

Paratextual Translation Strategies of the English Version of the Three-Body Problem

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Keywords: Science fiction, Translation strategies, Paratextual strategies, English version of the three-body problem

Abstract: The Three-body Problem has many a reader in China and has aroused great response after being translated into the West. With the development of translation studies, we should pay attention to translation strategies at the textual level and attach importance to the generation and selection of various paratexts complementary to the translating. In view of this, the purpose of this paper is aimed to examine translation strategies of the English version of The Three-body Problem in terms of paratexts, and to explore how it works to help the target text to be widely and successfully disseminated and translated in the English world.

1. Introduction

As the scopes of translation studies have expanded and deepened increasingly, many researchers have begun to concentrate on paratexts apart from translated versions, with a view to exploring translation activities much more thoroughly and objectively. “Paratext”, a concept originally applied into literary writing and research, was initially put forward by the French scholar named Genette (1997). He thinks paratexts make a text become a book and present it to readers.... It is an undefined part between the interior and the exterior. He also points out that the boundary between the interior (the text itself) and the exterior (the world discourse outside the text) is indefinite (Genette, 1997: 1). In other words, he reckons paratexts serve as a bridge between the text and the outside world. Additionally, Genette classifies paratexts into two types: one is inner paratext, closely related to the text, as an explanation to the text itself, including covers, contents, preface, etc.; the other -- outer paratext, separated from the text, generally involves the media or reader comments, book reviews, the author or translator interviews etc., as discussion and evaluation of the whole translation. However, with the further development of the research, the concept of “paratext” has been gradually employed in translation studies by more and more scholars, since the translation includes not only the text content, but also diverse kinds of accompanied paratexts, becoming an integral and playing a pivotal role in the translation and dissemination of the originals abroad.

When translating and disseminating the original text, on the one hand the translator should consider the textual content in term of languages; on the other hand he/she should take into account non-linguistic factors from the socio-cultural levels, namely, the translator should adopt appropriate textual strategies to translate the source text from the lingual level, meanwhile one ought to use different kinds of paratext strategies flexibly from socio-cultural perspectives to ensure the dissemination of the target text overseas. Textual translation strategies are mainly chosen by the

translator, the focus of the researches concerning Chinese literature translation currently. The translation of *The Three-body Problem* is no exception. A majority of scholars have mainly focused on qualitative or empirical researches on the textual strategies of its translated versions based on mainstream domestic and foreign translation theories or corpus technology. Nevertheless, they have rarely attached much importance to the influence of paratext strategies on the successful translation of *The Three-body Problem* abroad. Therefore, we should pay more attention to how the target texts are accepted by western readers by analyzing how the translator, publisher and readers are connected together through paratexts, so as to better investigate the translation and dissemination of *The Three-body Problem* written by Liu Cixin. In accordance with Genett's point of view, paratextual strategies can be divided into inner paratextual strategies and outer paratextual one. At present, plenty of researchers have attempted to study textual translation strategies of the non-Chinese versions of this sci-fi novel in terms of linguistic transformation, with the help of theories such as Feminist Translation Theory, Translator's Ethics, Translator's subjectivity, etc., hence seldom cases on the basis of paratextual strategies can be seen at present. For this reason, this paper is aimed at illustrating how its paratext strategies to help the translation spread successfully abroad via taking Ken Liu's English translation of *The Three-body Problem* as an example.

2. Inner Paratextual Strategies in the English Version of the Three-Body Problem

As mentioned above, the inner paratext includes cover, contents, preface, postscript, notes and so on, highly regarding and effectively supplementary to the original text, assisting readers to understand the content of the text roughly within a short time or briefly evaluate it, just as the saying goes "You may know by a handful the whole sack." A cover, a back cover, a list of characters, two postscripts, translator's notes are included in the English version of *The Three-body Problem*. Besides, the price and the design of the TL text are supposed to be considered. The author finds that there are two major functions in its English version: one is to expand and supplement the textual content (e.g.: list of characters, postscripts, and translator's notes); the other is to promote the translation (such as the cover, the back cover, and the book design), to be discussed in detail one by one as follows.

2.1 List of Characters

This kind of inner paratext aims to expand the textual content and provide more background knowledge for target readers. The translator Ken Liu compiles a List of Characters to outline the main characters in the book, enucleating names, identities, occupations and social relations of the roles in the novel as well as briefly expounding the principles for translating Chinese names that "surnames should be translated followed by given names", opposite to those in the West as a whole. In that case, western readers enable to have a general idea of the story before reading. Meanwhile, it is also rather convenient for TL readers not familiar with the original for reference whenever, to make it an index for reading.

2.2 Postscripts

The English version contains the author postscript by Liu Cixin and the translator one by Ken Liu. The following is an analysis of the two postscripts respectively. Over 30 footnotes are involved in the English translation of *The Three-body Problem*, rare for a single science fiction to have so many footnotes in general, let alone other hidden paratexts. To explain to TL readers why so many footnotes are needed in this novel, Ken Liu has translated the author postscript into English and

added the translator's postscript to explicate the reasons to foreign readers detailedly.

In the author's postscript, the writer of the original--Liu Cixin informs western readers of his childhood experience, his interest and reasons for science and science fictions. His postscript can make westerners associate the novel with the writer's life experiences, glimpse at writing intentions, and better understand the content of the novel and hidden metaphors, and above all, facilitate their understanding.

Similarly, the translator discusses views on translating *The Three-body Problem* in his postscript. For instance, he refers to footnotes deployed in the English version and relevant reasons, saying "the number of footnotes was kept to a bare minimum by, wherever possible, filling in the necessary knowledge for non-Chinese readers by the judicious addition of a few informational phrases in the text"(Liu ,2016:432). He also points out some parts of the novel are adjusted to meet TL readers' expectations while the flavor of other content in the original are retained as possible.

The author's postscript and the translator's have become a bridge to the third party for communication, making TL readers closer to the translation and the original. Besides, doubts from target readers can be removed by these two inner paratexts to some extent.

2.3 Contents

The contents in the original are divided into 36 chapters. Foreign readers are told the story in flashback in the form of news report, with a relatively loose structure. In the English version *The Three-body Problem* is rescheduled into 3 chapters: the first part corresponds to Chapter 7 to 9 of the original, the second to Chapter 1-6 & 10-21, and the third to Chapter 22 to 36, each part with a new title, namely *Part I Silent Spring*, *Part II Three Body*, and *Part III Sunset For Humanity*. The compilation like this makes the translation more adaptable to English readers' habits, the plot more compact and coherent.

2.4 Cover and Back Cover, inside Cover

The cover and back cover are the most intuitive materials seen by TL readers, and they are also very important because of playing a vital role to introduce the main idea of the English version and directly affect its acceptance abroad. The cover and back cover comprise of recommendations, praises and evaluation in the west for *The Three-body Problem*, summarizing, commenting and recommending it, pointing out it is an amazing science fiction. Additionally, on its cover are printed the pinyin of the author, the novel's English title, the commentary of *The New Yorker*, and the winner of the Hugo Prize. And the cover is filled with sci-fi elements such as the Pyramid, starry sky, spaceship, etc. Therefore, western readers can have a general idea of the novel by the cover and attracted greatly.

On the back cover, the Thor Inc., America's biggest science fiction publisher, has briefed the background on this novel in English, saying that With *The Three-body Problem*, English-speaking readers have got their first chance to experience the multiple-award-winning and bestselling book by China's most beloved science fiction author Cixin Liu and that "Now the opening volume of the series is available in paperback for the first time." The Thor.'s attractive introductions is a strong guarantee for its overseas translation, introduction and dissemination. There are also several comments from American mainstream media from National Public Radio (NPR), the New York Times and The Washington Post, among which, *The New York Times* mentions "A milestone in Chinese science fiction..." and "It is a classic science fiction story in the style of the British master Author C. Clark."

Readers' book reviews, sci-fi awards granted or nominations for *The Three-body Problem*, introductions to both the author and the translator can be found on the inside cover. David Bling, a

well-known US sci-fi writer, thinks that “Vivid, imaginative, and rooted in cutting-edge science, *The Three-body Problem* ponders several Big Questions of our time. “ Furthermore, five-star reviews from non-Chinese readers mention “Fans of hard SF will revel in this intricate and imaginative novel by one of China’s most celebrated genre writers.” It can be seen English readers think high of the book, influencing greatly on acceptance and dissemination of *The Three-body Problem* outside China. Major awards or nominations for *The Three-body Problem*, like Winner of the Hugo Award for Best Novel, Nebula Award for Best Novel, etc. are listed.

2.5 Prices and Design of the English Version

Two kinds of books are published abroad: one with hard paper cover and the other with soft one. The version with hard paper cover is usually used for academic books with expensive price; while the other one with soft paper cover is mostly for ordinary books. Each volume is priced at US \$15.99 or Can. \$18.50 for *The Three-body Problem*. Besides, the reasonable price is also related to its design. As a sci-fi works, it is a minority literature in China, whereas it is mainly for the public to read in the spare time in USA. At the very beginning, soft paper cover is adopted for its English version, rather than the hard one the same as done for academic books. Otherwise, it may greatly make ordinary readers not less likely to read, as well as increase sales prices and have a worse impact on its dissemination around the world.

3. Outer Paratextual Strategies in the English Translation

The outer paratext is a discourse separated from the text. Although it is related to the text, it is usually a discussion of the text, instead of an extension, with media comments, reader reviews or interviews of publishers and translators included. These actually play a crucial role in introducing the English translation of the original.

3.1 Mediacomments

Nowadays, with the globalization of information in the world, media broadcast and comments have exerted an crucially important influence on acceptance and dissemination of any works. Since the English version of *The Three-body Problem* has been published, numerous media have carried out exclusive reports on it. For instance, the famous American magazine *New Yorker* praises that “writing evokes the thrill of exploration and the beauty of scale....extraordinary.” *The Washington Post* refers “Liu successfully interweaves hard science and adventure in this series debut”. All of these comments express to non-Chinese readers the style and status of Liu Cixin's novels in China, to stimulate their enthusiasm. A top scientific academic journal *Science* applauds that *The Three-body Problem's* quest for human destiny is the foundation of science fictions. In a nutshell, positive comments from major overseas media have paved the way for successful translation and introduction for this novel.

3.2 Readers' Reviews

Thanks to foreign mainstream media's positive comments on *The Three-body Problem*, TL readers have naturally been attracted to its translation. How well this novel has been received eventually can be judged by readers' reviews. First, chosen from readers' reviews in Amazon, an e-commerce website, data indicate buyers purchasing the English version have scored average 4.3 points (totaling 5260 pieces of comments by the 2nd November, 2020, 5 points being full score), up to 81% readers marking over 4 points. Then move on to the world's biggest online reading platform

goodreads, over 148, 9.99 million readers have partaken in scoring (averaging 4.06 points, by the 2nd November, 2020), and written down comments, creating the highest record of feedback from foreign readers for Chinese contemporary literature. Of lots of readers, many are Western elites from various fields of politics, business, literature, etc.. For example, former U.S. President Barack Obama has praised this novel a lot, saying “ The scope of it was immense. So that was fun to read, partly because my day-to-day problems with Congress seem fairly petty- not something to worry about. Aliens are about to invade.”; American famous sci-fi writer Mike Resnick thinks “*The Three-body Problem* deserves all of its plaudits. It's an exceptional novel, and Ken Liu's translation is both smooth and unintrusive.” In a word, the English version of this book has obtained a high score overseas, and most English readers have better opinions on it, demonstrating its high translation quality and acceptance.

3.3 Interviews with the Author and the Translator

Interviews with the author and the translator to disclose details of creative and translation process can also effectively arouse readers' attention. In 2016, the author Liu Cixin, came up at the signing meeting in London and attended a science fiction conference. Reporters of *The European Times* had an exclusive interview with him. He emphasized that Britain was the birthplace of science fictions and had special significance for him. And Liu Cixin attended Science Fiction Literature Symposium *Living in Future Times*, attracting hundreds of Chinese and foreign literature fans to come. At the symposium, he mentioned his novel *The Three-body Problem* to be adapted to a film soon, stirring great interest and attention from western media and audience. These interviews have caused a hot response to the signing meeting, preheating and catalyzing overseas publishing and sales. Moreover, when this book was awarded the Hugo Prize, the translator Ken Liu took the stage to receive the prize and delivered a speech on behalf of the author Liu Cixin of the original, mentioning after reading *The Three-body Problem*, he was eager to translate it into English and share it with western readers. The major media also interviewed and vigorously reported on Ken Liu, by saying that “This book reads unbelievably well in English and flows as smoothly as I would imagine the original did” , which has played a certain role in the introduction of its translated version abroad.

4. Conclusion

The success of translation activities is closely related to translation strategies. Therefore, with the increase of the depth and breadth of Chinese literature “Going global”, we should study translation strategies of the original from the lingual and cultural levels. Based on the English version of *The Three-body Problem*, it is found that appropriate paratextual translation strategies can facilitate successful dissemination of Chinese sci-fi literature, which combine translators, publishers and readers from lingual and socio-cultural aspects, enlightening successful translation of Chinese sci-fi literature.

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