

An Exploration of Musicality and Literary Qualities in Translated Lyrics on Online Music Platforms: A Case Study of the Translated Lyrics of “Young and Beautiful”

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Keywords: Lyrics translation, non-singable lyrics translation, musicality, literary quality

Abstract: Lyrics translation practices can be categorized into singable and non-singable forms based on their purpose. Singable lyrics prioritize musicality, while non-singable lyrics prioritize literary quality. However, the binary opposition between literary and musical quality in non-singable lyrics has been challenged by new translation practices on internet music platforms. This paper examines the translation of “Young and Beautiful” to explore literary and musical qualities in non-singable lyrics translation.

1. Introduction

Songs combine literary quality and musicality, making them beloved. However, language barriers make understanding foreign songs difficult, necessitating translation. Digital media and new translation phenomena prompt researchers to rethink how to study song translation, requiring further exploration.

2. Overview of Song Translation Research at Home and Abroad

Xue Fan’s book, *Exploration and Practice of Song Translation* (2002), established the framework and terminology system for Chinese song translation. To date, it remains the only theoretical monograph on Chinese song translation.

In terms of research articles on song translation, some scholars have attempted to study lyric translation from the perspectives of literary translation, the three principles of skopos theory, intersemiotic translation, descriptive translation studies, and reception aesthetics. Among them, Qin Jun introduced Peter Low’s singable lyric and non-singable lyric translations. It can be seen that only a few scholars have attempted to study song translation in research articles. The keywords of these articles mainly focus on “lyric translation”, “song translation”, and “song adaptation”. Moreover, the distinction between these terms has not been fully clarified.

However, in the Western academic world, “over the past decade or so, audiovisual translation research has made significant progress, gradually moving from a marginal position to becoming a part of the central discourse, attracting unprecedented attention” [1]. It is worth mentioning that in 2017, Dr. Peter Low, a New Zealand scholar of song translation, published the book *Translating Song: Lyrics and Texts* with Routledge.

To make both the musical and literary aspects of a song shine in the target language, translators

must clarify “Is the translation intended for reading on page or screen, for example, or for singing in the target language?” [2].

Peter Low, mentioned earlier, “discusses song translation in chapters three, five, and six of *Translating Song: Lyrics and Texts*, mainly from the perspective of ‘purpose-oriented’ and ‘functional’ theories, and argues that different translation strategies should be adopted for different ‘textual purposes’ in song translation [3]. He divides song translation into “singable lyrics” and “non-singable lyrics” translation according to their purposes, and explains the scope and methods of song translation under these two purposes. Thus, Peter Low basically clarifies the two different methods of handling lyric translation.

“According to the ‘2016 Q3 China Mobile Music Client Quarterly Monitoring Report’ released by iResearch in October 2016, the number of users of mobile music clients in China had reached 465 million by the third quarter of 2016” [4]. The new practice of song translation has prompted questions about combining literary and musical qualities. Xue Fan and Peter Low emphasize the importance of “singable lyric” translation, but can literary and musical beauty be conveyed in “non-singable lyric” translation, and if so, how?

In this paper, the author takes the translated lyrics of the popular song “Young and Beautiful” as an example to explore the musical and literary qualities of “singable lyric” translation.

3. The literary Quality in Lyric Translation

This article analyzes the Chinese translation of the popular English song “Young and Beautiful” as an example of “non-singable lyric” translation. The Chinese translation, done by an anonymous user, retained and reconstructed images from the source lyrics but also lost some. Despite this, it was well-received by Chinese listeners. The translator’s ability to construct subjectivity in translation is highlighted, as the original English lyrics create a mood of luxury, nostalgia, and prayer, which the Chinese translation successfully conveys.

3.1 Imagery

3.1.1 Retention of Imagery

“Young and Beautiful” was written from the perspective of Daisy in *The Great Gatsby*. The source lyrics have 22 images, while the translation retains 17. The lyrics are divided into 6 sections, describing the present, past, prayer, and love in 4 thematic groups.

(1) Directly Retaining the Images

The translator adopts a strategy of directly retaining most of the imagery in the source lyrics. The translator retains most of the imagery from the source lyrics, keeping ten out of twenty-two. This strategy helps readers understand Daisy’s memories of the past and her obsession with her lover, enhancing the charm of the source lyrics.

(2) Retaining Imagery and Making Implicit Meaning Explicit

The translator also makes the implicit meaning explicit by retaining the imagery. For instance, the translator retained the image of “child” in the section recalling the past and translated it as “the innocence of youthful hearts” to convey the meaning of “pure and innocent like a child”. This strategy retains around 80% of the imagery, conveying Daisy’s nostalgia for a carefree past and her obsession with her lover’s charm.

3.1.2 Reconstruction of Imagery

Due to cultural differences, the translator cannot retain all the imagery from the source lyrics. Some imagery does not correspond well with the target language, and the translator employs different

strategies to reconstruct them and reshape the overall atmosphere created by the source lyrics.

(1) Image Transformation

The translator uses image transformation to replace culturally specific images in the source lyrics with culturally equivalent images in the target language. For instance, the image of “diamonds” lacks persuasive power in Chinese culture to represent a lavish lifestyle, so the translator chooses the image of “gold” and the idiom “intoxicated by illusions of wealth and luxury” to convey Daisy’s opulence. Through image and context transformation, the translator conveys the meaning of Daisy’s indulgent life in the target language.

(2) Image Abstraction

The strategy of image abstraction is used to translate concrete images in the source language into abstract expressions in the target language. For example, “rock and roll” in the source lyrics symbolizes lively music and carefree dancing, but the Chinese equivalent often refers to noisy music. Thus, the translator abstracts the image into the expression “carefree dancing and swaying” to convey the scene of Daisy and Gatsby’s playful moments in lively music.

3.1.3 Images Loss

Despite the translator’s efforts to preserve the original images or employ strategies such as image transformation and abstraction to reproduce the cultural imagination associated with the images in the source English in the target language, the deeper meaning and context have been lost.

The source lyrics cleverly use puns with “Diamonds, brilliant”, where “brilliant” serves as both an adjective and a noun. The translator only interpreted it as an adjective to describe the brilliance of diamonds, losing the double meaning of “brilliant” as an image. This was combined with “intoxicated by illusions of wealth and luxury, to raise a toast and clink glasses” to describe Daisy’s luxurious life, capturing the intended meaning but losing the dual use of “brilliant”.

Translating song lyrics requires the ability to shape the artistic conception of both the original and target versions to cater to the audience. Translators must consider both the original conception and the target culture to achieve the best effect. Flexible translation strategies can preserve the original while rewriting it to meet the target audience’s preferences. This respects the original, gives new life to the lyrics in the target culture, and garners appreciation. The Chinese translation of “Young and Beautiful” is an example of successful preservation and reconstruction of the original artistic conception.

4. The Musicality in Lyric Translation

In song translation, conveying the musical beauty of the lyrics is important. Listeners expect translated lyrics to convey the musicality of the song. Even “non-singing lyric” can be conveyed through other means to enhance the reading experience and convey the musical beauty of the song. The main chorus of “Young and Beautiful” is the most distinctive and is used as examples to convey the musical beauty of the lyrics in a non-singing translation.

4.1 Tail rhyme

The song “Young and Beautiful” features six verses with tail rhyme mainly concentrated in the first and third verses, which describe the present and the past. In the first verse, the third and fifth sentences have /aʊ/ tail rhyme, while the sixth and ninth sentences have /tʒ/ tail rhyme, and the eighth and tenth sentences have /aɪld/ tail rhyme. Similarly, in the third verse, the third and fifth sentences have /aʊ/ tail rhyme, while the seventh and tenth sentences have /oʊl/ tail rhyme, and the eighth and ninth sentences have /oʊ/ tail rhyme. This alternating tail rhyme scheme in the first and third verses,

except for the third and fifth sentences, helps match the melody and create a smooth and flowing feeling for the audience.

The Chinese translation of “Young and Beautiful” boldly changes the tail rhyme scheme of the source lyrics. The first verse has /an/ tail rhyme in the third and fourth sentences, while the other sentences have /ang/ tail rhyme. The third verse has /ang/ tail rhyme in the seventh, eighth, and ninth sentences, like the first verse. The predominantly /ang/ tail rhyme scheme gives Chinese readers a poetic and easy-to-read feeling. The translator’s “rebellious” behavior completes the transformation of the tail rhyme scheme of the source lyrics.

4.2 Four-Word Phrases

The first and third sections of “Young and Beautiful” use short phrases, with 1-4 words per phrase in the first 7 lines and 6-10 words per phrase in lines 8-10. The sections contain many nouns and use short phrases to complement the smooth melody, creating a poetic effect with abundant imagery and meaning associations. The translator aimed to maintain this poetic style in the translated lyrics and used many four-word phrases, especially in the sections describing luxury and reminiscing about the past. The first section has 8 four-word phrases, and the third section has 6. The translator also transformed Chinese idioms, such as “intoxicated by illusions of wealth and luxury” and “To raise a toast and clink glasses”, successfully preserving the concise and poetic language of the source lyrics in the Chinese version.

The translator preserved the musicality of the source lyrics by capturing its melancholic and nostalgic tone through the use of alternating tail rhymes and short phrases. By incorporating the essence of Chinese poetry, the translator replaced the rhyme feet with four-word phrases, resulting in a concise and meaningful translation that stays true to the original.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, song lyrics, as a product of the integration of music and literature, possess both literary and musical beauty. However, in the process of translating song lyrics, they are generally divided into “singable lyric” and “non-singable lyric” categories based on their intended purpose. “Singable lyric” is “constrained in many ways because they are ultimately meant to be sung with music” [5].” As Xue Fan notes, “the source lyrics are created by composers based on the artistic images, sentence structures, word tones, and language rhythms provided by the lyrics” [5]. “Singable lyric” translations need to be able to fit the melody of the original music. “Non-singable lyric”, on the other hand, are intended for reading by the audience, and translators tend to focus more on their literary aspects while neglecting their musical aspects. For a long time, these two translation practices have been in binary opposition.

When translating “non-singable lyrics”, if there is a significant disconnect between the source language and the reader's reception, the translator can exercise their subjective initiative while respecting the original. By rewriting or overturning the constructed imagery of the source language, the translator can reconstruct the literary qualities of the lyrics. Although “non-singable lyrics” are not restricted by melody, the translator can still use form, rhyme, and other methods to create a different musical beauty. Thus, the translator can provide the audience with a unique experience that diverges from the source language.

With the rise of internet music platforms in China, translators must balance the musical and literary aspects of song lyrics for optimal translation. “Non-singable lyrics” can also achieve a unity of literary and musical qualities, breaking the traditional understanding that literary quality is limited to words and musical quality to melody.

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