An Analysis of Literary Translation from the Perspective of Register Theory: A Case Study of Yang Xianyi's English Translation of Mr. Fujino

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Abstract: The artistic value of literary works is typically reflected in their dramatic plots, vivid characterization, and linguistic richness, all of which constitute key elements that require careful attention in the process of literary translation. As one of the core theories in Systemic Functional Linguistics, Register Theory provides an effective analytical framework for translation studies. Based on Halliday's Register Theory, this study conducts a systematic analysis of Yang Xianyi's English translation of the memoir essay *Mr.Fujino*, with a focus on the theory's guiding role in literary translation practice. The findings demonstrate that the translator meticulously considered the three register variables—field (thematic content), tenor (interpersonal tone), and mode (discourse medium)—thereby ensuring that the English translation not only accurately conveys the original thematic content but also appropriately reconstructs interpersonal relationships while effectively preserving the distinctive stylistic features of the source text.

1. Introduction

Literary translation, as a crucial form of cross-cultural communication, serves not only the function of linguistic conversion but also the mission of cultural transmission and the exchange of values. In this process, translators must pay attention not only to the linguistic features of the text but also deeply understand the cultural background, context of the original work, and the receptivity of the target readers. Register theory provides a multidimensional perspective for analyzing translated texts. Through a detailed examination of socio-cultural context, discourse roles, and discourse types, it helps reveal the complexity and diversity inherent in literary translation.

Mr.Fujino is a memoir essay written by Lu Xun (1881–1936), a towering figure in modern Chinese literature. First published in 1926, it was later included in his essay collection Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk. The essay recounts Lu Xun's early study experience at Sendai Medical College (now the School of Medicine at Tohoku University) in Japan, fondly recalling his anatomy professor, Mr.Fujino Genkurō. The work expresses Lu Xun's sincere gratitude toward his Japanese mentor while implicitly critiquing and reflecting on the social conditions of China at the time. In *Mr.Fujino*, the author employs a plain narrative style to portray characters—such as Mr.Fujino's "dark, thin face" and "slow, deliberate tone"—conveying emotions through subtle details.

Simultaneously, the essay incorporates satirical undertones, such as the veiled criticism of so-called "patriotic youth", creating a nuanced and profound expressive force. Furthermore, as a memoir, the text blends narrative and reflective elements, presenting rich emotional layers that intertwine tender reminiscence with rational introspection.

In Yang Xianyi's English translation, not only are Lu Xun's distinctive narrative style and emotional depth preserved, but careful linguistic choices and cultural considerations also ensure that the translation achieves an artistic effect and intellectual resonance consistent with the original. Therefore, an analysis of Yang Xianyi's translation of *Mr.Fujino* can effectively demonstrate the practical application and significance of register theory in literary translation.

This paper aims to explore Yang Xianyi's translation practice and his grasp of the original text's essence from the perspective of register theory. It will analyze factors such as linguistic style, cultural differences, and reader reception, examining how different registers influence translation choices. Additionally, by applying key concepts of register theory, the study investigates how to strike an effective balance between fidelity and adaptation, transmission and transformation in literary translation, thereby offering new perspectives for advancing cross-cultural literary exchange. Through this case study of Yang Xianyi's English translation of *Mr. Fujino*, the paper seeks to provide valuable insights for both the theoretical study and practical application of literary translation.

2. An Overview of Register Theory

Register theory emerged in the 1960s and has since undergone five decades of development, with the renowned British linguist M.A.K. Halliday as its primary proponent[8].Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), represented by Halliday, constitutes a significant advancement in modern linguistics[6]. SFL conceptualizes language as a dynamic meaning-making system, emphasizing the intrinsic connection between language use and social context. Halliday posits that language is fundamentally a product of social activity, continuously constructed and negotiated by users within specific cultural environments[3]. This perspective shifts linguistic inquiry from abstract formal analysis to concrete functional investigation, laying the theoretical foundation for register theory.

The core of register theory lies in uncovering the systematic relationship between linguistic form and contextual factors. Halliday defines register as "functional varieties of language"—systematic linguistic variations that arise in response to different communicative situations[2]. These variations are governed by three key contextual variables: field, tenor, and mode, collectively termed the contextual configuration[1]. These dimensions correspond to the three meta functions of language: the ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions[1].

Field refers to the social action and subject matter of communication, addressing the question of what is being discussed. Based on thematic specialization, fields can be categorized as technical (e.g. academic papers, professional reports) or non-technical (e.g. casual conversation). Technical fields employ precise terminology and formal syntactic structures (e.g. "myocardial infarction" in medical literature), whereas non-technical fields favor colloquial expressions and flexible syntax (e.g. "heart attack" in everyday speech). In translating *Mr.Fujino*, Yang Xianyi's rendering of anatomical terms (e.g. "xue guan tu"as "blood vessel diagram") exemplifies how field constraints govern lexical choices.

Tenor reflects the social relationships between participants, including power distance and affective involvement, realized through pronouns, honorifics, modality, etc. For instance, the deferential "xian sheng ke fou zhi dian?" (May I ask for your guidance, sir?) contrasts sharply with the casual "ni jue de zen me yang?"(What do you think?). In literary translation, tenor is particularly crucial. The nuanced blend of respect and warmth in Lu Xun's portrayal of Mr.Fujino must be

reconstructed in translation through choices in pronouns, modal particles, and tone. Halliday notes that individuals assume different roles (e.g. child at home, student at school) across contexts, necessitating flexible tenor adaptation[2].

Mode pertains to the medium and channel of linguistic communication, primarily distinguishing between spoken and written forms. Spoken discourse (e.g. conversations, speeches) is characterized by immediacy, manifesting in loosely structured sentences, frequent ellipsis, and colloquial vocabulary. In contrast, written discourse (e.g. academic papers, official documents) exhibits logical rigor, structural completeness, and lexical formality. Notably, with the rise of new media, an intermediate mode blending spoken and written features has emerged—for instance, social media posts retain the standardization of written language while incorporating the vividness of spoken discourse. In translation, the distinctive "literary colloquialism" of prose (such as the interplay between plain narrative and lyrical commentary in *Mr.Fujino*) requires the translator to accurately discern and reproduce modal features.

These three variables (field, tenor, mode) are not isolated but form an interconnected organic whole. Halliday proposed their "probabilistic" nature, indicating that specific contexts predispose certain linguistic forms to occur with higher frequency[1]. For example, passive voice accounts for over 30% of occurrences in scientific English, whereas active voice dominates daily conversations at more than 80%. Such probabilistic distributions create "fingerprint features" of different registers, offering objective criteria for register identification.

Contemporary register studies exhibit two major trends: first, integration with corpus linguistics, employing big-data analysis to validate probabilistic patterns of register features; second, expansion into multimodal research, examining how non-linguistic elements (e.g. images, layout) complement register functions. These advancements provide new analytical tools for translation studies.

As a pivotal branch of Systemic Functional Linguistics, register theory offers a systematic and operational framework for literary translation research. It bridges micro-level linguistic choices with macro-level sociocultural contexts, effectively elucidating the complexity of meaning reconstruction in translation. In studying the English rendition of *Mr.Fujino*, applying register theory reveals how Yang Xianyi reconstitutes the original's literary qualities, cultural connotations, and emotional resonance within an English-language framework. This approach holds significant methodological implications for prose translation practice.

3. Register Theory within the English Translation of Mr. Fujino

3.1 Field

Halliday and Hasan (1976) posit that the field of register refers to the subject matter as well as the institutional setting of communication. It encompasses the topic of conversation, the speaker, and the entire activity in which participants are engaged[6]. In literary translation, translators must take into account both the cultural background of the source text and the target readers' reception.

Example 1:

ST:wo yin wei ting shuo zhongguoren shi hen jing zhong gui de, suo yi hen dan xin, pa ni bu ken jie pou shiti. xian zai zong suan fang xin le, mei you zhe hui shi[5].

TT: Having heard what respect the Chinese show to spirits, I was afraid you might be unwilling to dissect corpses. Now my mind is at rest, since this is not the case[7].

Analysis: The translator translated the term "gui" into "spirit" rather than "ghost" in the target text. Field refers to the subject matter and degree of specialization in communicative events. When Mr.Fujino mentions the Chinese people's reverence for "gui" in the source text, contextual analysis reveals that "gui" here does not denote a terrifying or supernatural "specter" (ghost), but rather

refers to culturally venerated "souls" or "deities" within belief systems. The English term "spirit" carries broader semantic connotations, encompassing neutral or positive meanings in religious and mythological contexts (such as ancestral souls or nature deities), whereas "ghost" predominantly refers to concrete manifestations of the dead with negative undertones. Thus, the choice of "spirit" better aligns with the original theme—Mr.Fujino's discussion of China's tradition of "ancestor veneration and spirit worship"—rather than horror narratives.

The field necessitates the translator's consideration of cultural differences between source and target languages. The Chinese concept of "gui" can, in specific contexts, refer to ancestors or deities (as in the compound "gui shen"), whereas the English cultural concept of "ghost" lacks this connotation of reverence. By employing "spirit", Yang Xianyi preserves the original emphasis on "veneration", avoiding potential misinterpretations by target readers that might arise from the negative associations of "ghost" (e.g. "ghost story"). This translational decision prevents readers from misconstruing *Mr.Fujino*'s intended meaning or forming erroneous judgments about Chinese cultural values concerning the dead.

Example 2:

ST:da gai shi wu yi xi wei gui ba. beijing de baicai yun wang zhejiang, bian yong hongtousheng ji zhu caigen, dao gua zai shuiguo diantou, zunwei"jiaocai";fujian ye sheng zhe de luhui,yi dao beijing jiu qing jin wenshi,qie mei qi ming yue"longshe lan"[5].

TT: No doubt the rare a thing the higher its value. When Peking cabbage is shipped to Zhejiang, it is hung upside-down in the greengrocer's by a red string tied to its root, and given the grand title "Shandong Vegetable". When the aloe which grows wild in Fujian comes to Peking, it is ushered into a hot-house and given the beautiful name "Dragon-Tongue Orchid"[7].

Analysis: The term "jiaocai" in the original text refers to a regional variety of vegetable produced in Jiaozhou, Shandong Province. While this geographically specific term might be familiar to Chinese readers, English-speaking audiences lack the corresponding cultural context. Yang Xianyi adopted a domestication strategy by using "Shandong" – a geographical name with higher international recognition – to effectively convey the core information about it being a "local specialty" to target readers. Retaining the phonetic transliteration (e.g. "Jiao Cabbage") would create register mismatch, potentially confusing readers and diminishing the humorous effect arising from "cultural misinterpretation" in the source text. Furthermore, as the original text belongs to a non-technical register (memoir-style prose), precise correspondence with botanical terminology was unnecessary. The translator's choice of the generic term "vegetable" rather than "cabbage" or "Chinese cabbage" maintains appropriate accessibility by avoiding excessive specialization while preserving the broad concept of "edible plant".

3.2 Tenor

The tenor, or discourse tenor, refers to the role relationships between participants in the communication process as well as their social status[6]. During the translation process, the translator should accurately convey the speaker's tone, discourse manner, and the implied interpersonal relationships and social positions within the text. This approach facilitates the reader's comprehension of the protagonist's personality, social standing, and other contextual elements.

Example 3:

ST:hai jide you yihui tengye xiansheng jiang wo jiaodao tade yanjiushi li qu, fanchu wo na jiangyi shang de yige tu lai, shi xiabi de xueguan, zhizhe, xiang wo heai de shuodao: "ni kan, ni jiang zhe tiao xueguan yi le yidian weizhi le. ziran,zheyang yi yi, dique bijiao haokan xie, raner jiepoutu bushi meishu, shiwu shi nayang de, women mei fa gai huan ta. xian zai wo gei ni gai hao le,yihou ni yao quan zhao zhe heiban shang nayang hua." danshi wo hai bu fuqi,koutou daying zhe, xinli que xiangdao: "tu haishi wo hua de bucuo; zhiyu zhizai de qingxing, wo xinli ziran jide de."[5]

TT:I remember once Mr.Fujino called me to his laboratory and showed me a diagram in my notes of the blood vessels of the forearm. Pointing at this, he said kindly: "Look, you have moved this blood vessel a little out of place. Of course, when moved like this it does look better; but anatomical charts are not works of art, and we have no way of altering real things. I have corrected it for you,an in future you should copy exactly from the blackboard." I was very stubborn, however. Though I assented, I was thinking: "My diagram was a good drawing. As for the true facts, of course I can remember them."[7]

Analysis: In this scene, the tenor of the discourse distinctly elucidates the character traits and respective social positions of Mr.Fujino and the author. The scenario depicts Mr.Fujino pointing out an error in the diagram drawn by the author in his lecture notes. While the author harbors intellectual resistance, he refrains from overt contradiction due to Mr.Fujino's authoritative position as his teacher. Though dissatisfied with the correction, the author dares not voice dissent, expressing his discontent only through internal monologue. In translating this dialogue, the translator adopts a literal translation strategy, precisely capturing the nuanced tones of the characters, thereby effectively conveying their distinctive personalities and interpersonal dynamics.

3.3 Mode

Formal equivalence as the communicative process wherein interlocutors select the most appropriate expression based on the specific content to be conveyed, particularly in terms of choosing between formal written language and informal spoken language[8]. This selection exerts significant influence on the textual effects of discourse[4].

Example 4:

ST: you yi tian, ben ji de xueshenghui ganshi dao wo gongyu li laile, yao jieeode jiangyi kan. wo jian chu lai jiao gei tamen, que zhi fanjian le yitong, bing meiyou daizou. dan tamen yi zou, youchai jiu songdao yifeng hen hou de xin, chaikai kan shi, diyiju shi "ni gaihui ba!"[5]

TT: One day the executive of the students' union of my class came to my hostel and asked to borrow my lecture notes. I found them and handed them over, but they merely looked through the notes without taking them away. As soon as they left, however, the postman delivered a bulky envelop, and when I opened it, the first line read: "Repent!"[7]

Analysis: The sentence is written in a colloquial, epistolary style. As the student council officer learned that the author had previously copied Dr. Fujino's lecture notes, he assumed that the author's academic success was due to leaked exam questions from the instructor, hence seizing this opportunity to reprimand him. The translator renders this sentence with a single word, achieving linguistic conciseness and compactness. Beyond faithfully conveying the original meaning, the translator must also capture the student council officer's tone—both contemptuous and forceful—thereby effectively portraying the distinct personalities and hierarchical dynamics between the officer and ordinary students.

Example 5:

ST: dan ta ye ou you shi wo weinan de shihou. ta tingshuo zhongguo nvren shiguojiao de, dan bu zhidao xiangxi, suoyi yao wen wo zenme guofa, zugu biancheng zenyang jixing, hai tanxi shuodao: "zongyao kan yi kan cai zhidao, jiujing shi zenme yi hui shi ne? " [5]

TT: Yet sometimes too, inadvertently, he embarrassed me very much. He had heard that Chinese women had bound feet, but did not know the details; so he wanted to learn from me how it was done, how the bones in the feet were deformed. And he said with a sigh, "I should have to see it to understand. What can it really be like?" [7]

Analysis: In the original text, the author employs a colloquial writing style, as evidenced by the use of modal particles such as "ne" in the phrase "jiujing shi zenme yi hui shi ne?" However, the translator failed to convey this stylistic feature in the English rendition, thereby inadequately reflecting the amicable teacher-student relationship between Mr.Fujino and the author.

4. Conclusion

In the process of literary translation, the translator's systematic register analysis of the source text serves as a crucial prerequisite for achieving dynamic equivalence in translation. According to Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics theory, such analysis should comprehensively examine the three core dimensions of register—field (thematic content), tenor (interpersonal relationships), and mode (discourse medium). An empirical analysis of Yang Xianyi's English translation of *Mr.Fujino* reveals that the translator achieved a high degree of alignment with the original text across these three dimensions: the field dimension accurately conveys the specialized domain knowledge and sociocultural context of the text; the tenor dimension appropriately handles interpersonal relationships between the author and readers, as well as among characters; while the mode dimension effectively preserves the stylistic features and linguistic style of the original. This multi-dimensional register correspondence ensures that the translation not only fully presents the ideational meaning of the source text but also faithfully reproduces its interpersonal meaning and textual meaning, thereby providing English readers with a reading experience comparable to that of the source-language audience. This case study convincingly demonstrates that register-based textual analysis can offer systematic methodological guidance for literary translation practice.

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