

On “Translationese” of Bing Xin’s Translation of The Prophet

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Abstract: The Prophet was regarded as Gibran’s most representative work and Gibran regards this book as “the second birth of his life” for it well expresses his “only wish to strive for freedom in front of the sun.” The original work is very imaginative with deep philosophical insight and great imagination and clarity. The prophet had been translated into 56 languages since its first publication in 1923. Bing Xin firstly translated it into Chinese in 1931. In China, the status of Bing Xin’s version of The Prophet is of great importance, which has great research value. Throughout Bing Xin’s translation of The Prophet, in addition to her elegant and beautiful literary language, the phenomenon of “translationese” is also everywhere, producing the unique translation style of Bing Xin’s version. This paper will analyze the “translationese” in Bing Xin’s translation of The Prophet from word collocation and logical processing so that readers may consider “translationese” in a more objective way and have a better understanding of Bing Xin’s translation style of The Prophet.

Key words: translation; word collocation; logical processing; “translationese”; translation style

1 Introduction

The Prophet is a collection of prose poems written by Kahlil Gibran in English. It is at the most prominent position among Gibran’s creations and is considered to be his “top of the works”. Gibran builds the book in a way of parting advice. The language of The Prophet is soft and concise, with active imaginations. It is the fluency and free and easy style of writing that determines his prose poem “not paying much attention to the dignity of language, nor the pursuit of strict scientificity, but to paint a dazzling color with rich imagination and blazing emotions.” Despite the freshness and singularity, the language of The Prophet is elegant and dazzling, always creating a colorful and warm color between the imaginations. In addition to Gibran’s “apocalyptic prophecy statement, and the powerful sense of rhythm of music and the sense of movement and jumping”, the unique style is called “Gibran style”.

Bing Xin (1900–1999) was one of the pioneering figures and the last senior writer in the May Fourth New Cultural Movement, and also the first authoress in modern China. In her whole life, she not only achieved great success in novel, poem, prose and children’s literature, but also made enormous contributions to the Chinese translation course. In 1927, when Bing Xin read the book The Prophet in her American friend’s home, she was immediately so absorbed by the philosophical understanding and the beautiful dictions in it that she seemed to find an echo in it. Then she began in 1930 to translate it into Chinese, and got her translated version published in 1931. The Prophet was Bing Xin’s first translated book from English into Chinese. Due to the foreignization strategies employed and the flavor reserved in Bing Xin’s translation, readers can gain as the same artistic charm as the original text. It can be said that Bing Xin’s translation The Prophet is really excellent among all the translations up to now. Her translation opens a window for Chinese readers to appreciate and understand Gibran’s spirit, and also makes more and more Chinese readers aware of the world’s literary masters. In her

translation of The Prophet, similar syntactic structures and expressions of the original text are widely used, and the whole translation reflects the phenomenon of “Europeanization”, leading to “translationese”.

“Translationese”, as a problematic phenomenon, has been discussed for many centuries, but it was about ninety years ago that the term of “translationese” began to be a subject of scholars’ debate or study. It has often been defined as “obscure and unreadable versions or even those nonsense ones”, or simply, as for English–Chinese translation, the phenomenon of “Europeanization”. A number of scholars and researchers have sharply criticized this phenomenon in all kinds of theses and works. Only a few have somewhat taken notice of the acceptability of “translationese”. In 2011, Fang Mengzhi listed three different entries to respectively explain “translationese” in his book A Dictionary of Translation Studies in China, and he defined one of them as: “In contrast to national ‘creation’, it refers to the general term of all the foreign literary works on style”, which is called “翻译体”. This explanation affirms the positive effect of “translationese” to some extent.

“Translationese” has its own foreign aesthetics, which not only retains some novel ways of language expression in the original text, but also reflects the thought patterns and customs of foreign countries, which can enrich native language from both linguistic and cultural level.

Since Bing Xin’s translation of The Prophet has always been praised highly by a large number of readers, this thesis based on her version tries to figure out how the “translationese” forms and make readers have a better understanding of Bing Xin’s translation of The Prophet and her unique translation style.

2 “Translationese” and Translation Style

In Zhou Hongmin’s article From Europeanized Chinese to Translationese: An Overview of a Century-long Controversy over the Impact of Translation on Chinese, he claims that “translationese” is originally a mixed style that is not completely similar to target language but meanwhile with some features of source language more or less in the process of translation. It combines two conflicting features to present a multi-dimensional structure. Although the “translationese” starts from translation, it is difficult to be independent since it is integrated with Chinese culture. Outside the translation activity, the “translationese” has evolved into a way of writing. “When we talk about the “translationese”, it actually involves the problem of ‘Europeanization’ in Chinese writing.” (Sun Ganlu, 1997: 57–70) From this point of view, the foreignization of “translationese” has gone beyond the translated text itself. It has emerged from the translated text and become a literary technique. After the smelting of time, it has been refined and directly entered into the target language system, becoming a foreign language and a new literature genre.

He Sanning believes that “translationese” is the stylistic style, language style, and author’s style of the original text in essence in his article Also Talk about the So-called Translationese. Any translator who engages in translation activities is not a purely personal

act. When he converts source language into target language, he is always subject to the contract of the source language, and this constraint is multifaceted. It is impossible to completely “Chinesize” the foreign language. No matter how high the translation level of the translator is, he is not permitted to translate without considering the cultural background of source language, stylistic style and the language style of the original text. Otherwise, it can not be called a translation. Faithful to the source text has always been the principle followed by translators. Under the premise of pursuing the similarity both in form and meaning of the source text, there must be a “foreign flavor” that coincides with the original text, which is the linguistic feature of the original. In others words, “translationese” inevitably has its own foreign aesthetics and reflects the foreignization of translation.

Translation style involves the style of both original text and translated text, and the style of the original text is an important factor affecting translation style. The stylistic style of the original text is a direct reflection of the author's choice, conveying the speaker's conscious or unconscious meaning. The employment of the translation strategy of foreignization or domestication will have impact on translation style. Since the “translationese” is the result of the translation strategy of foreignization as a new genre, it represents the translation style with of the translated works in a way.

3 “Translationese” in Bing Xin's Translation of The Prophet

3.1 Unusual Word Collocation

English and Chinese have different expressive systems. English is more abstract while Chinese is more specific, and English words are stronger than Chinese in coherence and collocational ability. In English, a verb can be combined with multiple nouns, an adjective can modify different nouns, and an adverb can also modify different verbs. In contrast, Chinese words are often more specific, and the collocational ability of the words is not as good as English. The adoption of collocations which exist in English instead of in Chinese will lead to the “translationese”.

(a) Then the gates of his heart were flung open, and his joy flew far over the sea.

(Gibran, 3)

他的心门轰然地开了, 他的喜乐在海面飞翔。(冰心, 3)

In the original text, the prophet is very delighted because the ship which can carry him back to his hometown finally arrived. Gibran describes this mood in a poetic and beautiful language. Bing Xin's translation follows the original form and describes “喜乐”在“飞翔”. However, “喜乐” is an abstract noun. Matching “喜乐” with “飞翔” is contrary to the habitual expression of Chinese, which leads to “translationese”. But this “translationese” materialized the abstract noun “喜乐”, making it become dynamic and making readers feel the same as the prophet. Continuing the beauty of the original text, Bing Xin's translation is full of artistic atmosphere. Besides, this “translationese” can be also illustrated from the perspective of figures of speech. Bing Xin's translation uses the rhetoric of analogy. “飞翔” is the unique skill of birds while “喜乐” is not a bird but an abstract concept. She compares the abstract word “喜乐” to specific thing, endowing the prophet's mood with powerful wings, which makes “喜乐” alive. It inspires readers to imagine and make Bing Xin's translation more vivid.

(b) Ready am I to go, and my eagerness with sails full set awaits the wind. (Gibran, 4)

我已准备好要去了, 我的热望和帆蓬一同扯满, 等着风来。(冰心, 4)

In the original sentence, “with sails full set” is used as an attribute to modify the subject “eagerness”. Gibran wants to express that: the prophet is eager to set off, just as the sails have all been unfolded, waiting for the wind to swell them one by one. Bing Xin translates “eagerness” and “sails” as “热望”和“帆蓬”, and put them together as a subject, and one is an abstract noun while another is a concrete noun. Then “full set” is translated as a predicate. Matching “扯满” with “热望” is obviously not in line with habitual usage of Chinese, resulting in “translationese”. However, it does not affect readers to understand this sentence, instead, it makes the abstract noun “热望” visualized, making Bing Xin's translation have more artistic aesthetic feeling, giving readers an imaginary space.

3.2 Unconventional Processing of Logic

Chinese and English belong to different language systems. Chinese belongs to the Sino-Tibetan system and English belongs to the Indo-European system, which essentially determines the fundamental difference between the two. English is a hypotactic language, while Chinese is a paratactic language. Lone sentences and clauses are very popular in English, and the logical relationship between sentences can be indicated through conjunctions. While Chinese has more short and simple sentences, and the logic between sentences can be inferred from their intrinsic links. Therefore, thinking patterns and logic which are used in English instead of in Chinese will also lead to “translationese” in English-Chinese translation, mainly expressing in the following aspects.

3.2.1 Postposition of Long Adverbials

Because of different thinking patterns, adverbial clauses in English are always put behind main clauses. In contrast, adverbial clauses in Chinese are always put in front of the main clauses. In English-Chinese translation, the postposition of long adverbials often leads to “translationese”. For example:

And I say that life is indeed darkness save when there is urge,
And all urge is blind save when there is knowledge,
And all knowledge is vain save when there is work,
And all work is empty save when there is love. (Gibran, 23)

我说生命的确是黑暗的, 除非是有了激励;
一切的激励都是盲目的, 除非是有了知识;
一切的知识都是徒然的, 除非是有了工作;
一切的工作都是空虚的, 除非是有了爱。(冰心, 21)

These sentences are adverbial clauses of condition. When Bing Xin translated these sentences, she translated “when” into “除非” and always put the adverbial clauses behind the main clauses, which is inconsistent with the habitual expression of preposition of adverbials in Chinese, leading to “translationese”. However, this kind of “translationese” is acceptable. It not only does not affect the expression of the original text, but also helps readers to figure out the differences in thinking pattern and language performance between Chinese and foreigners, making Bing Xin's translation full of exotic flavors. Moreover, it is not so hard for readers to understand, in return, it gives readers an opportunity to have a different reading experience, which is unforgettable.

3.2.2 Use of Long Attributes

Long sentences are popular used in English, with more modifiers. Concise and short sentences are common in Chinese. In English-Chinese translation, literal translation of longer attributes can also lead to “translationese”.

(a) You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth.

你们是弓, 你们的孩子是从弦上发出的生命的箭矢。

(b) For to be overmindful of your debt, is to doubt his generosity

who has the free-hearted earth for mother, and God for father. (Gibran, 18)

因为过于思量你们的欠付, 就是怀疑了那以慈悲的大地为母、以上帝为父的人的仁心。(冰心)

As can be seen from the above examples, Bing Xin tends to modify the preceding nouns with expatiatory attributes, resulting in longer sentences, presenting the phenomenon of "Europeanization". Like the postposition of long adverbials, the use of long attributes is also one of the reasons why Bing Xin's translation is filled with exoticism. Despite the "translationese", Bing Xin's expressions are not so difficult to understand, instead, the logical relationship appears more clearly and ambiguity can be easily avoided.

3.2.3 Frequent Use of Conjunctions

English is a hypotactic language, while Chinese is a paratactic language. Hypotactic languages need to rely on connectives, which is overt coherence, while the sentence building in paratactic languages independent on connectives, which is covert coherence. Many conjunctions in English can be omitted in Chinese. The frequent use of conjunctions especially two or more conjunctions used together in English - Chinese translation often leads to "translationese".

(a) Yet unless the exchange be in love and kindly justice, it will but lead some to greed and others to hunger. (Gibran, 34)

然而若不是用爱和公平来交易, 则必有人流为饕餮, 有人流为饿殍。(冰心, 30)

(b) For if you should enter the temple for no other purpose than asking you shall not receive. (Gibran, 61)

因为假如你进入殿宇, 除了请求之外, 没有别的目的, 你将不能接受。(冰心, 56)

In addition to the above examples, there are still many improper continuously used conjunctions in Bing Xin's translation, which makes the Chinese expression of the original text become rigid and formalized, leading to "translationese". Although the "translationese" can introduce foreign syntactic structure and grammar to domestic readers, it has negative impact on the flexibility of Bing Xin's translation.

4 Conclusion

Bing Xin's translation mainly focus on "elegance" with beautiful language and remarkable writing, showing prominent aesthetics. Bing Xin tends to use literal translation, strictly following

the semantics and word orders of the original text, resulting in the characteristics of "Europeanization" in general. Her translation conforms to the trend of literary translation at that time and meets the aesthetic needs of contemporary readers. And the "translationese" in her translation have both advantages and disadvantages, but one flaw cannot obscure the splendor of the jade on the whole. Due to the "translationese", Bing Xin's translation style of *The Prophet* is not only gentle and tender, fresh and simple, but also has an exotic atmosphere, which is accepted and loved by the vast number of Chinese and foreign readers of later generations.

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