

# *A Study on Othello Translated by Zhu Shenghao from the Perspective of Performability*

Chen Li

*School of Foreign Studies, Guangxi Minzu University, Nanning, Guangxi, 530006, China*

**Keywords:** Performability; Zhu Shenghao; *Othello*

**Abstract:** Drama is a stage performing art in which actors play characters and perform on stage to achieve narrative purposes in the form of speech, movement, dance and so on. The literary concept of drama refers to the script, or play, written for a theatrical performance. Translation theorist Susan Bassnett has accordingly proposed the famous principle of performability, which provides a new perspective for the study of drama translation. This paper examines and discusses the connotation of the principle of performability and its specific application in the translation of this play, taking the Chinese translation of *Othello* by the famous translator Zhu Shenghao as the object of study.

## 1. Introduction

Drama is a special kind of literary genre. Unlike other literary genres, drama has two characteristics of “literature and stage” at the same time [1]. When translators translate drama, they should not only make the meaning of the play clear, but also make the translated play suitable for stage performance. Susan Bassnett, a famous Western translation theorist, proposed the famous principle of performability, which opened up new ideas for the study of drama translation and coincided with Zhu Shenghao’s view on drama translation. This paper takes Zhu Shenghao’s Chinese translation of *Othello* as the object of study, explores the main connotation of the principle of performability in drama translation, and analyzes the specific application of the principle of performability in this translation.

## 2. The Principle of Performability in Drama Translation

The formal origin of the term “performability” in dramatic translation goes back to the British translation theorist Susan Bassnett, who introduced the concept in her article “Still Trapped in the Labyrinth: Further Reflections on Translation and Theatre”[2]. According to the principle of performability, a translated play not only provides readers with literary reading and appreciation, but also facilitates performance by actors and viewing by audiences, and audience reception and response is one of the crucial criteria for measuring the effectiveness of a play’s stage performance. In view of this, the translation of a play should retain its literary quality, but also pay attention to the “performability” of the play, which is catchy and easy to understand, and the lines are easy for the actors to remember and the audience to understand.

Lines are the words spoken by the characters in a theatrical performance. The playwright uses the lines to drive the plot, portray the characters, and reflect the themes of the storyline. Lines are the

cornerstone of a play and one of the most important components of a play. It is through the lines that the characters in the play are able to express their respective identities, personalities, characteristics, etc. In order to make his translations more easily understood and accepted by readers and thus have a wider circulation, Zhu chose to make his translations more suitable for readers' reading style, such as revising the order of sentences: "Whenever I encountered any inconsistency with Chinese grammar in the original text, I often chewed it again and again, and did not hesitate to change the structure of the original text, so that the author's intention would be clearly revealed and not be obscured by difficult words and phrases." [3] In the process of translation, in order to consider whether the translation has strong performability, Zhu Shenghao, after translating a paragraph, "must also pretend to be an actor on the stage, and examine whether the tone is smooth and the syllables are harmonious." [3] The famous drama translator Mr. Ying Ruocheng pointed out, "What the audience wants to hear is "crisp" language, a clever and neat counterpoint, a back-and-forth dialogue and rebuttal." [4] As above, the colloquialism, personalization and action of the dialogues become the requirements that have to be considered in the translation of drama.

### 3. The Application of the Principle of Performability in the Chinese Translation of *Othello*

In drama, each character is a unique individual, and each line has an appropriate tone and pace, a comfortable rhythm, and appropriate movement and expression. The translated drama script should be able to achieve the same or maximum approximation in stage effect as when it is performed in the source language. In order to comply with the requirements of the principle of performability, when translating a play, attention should be paid to the three main characteristics of colloquialism, personalization and action of the lines.

#### 3.1 Colloquialism

In order for the audience to clearly understand the development of the plot, the lines of the drama translation must be intelligible and have the characteristics of colloquialism. Colloquialism makes the lines rich in life, friendly and natural. According to Kruger, "'Features of involvement' refer to those linguistic features which reflect that speakers and listeners typically interact with one another in face to face communication (i.e., private verbs, contractions, first and second person pronouns, demonstratives)." [5] In short, the spoken lines should be relatively short, with connections between sentences, clear indications, and avoidance of out-of-the-ordinary words. Zhu Shenghao's translation of *Othello* reflects the characteristics of colloquialism.

Example 1 IAGO. Nay, but he prated,  
 And spoke such scurvy and provoking terms  
 Against your honour  
 That, with the little godliness I have,  
 I did full hard forbear him. [6] (The target text (TT) [7] is shown in Figure 1.)

伊阿古 可是他唠哩唠叨地说了许多难听的话破坏您的名誉，连像我这样一个荒唐的家伙也实在压不住心头的怒火。

Figure 1: The target text (TT) of Example 1.

Iago is a treacherous and cunning villain in *Othello*, who is evil at heart, hates everything that is wonderful in the world, and has no reason to question the sincere relationship between people. Example 1 is what Iago said when he was sowing discord. The word "prate" is translated as "lao li lao dao (in Chinese)", "scurvy and provoking" is translated as "nan ting de", and "full hard forbear him" is translated as "ya bu zhu xin tou de nu huo". The use of simple colloquial words, avoiding the use of out-of-the-ordinary words, makes the lines more specific in their expression of feelings and

allows the actors to be more emotionally compelling in their interpretation, making it easier for the audience to understand the lines.

Example 2 BRABANTIO. For nature so preposterously to err,  
Being not deficient, blind, or lame of sense,  
Sans witchcraft could not.

Othello, a Moorish general, was sued by his father-in-law Brabantio for “seducing his daughter with evil spells” because of the affair with Desdemona, a Venetian noblewoman. In the target text of example 2, “deficient”, “blind” and “lame of sense” are translated as “mei you can ji (in Chinese)”, “yan jing ming liang” and “li zhi jian quan” respectively. The three consecutive four-character words are catchy and rhythmic. In the sentence order of the translation, the phrase “For nature so preposterously to err” is placed at the end, which is translated as “jue bu hui fan zhe yang huang tang de cuo wu de” which obeys the cause-and-effect relationship of the lines, and the translation has a clear conjunction “yin wei”, which makes the lines more straightforward to understand. The lines in the translation are concise and colloquial, and the choice of syntax and vocabulary is close to the Chinese expression habits, so as to express the correct meaning from the perspective of the target language and the audience.

### 3.2 Personalization

Personalization refers to what type of person says what kind of words and what kind of words reflect what kind of personality the character is [8]. The lines of the characters in the play must be highly unique and sufficiently expressive. To personalize the lines, the translator must master the linguistic characteristics of the characters according to their identity, profession, experience, and the time period in which they live, etc. Only in such a situation can the audience appreciate the words and actions of each character and learn the traits of each character. The lines of Zhu Shenghao's translation of *Othello* are rich in individual characteristics.

Example 3 OTHELLO. Wherein I spake of most disastrous chances,  
Of moving accidents by flood and field,  
Of hair-breadth scapes i' the imminent deadly breach,  
Of being taken by the insolent foe  
And sold to slavery, of my redemption thence  
And portance in my travels' history;  
Wherein of antres vast and deserts idle,  
Rough quarries, rocks and hills whose heads touch heaven,  
It was my hint to speak, such was the process;  
And of the Cannibals that each other eat,  
The Anthropophagi and men whose heads  
Do grow beneath their shoulders. (The target text (TT) is shown in Figure 2.)

奥瑟罗 我说起最可怕的灾祸，海上陆上惊人的奇遇，间不容发的脱险……那些广大的岩窟、荒凉的沙漠、突兀的崖峰、巍峨的峰岭；接着我又讲到彼此相食的野蛮部落和肩下生头的化外异民；这些都是我的谈话的题目。

Figure 2: The target text (TT) of Example 3.

Example 3 is an excerpt of Othello's defense in court to refute the charge of “seducing Desdemona with evil arts”. In the translation, Othello's plea of both reason and courtesy creates a righteous image for him in the audience's mind. The word “disastrous” is translated as “ke pa de (in Chinese)”, “moving” as “jing ren de”, “hair-breadth” as “jian bu rong fa de”. A series of three adjectives highlight the thrilling personal experience of Othello. “antres vast and deserts idle, Rough quarries, rocks and hills whose heads touch heaven” are translated as five endocentric phrases “guang da de yan ku, huang liang de sha mo, tu wu de yan zhang, wei e de feng ling”. The phrases are neatly rhythmic and

catchy phrases that tell the thrilling story of Othello's experiences. "Cannibals that each other eat" is translated as "bi ci xiang shi de ye man bu luo" and "Anthropophagi and men whose heads do grow beneath their shoulders" is translated as "jian xia sheng tou de hua wai yi min". The use of several four-character phrases has a high generalizing function, making the translation simple and concise, and achieving a condensed and relevant effect. The rhythm of the translation is harmonious and phonetically beautiful, which fits the mood and characterization of Othello in the current scene: a calm and courteous response to the rude slander that threatens his dignity and even his life.

Example 4 IAGO. Our bodies are our gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners; so that if we will plant nettles or sow lettuce, set hyssop and weed up thyme, supply it with one gender of herbs or distract it with many, either to have it sterile with idleness or manured with industry, why, the power and corrigible authority of this lies in our wills.

Iago was a highly intelligent man, a conspirator and a rhetorician. In the target text of example 4, "plant nettles or sow lettuce", with three syllables before and after "or", is translated as "cha qian ma, zhong wo ju (in Chinese)". This corresponds to the number of syllables in the original text. "Set hyssop and weed up thyme", three syllables before and after "and", translates as "zai xia niu xi cao, ba qi bai li xiang". The verse-like translation and the previous set of prose continue to articulate the momentum of speech. "Either to have it sterile with idleness or manured with industry" is translated as "rang ta huang fei bu zhi ye hao, ba ta xin qin geng ken ye hao". "Sterile with idleness" and "manured with industry" are six syllables each, and are translated as "huang fei bu zhi" and "xin qin geng ken", creating a smooth rhythm and a sense of unhurried order with four-character words. The translation deeply portrays Iago's character and personality: selfish, greedy, violent and full of inflated desires, knowing everyone's psychology and weaknesses, and seizing opportunities to exploit them.

Example 5 DESDEMONA. Why, this is not a boon;

'Tis as I should entreat you wear your gloves,  
Or feed on nourishing dishes, or keep you warm,  
Or sue to you to do a peculiar profit  
To your own person; nay, when I have a suit  
Wherein I mean to touch your love indeed,  
It shall be full of poise and difficult weight,  
And fearful to be granted.

Desdemona was born into a noble family, beautiful and kind, unaware of the frauds and scandals of the world. Her heart is filled with only love, friendship, and consideration for people. Example 5 shows Desdemona's words to Othello when she expresses her concern and sincerity. In the target text of example 5, the word "entreat" is translated as "qing qiu (in Chinese)", and the word "quan" is added to express advice. The word "touch" is translated as "shi tan" and "poise and difficult" is translated as "fei chang ji shou". The words used in the translation are euphemistic and elegant, in line with Desdemona's image of a submissive wife who thinks of her husband in every way and takes good care of him.

### 3.3 Action

Drama is a comprehensive art of action. The script must quickly unfold the actions of the characters and bring them into sharp conflict, thus revealing to the audience the feelings, personalities and emotions of the characters. This requires the lines to have the characteristics of action. The action of the lines means that the words spoken by the characters on the stage can reflect the character and tendencies of the characters' actions, as the saying goes, "there is drama in the words". [9] Further, it means that the character's language should powerfully express his desires, will and inner conflicts, and make his inner state transformed into external action through language, and have a tension that

drives the plot forward [10]. Zhu Shenghao's translation of Othello embodies the action-oriented character of drama translation.

Example 6 IAGO. It cannot be that Desdemona should long continue her love to the Moor,—put money in thy purse,—nor he his to her. It was a violent commencement in her, and thou shalt see an answerable sequestration; put but money in thy purse. These Moors are changeable in their wills;—fill thy purse with money:—the food that to him now is as luscious as locusts, shall be to him shortly as bitter as coloquintida. She must change for youth: when she is sated with his body, she will find the error of her choice.

Iago is the creator of tragedy and the destroyer of goodness and benevolence. Example 6 is a statement by Iago that unjustifiably questions Desdemona's morality. In the target text of example 6, the phrase “violent commencement” is translated as “ai de zhe yang re lie (in Chinese)” and “sequestration” is translated as “po lie”. The two verbs in the translation form a huge contrast, which gives the audience a strong sense of image. “Bitter” is translated as “se kou”, “is sated with” is translated as “yan zu”, and “find” is translated as “jue wu”. The specific, dynamic and vivid lines fit the character's image: Iago is evil at heart, hates the beauty of the world, has no reason to doubt the sincere feelings between people, and enjoys the process and results of his mischief. The action-oriented lines can bring out the rich and vivid body movements of the actors and enhance the effect of the drama.

Example 7 OTHELLO. Like to the Pontick sea,  
Whose icy current and compulsive course  
Ne'er feels retiring ebb, but keeps due on  
To the Propontic and the Hellespont,  
Even so my bloody thoughts, with violent pace,  
Shall ne'er look back, ne'er ebb to humble love,  
Till that a capable and wide revenge  
Swallow them up. (The target text (TT) is shown in Figure 3.)

奥瑟罗 正像黑海的寒涛滚滚奔流，奔进马尔马拉海，直冲达达尼尔海峡，永远  
不会后退一样，我的风驰电掣的流血的思想，在复仇的目的没有充分达到以前，  
也决不会踟蹰回顾，化为绕指的柔情。

Figure 3: The target text (TT) of Example 7.

Iago easily transfers Othello's anger from himself to Desdemona through slander, leading Othello into the great pain of suspicion and fright. In example 7, in order to fit Othello's state of intense anger, the translated lines create a strong sense of impact. The verb “compulsive course” is transformed into the verb “gun gun ben liu (in Chinese)”, and the verbs “ben jin” “zhi chong” are added. The verb “with violent pace” is translated as “feng chi dian che”. The verb “look back” is translated as “chi chu hui gu” and “ebb to humble love” is translated as “rao zhi de rou qing”. The translation carries a sense of both fierceness and elegance, enhancing the layering of the language. The translation of this example, in line with the character and the intention of speech, well reflects the action of Othello's lines, and also makes smoother the development of plot in the audience's expectation, thus improving the fluency of the stage performance.

Example 8 DESDEMONA. That I did love the Moor to live with him,  
My downright violence and storm of fortunes  
May trumpet to the world; my heart's subdu'd  
Even to the very quality of my lord;  
I saw Othello's visage in his mind,  
And to his honours and his valiant parts  
Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate.  
As a Venetian noblewoman, Desdemona defies her father's wishes and society's secular views,

and chooses a marriage that the world does not see as a good match, regardless of race, money, and appearance. Example 8 is Desdemona's defense of her marriage in front of the Venetian senators. In the target text of example 8, the phrase "downright violence and storm of fortunes" is transformed into "bu gu yi qie gen ming yun dui kang (in Chinese)", which clearly shows her rebellious character. In the translation, "wo xian ren shi ta na ke xin, ran hou ren shi ta na qi wei de yi biao (in Chinese)", the word "ren shi" is used repeatedly to express that she rejects the social discrimination and prejudice against black people, and she loves Othello for his inner qualities. Reading the action-packed lines, the actor immediately understands the need to present a picture of hysteria and protest on her knees. Zhu Shenghao's action-packed translation satisfies both the audience and, to a certain extent, the actors.

#### 4. Conclusion

Performability is a key criterion for evaluating the quality of drama translations. Zhu Shenghao's translation as a whole meets the requirements of the principle of performability and conforms to the trinity of colloquialism, personalization and action in the translation of plays. "It is because Zhu Shenghao's translations of Shakespeare's plays are always convenient for the actors and for the audience, and his translations are so catchy to read and so pleasant to listen to that most of the theater companies in China that stage Shakespeare's plays use Zhu's translations" [11]. In translating a play, the translator has to consider the audience of the play. The translation of a play does not only serve the readers, but also the audience, actors, directors and so on. Under the guidance of the principle of "performability", the translation of plays can meet the needs of theatrical performances to the greatest extent, inspire the intrinsic value of theatrical performances, and maximize the value of plays.

To sum up, the principle of performability of drama translation is a translation strategy based on stage performance. Therefore, in order to create a better effect for the audience, the cultural factors should be treated more closely to the audience, the lines in the text should be as succinct and colloquial as possible, and the choice of syntax and vocabulary should be as close as possible to the Chinese expression habits, accentuating the action of the language and the personality of the characters, which can make the work resonate with the audience emotionally and show the performability of the drama to the fullest.

#### Acknowledgement

**Funding:** This work was supported by 2021 Guangxi Higher-Education Institutions Enhancement Program in Humanities and Social Sciences for Thousand Young Excellent Teachers (Group III): Southeast-Asia Narratives in the 20th Century Euro-American Literature. No.: 2021QGRW032.

#### References

- [1] Cao Xinyu. *On the Principle of Performability in Drama Translation* [J]. *Chinese Translators Journal*, 2007, (4): 73-76.
- [2] Bassnett S, Lefevere A. *Constructing Cultures: Essays on Literary Translation* [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2001.
- [3] Zhu Shenghao. *The Translator's Preface to the Complete Works of Shakespeare* [A]. Luo Xinzhang. *Translation Essays* [C]. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 1984: 457.
- [4] Ying Ruocheng. *Ying Ruocheng's Translation Series of Famous Plays 6: Teahouse* [M]. Beijing: China Translation & Publishing Corporation, 1999.
- [5] Kruger A. *Shakespeare in Afrikaans: A Corpus-based Study of Involvement in Different Registers of Drama Translation* [J]. *Language Matters*, 2004, 35(1).
- [6] Shakespeare. *Othello* [M]. Beijing: China Astronautic Publishing House, 2017.
- [7] Shakespeare. *Othello* [M]. (Translation by Zhu Shenghao). Qinhuangdao: Yanshan University Press, 2018.

- [8] Jin Xin. *On the Principle of Performability in the English Translation of Teahouse* [J]. *Journal of Northwestern Polytechnical University (Social Sciences)*, 2006, (4).
- [9] Wang Meifang. *A Study of Ying Ruocheng's Translation of Teahouse from the Perspective of Performability* [J]. *Journal of Yuzhang Normal University*, 2022, 37 (02): 27-30.
- [10] Dong Jian, Ma Junshan. *Fifteen Lectures on Dramatic Art* [M]. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2004.
- [11] Feng Yingqin. *Three discussions on Zhu Shenghao's translation heritage* [J]. *Chinese Translators Journal*, 1991(6):27-32.