaning, which is “Road to the western paradise that is related to Buddhism”. Yu translated it into “the Westward Way”. Both initials are capitalized to indicate that it is a proper noun of special connotation. It is a fairly feasible and acceptable translation method that calls for the translator’s full understanding of the referential meaning in context.

Example 2:

The original: 又见那一竿两竿修竹, 三点五点梅花。几树青松常带雨, 浑然相个人家。(Ibid., p.10)

The translation: There were, furthermore, a stalk or two of tall bamboos. And three or five sprigs of plum flowers. (Ibid., p. 11)

Analysis: The “三点五点梅花” is an example of lexical innovation, the meaning and collocation of “点” here is original and novel. Yu rendered it into “sprigs”. On the whole, it may seem appropriate, but it does not reflect

the ingenious use of “点” in the original text. Due to the differences between English and Chinese, it is sometimes difficult to achieve complete equivalence in translation.

2.2.2 Grammatical Deviation

Grammatical deviation is about language uses that do not conform to grammatical rules of the language. In *The Journey to the West*, although the expressions concerning grammatical deviation is less, there are still some worthy of studying.

Example 3:

The original: 悟空道：“我今姓孙，法名悟空。”众猴闻说，鼓掌忻然道：“大王是老孙，我们都是二孙、三孙、细孙、小孙、——一家孙、一国孙、一窝孙矣！”(Ibid., p.56)

The translation: “My surname is Sun,” replied Wukong, “and my religious name is Wukong.” When the monkeys heard this, they all clapped their hands and shouted happily, “If the great king is Elder Sun, the we are all Junior Suns, Suns the third, small Suns, tiny Suns-the Sun Family, the Sun Nation, and the Sun Cave!” (Ibid., p.57)

Analysis: In the original text, the sentence “二孙、三孙、细孙、小孙、——一家孙、一国孙、一窝孙” deviates from the conventional grammatical criterion. “孙” here refers to the surname, and its collocation with quantifiers “二” and “三” obeyed the grammatical rules, which make the language more attractive, though it may be slightly difficult to understand the meaning without the context. The translator tries to retain the original features by literal translation.

Example 4:

The original: 菩萨道：“古人云：‘若要有前程，莫做没前程。’你既上界违法，今又不改凶心，伤生造孽，却不是二罪俱罚？”(Ibid., p.198)

The translation: The Bodhisattva said, “There is an old saying: If you want to have a future, don’t act heedless of the future. You have already transgressed in the region above, and yet you have not changed your violent ways but indulge in the taking of life. Don’t you know that both crime will be punished?” (Ibid., p.199)

Analysis: For the old saying “若要有前程，莫做没前程”， it is not in line with the grammatical norms as it omits some ingredients. But since we are more or less exposed to similar examples, there would be no understanding problem. Meanwhile, it also embodies a kind of implicit beauty. The translator also retains this feature of the original text and does not cause any deviation in understanding. In general, it is advisable in such contexts.

2.2.3 Phonological Deviation

Phonological deviation means the specialization of language pronunciation, involving stress, rhythm and intonation. Written in classical Chinese, the masterpiece *The Journey to the West* contains a large number of poems and directs great attention to the rhythmic beauty of words and sentences.

Example 5:

The original: 去来自在任优游，也无恐怖也无愁。极乐场中俱坦荡，大千之处没春秋。(Ibid., p.182)

The translation: To go or come is casual and free; of fear or sorrow there’s not one degree. Fields of Ultimate Bliss are flat and wide. In this great world no four seasons abide. (Ibid., p.183)

Analysis: This is the segment of a poem in *The Journey to the West*. It is based on end rhymes, for “愁” and “秋” rhyme. In the translation, the feature is more evident with each sentence having a rhyme. Of course, this is not contradictory with the original text. It is a recreation on the foundation of the original text. Hence such kind of processing approach is very ingenious and worthy of learning.

Example 6:

The original: 青不青，黑不黑，晦气色脸；长不长，短不短，赤脚筋躯。(Ibid., p.190)

The translation: A green, though not too green, and black, though not too black, face of gloomy complexion; a long, though not too long, and short, though not too short, sinewy body with naked feet. (Ibid., p.191)

Analysis: Although the selection is not long, it is very neat and reads smoothly, revealing a kind of phonological beauty. In order to highlight this unique beauty of the original text, Professor Yu adopts similar structure in the English language. Besides, there is an additional alliteration, which enriches the target text as well as embodies the translator’s profound knowledge of translation.

2.2.4 Graphological Deviation

Graphological deviation refers to the sorting and coding of language symbols in graphological aspect (Wang, 2010), including type style, spelling, punctuation marks etc. In *The Journey to the West*, there are also many examples of graphological deviation.

Example 7:

The original: 表曰：“水元下界东胜神洲东海小龙臣敖广启奏大天圣主玄穹高上帝君：近因花果山生、水帘洞住妖仙孙悟空者，…… 臣今启奏，伏望圣裁。恳乞天兵，收此妖孽，庶使海岳清宁，下元安泰。奉奏。”(Ibid., p.76)

The translation: The memorial said: *From the lowly water region of the Eastern Ocean at the East Purvavideha Continent, the small dragon subject, Aoguang, humbly informs the Wise Lord of Heaven, the Most Eminent High God and Ruler, that a bogus immortal, Sun Wukong.... Your subject therefore presents this petition and humbly begs for imperial justice. We earnestly beseech you to dispatch the heavenly host and capture this monster, so that tranquility may be restored to the oceans and prosperity to the Lower Region. Thus we present this memorial.* (Ibid., p.77)

Analysis: The genre of the excerpt is biyoo. It can be seen that its writing format is distinctive. The translation

follows the original pattern by using italics to highlight the passage. It attracts the readers' attention by graphological deviation, thus emphasizing the content of the passage. In this case, most translators tend to follow the original form of writing so as to faithfully reproduce its pattern and focus.

Example 8:

The original: “你算, 他该多少年数, 方能享受此无极大道? 你那个初世为人的畜生, 如何出此大言! 不当人子! 不当人子! 折了你的寿算! 趁早皈依, 切莫胡说! 但恐遭了毒手, 性命顷刻而休, 可惜了你的本来面目!” (Ibid., p.166)

The translation: “Figure out yourself how many years it took him to rise to the enjoyment of his great and limitless position! You are merely a beast who has just attained human form in this incarnation. How dare you make such a boast? Blasphemy! This is sheer blasphemy, and it will surely shorten your allotted age. Repent while there's still time and cease your idle talk!” (Ibid., p.167)

Analysis: The original text employs a number of question marks and exclamation points, forming a strong visual impact and highlighting the speaker's tone of anger and denunciation. Because of the differences in language expression, there are some adjustments of the punctuation marks in the translation, but it still includes quantity of question marks and exclamation points to emphasize the tone. On the whole, the content and tone expressed in the target text are basically consistent with the original text.

2.2.5 Semantic Deviation

Semantic deviation refers to the abnormal, absurd or ambiguous meaning of a sentence component. *The Journey to the West* is a mythic fiction, which tells readers a lot of telling story on vanquishing demon. The author of this masterpiece is of rich imagination, hence adopting many semantic deviations to achieve mythological effect.

Example 9:

The original: 佛祖道: “我与你打个赌赛: 你若有本事, 一筋斗打出我这右手掌中, 算你赢, 再不用动刀兵苦争战, 就请玉帝到西方居住, 把天宫让你; 若不能打出手掌, 你还下界为妖, 再修几劫, 却来争吵。” (Ibid., p.166)

The translation: The Buddhist Patriarch said, “Let me make a wager with you. If you have the ability to somersault clear of this right palm of mine, I shall ask the Jade Emperor to go live with me in the West and let you have the Celestial Palace. If you can not somersault out of my hand, you can go back to the Region Below and be a monster. Work through a few more kalpas before you return to cause more trouble.” (Ibid., p.167)

Analysis: It is clear that the sentence “一筋斗打出我这右手” belongs to an abnormal expression, and the readers can only understand its true meaning in particular context. *The Journey to the West* is a mythic fiction, so

similar examples of semantic deviation are unavoidable and endowed with concrete literary meaning. Yu keeps its language features to represent the rich imagination of the original passage. Meanwhile, this semantic deviation itself is difficult to make a change in translation.

Example 10:

The original: 好大圣, 急纵身又要跳出, 被佛祖翻掌一扑, 把这猴王推出西天门外, 将五指化作金、木、水、火、土五座联山, 唤名“五行山”, 轻轻的把他压住。 (Ibid., p.168)

The translation: Dear Great Sage! Quickly he crouched and was about to jump up again, when the Buddhist Patriarch flipped his hand over and tossed the Monkey King out of the wood, water, fire, and earth. They became, in fact, five connected mountains, named Five-Phases Mountain, which pinned him down with just enough pressure to keep him there. (Ibid., p.169)

Analysis: For the sentence “将五指化作金、木、水、火、土五座联山……”, the question is that how can five fingers be turned into a mountain that can hold people down. Despite the semantic absurdity, it is the deviation that makes the original more creative and imaginative. The translation makes use of literal translation to reproduce this characteristic of the original text. Although it may not be logical under normal circumstances, it can bring us wonderful ideas and expand our thinking space.

CONCLUSION

Foregrounding language is closely related to the literariness and aesthetic values of literary works. The novel, as an important part of literary works, represents the author's originality in the application of foregrounding language. Therefore the key to the success of novel translation lies not only in the communication of information, but in the representation of style. Firstly, the foregrounding language, together with the content, constitutes the meaning of the novel. Hence, the translator should give full attention to it. Secondly, the translator should master certain stylistic knowledge and maintain a high degree of sensitivity to the language form and style of the work so as to identify different types of deviations from conventional language in the original text. In addition, translators should try to convey and reconstruct literary and artistic foregrounding language. Finally, since some of the foregrounding language caused by differences in writing structure, dialects and grammar of the two languages are untranslatable, the translator should give full consideration to the acceptability of the reader and dilute the language form to ensure that the content is correctly conveyed. In a word, foregrounding theory is of great value to guide the theoretical study and practice of novel translation, and its significance needs to be further discussed by future scholars.

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