

A Study of Novel Translation from the Perspective of Cultural Classification

-- A Case Study of English Translation of Wolf Totem

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Abstract

As an important crystallization in the evolution of human civilization, culture plays a crucial role in translation activities. Among the studies of cultural classification, Eugene Nida's theory is of unique guiding significance to cultural translation. *Wolf Totem* is an epic work describing the Mongolian steppe, which contains rich cultural elements, whose English translation has attracted wide attention in the world. Therefore, from the perspective of cultural classification, this paper attempts to explore the different cultural elements in *Wolf Totem* and their corresponding translation strategies in order to provide reference for relevant translation activities.

Keywords

Cultural classification; Translation study; *Wolf Totem*.

1. Introduction

Wolf Totem is a fantastic book which depicts the admirable exotic Mongolian grassland. From the perspective of Chen Zhen, an educated youth in Beijing, this book introduces Mongolian's unique life style, customs and religious beliefs, and presents us the aristocratic personality, way of thinking and psychological characteristics of Mongolian culture.

Howard Goldblatt, a famous translator of Chinese-English translation, whose English translation of the novel has aroused great repercussion in the western world. The treatment of cultural elements in translation is the focus of translation studies, therefore, this paper tries to analyze the various cultural elements in *Wolf Totem* from the perspective of cultural classification and explore the different translation strategies used by the translator.

2. Cultural Classification

Culture includes all the achievements of civilization in the development of human history. In *Primitive Culture* (1871), Edward Burnett Tylor defined culture as: "an umbrella term which encompasses the social behavior, institutions, and norms found in human societies, as well as the knowledge, beliefs, arts, laws, customs, capabilities, and habits of the individuals in these groups [1]."

Culture covers a wide range of areas, including almost all aspects of human social life, so there exists a great number of classifications of culture [2]. In the study of cross-cultural communication, a traditional way to classify it is to divide culture into dominant culture and subculture. According to the explicit and implicit characteristics of culture, Edward Hall raised the concepts of overt culture and covert culture. Nevertheless, in his monograph *Language, culture and translating* (1993), Eugene A. Nida distinguished Culture into five

categories: ecological, material, social, religious and linguistic Culture [3]. The last method is adopted by this paper, for it covers relatively the most comprehensive scope.

3. Translation Strategies from the Perspective of Cultural Classification

3.1. Ecological Culture

Example 1

ST: 要是今儿晚上刮起白毛风，那咱们一只黄羊也得不着咯。

TT: If a blizzard came tonight, we wouldn't wind up with a single gazelle.

The underlined Chinese word “白毛风” literally means “White Hair Wind”, which refers to a kind of terrible weather with strong wind, low temperature and heavy snow. It's a local name used only by people living in in northern China, so it may seem baffling to the target language (TL) reader. Therefore, the translator adopted the domestication strategy, translating this unfamiliar word into a common word “blizzard” by using the technique of subtraction.

Ecological Culture

3.2. Material Culture

Example 2

ST: 我想法子再多弄点儿“二踢脚”来。

TT: And I will find a way to get my hands on some firecrackers.

The underlined Chinese phrase “二踢脚(Kick Twice)” is a Beijing dialect, vividly describes a traditional folk supplies, double sound firecracker, for there are two sounds after being lighted. If translated literally, the TL readers will not be able to understand. Hence, the translator also used the domestication strategy here, translating it simply as firecrackers.

3.3. Social Culture

Example 3

ST: 一旦狼把人的尸体完全啃尽，“天葬”就完成了。

TT: The “sky burial” was completed once the wolves had eaten every morsel of human remains. Sky burial is a traditional form of burial in Mongolia in which the body is taken to a designated location for wolves to devour. In order to render the mysterious nomadic culture, the translator adopts the strategy of alienation, which not only retains the image of the original text, but also fills the target text (TT) with strong exotic customs. This treatment could make the TT more attractive to the TL readers.

3.4. Religious Culture

Example 4

ST: 小狼的身子骨催起来了。它总是吃得肚皮溜溜圆，像个眉开眼笑的小弥勒。

TT: The cub was filling out, its belly tight as a drum after each meal, like the fat, squinty-eyed laughing Buddha.

The underlined Chinese noun “弥勒(Maitreya)” is a name of a bare-chested, smiling Buddha, who is revered among Chinese people. It is believed that Maitreya comes from the Sanskrit word, but this name is too strange for the readers of the TT culture. Thus, the translator adopted the domestication strategy and translated it as Buddha, which increased the readability of the TT.

3.5. Linguistic Culture

Example 5

ST: 这里天高皇帝远，红卫兵“破四旧”的狂潮还没有破到老人壁毯地毯上来。

TT: In this remote area, where “heaven is high and the emperor far away,” the Red Guards’ fervent desire to destroy the Four Olds—old ideas, culture, customs, and habits—had not yet claimed Bilgee’s tapestries or rug.

The Four Old is a Chinese term generated in a special historical period with distinguish cultural meanings which could not be obtained by TL readers only by the phrase itself. For the purpose of retaining the cultural color of the source text (ST) and smoothly convey its meaning, the translator adopted the strategy of alienation and the skills of amplification. Firstly he transliterated the ST term faithfully, and then supplemented the cultural vacancy behind it by using dash to paraphrase it. In this way, the TL readers could clearly understand the intention of the ST.

4. Conclusion

The translation of cultural elements should carefully be analyzed on a case-by-case basis in detail. From the above study of the English version of *Wolf Totem*, this paper found that the translator tended to adopt domestication strategy for ecological, material and religious culture, while alienation strategy is employed in the translation of social and linguistic culture. We also found that the main factor affecting translator's choice is the acceptability of translation, thus, when considering cultural translation strategies, we should make trade-offs according to different cultural types so as to meet the reading expectations of TL readers.

References

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