

Differences in Chinese Translations of Die Verwandlung (The Metamorphosis): A Case Study of Translation by Junwen Li and Rongchang Zhang

Liuyun Lu^{1, a}, Shu Wu^{1, *}

¹Sino-German College, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

^aLuAmanda@126.com

*Corresponding author

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Abstract: The challenges of translating German-Chinese literature lie in the fact that the translator must convey more than just the meanings of words and phrase; additionally, in China, German is still not a widely spoken foreign language. Compared to the translation of English literature, there is a lack of theoretical research and practical translation experience. This article first summarizes the Functional Equivalence Theory from Eugene A. Nida and the content as well as the language style of the original novel of *Die Verwandlung* (The Metamorphosis) by Franz Kafka in preparation for the research. Then, the article analyzes the differences between the two Chinese translations from three perspectives before coming to the final conclusion.

1. Introduction

Literary translation has its own particularities. The translators are required to convey not only the meanings of words and phrases but also the author's writing style and culturally related metaphors. At the same time, the translated text must undergo a certain degree of cultural adaptation to make it possible for readers to engage with the work in target language.

In comparison with literature works written in English, those created in German language have been less disseminated in China. As English is generally regarded as the first foreign language in China, the number of individuals who speak German, particularly those with a high proficiency in German, is significantly lower than that of English speakers. German language differs from English by having a more complicated grammatic structure, different language habitats as well as diverse cultural and historical background. Therefore, in terms of German translation, differentiated translation skills should be employed.

Die Verwandlung (The Metamorphosis), which was written in 1912 by Franz Kafka, one of the pioneers of literary modernism, has exerted a profound influence on world literature. In 1979, the Chinese version of the novel translated by Wenjun Li was first released in the magazine *World Literature*. In the next decades, more translators, including Rongchang Zhang, Yingying Xie and so on have been providing readers with a diversity of Chinese versions. Among them, the translation of

Wenjun Li and the translation of Rongchang Zhang are relatively the most influential ones in China to date.

This article attempts to analyze the differences of Li's and Zhang's Chinese version of *Die Verwandlung* and explore the practical application of existing translation theories in German-Chinese literature translation.

2. Research background

2.1 Functional Equivalence Theory

Eugene A. Nida formally introduced the Functional Equivalence Theory of translation in 1969. This theory consists of two important elements: dynamic equivalence (functional equivalence) and formal equivalence. Dynamic equivalence refers to the closest natural equivalent in the source language. While formal equivalence means translating the source language into target language literally as faithfully as possible [1].

Nida laid emphasis on the reaction of readers. The comprehension of readers is the standard for measuring the quality of translation [2]. When translating, translators should try as much to reserve meanings of the language literally as well as semantically. If it turns out to be unattainable, translators should focus on dynamic equivalence instead. In order to convey the content meaning, it is allowed to employ words or phrases which can have totally different meanings to the original ones [3].

In terms of novel translation, translators always encounter with situations, in which the language can be obscure when literally translated, thus it is essential to give considerable thought to dynamic equivalence.

2.2 Content summary of *Die Verwandlung*

The plot of *Die Verwandlung* is divided into 3 parts.

The novel begins with the protagonist Gregor Samsa, who has been working really hard for the sake of household, waking up in the morning to find himself turning into a gigantic beetle. Gregor paid little attention to his metamorphosis, but was instead overwhelmed by a greater anxiety of being dismissed and losing the economic source of the entire family. His manager visited because of his tardiness when he was struggling to get off the bed and open the door of his room. In Part I Gregor ended up frightening the manager away by showing up and got repelled with cane by his father.

As time passed, Gregor was getting used to his new body and gradually gaining habits of a bug in Part II. Every individual in the Samsa family of Gregor were forced to face the issue of source of income. He concedes as much as possible in order to reduce his family's troubles. However, what his family thought of Gregor as well as he was treated deteriorated over time.

In Part III, as Gregor awakened from a coma caused by an injury inflicted by his father, he found that everyone in the family had found a job by then. Gregor was treated completely as if he was a useless bug. Despite his deep contemplation of the time when he was still a human and warm consideration of his family, the family decided that Gregor was not to live any longer. As they had wished, Gregor died at the time of sunrise. After his death, his family seemed to be rejuvenated and decided to go on an outing.

2.3 Language style of *Die Verwandlung*

Kafka narrated the story in a very calm tone. The objective writing style effectively portrays the absurd reality and the oppressive atmosphere. Throughout the entire text, the novel is written totally from Gregor's perspective but in third person. The psychological activities of the protagonist are

explicitly articulated without additional embellishments, therefore, convey a sense of coldness and powerlessness.

3. Comparison of the two translations

3.1 Words and phrases

Example 1

Original text:

... weiß ich nicht, warum es nicht auch Ihre Herren Eltern erfahren sollen. [4]

This sentence comes from page 14 of epublibre's *Die Verwandlung* and the corresponding translations of Li and Zhang are in page 55, line 17 (Tianjin Renmin Publishing House, 2011) and page 45, line 8 (Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2018). The version of the original text used will not be mentioned again in the following examples.

Regarding '*Ihre Herren Eltern*' owning a primary meaning of 'your father and mother', Li translated by using a respectful form of 'your' and regular word for 'parents' while Zhang translated into the honorific title for 'your parents', which is close in meaning with 'your esteemed father and your esteemed father in English. '*Ihre Herren Eltern*' is a term of respect towards parents of the speaker's counterpart. In this case, the words used by Zhang are more corresponding in Chinese expressions, meanwhile there may be some slight requirements for the readers' language proficiency.

Example 2

Original text:

..., entfernten sich jetzt all drei auf den Fußspitzen. [4]

This sentence comes from page 24 of *Die Verwandlung* and the corresponding translations of Li and Zhang are in page 64, line 18 and page 54, line 10.

Li translated 'auf den Fußspitzen' into an authentic Chinese idiom phrase, which is similar to 'tiptoe' as verb in English language. In the contrary, used the expression of 'walk away on their tiptoes', which corresponds more closely to the original text. Two versions of the phrase translation refer to same actions but the matter of slight differences in emotional expression is subject to further discussion.

3.2 Sentences

Example 3

Original text:

Er lag auf seinem panzerartig harten Rücken und sah, wenn er den Kopf ein wenig hob, seinen gewölbten, braunen, von bogenförmigen Versteifungen geteilten Bauch, auf dessen Höhe sich die Bettdecke, zum gänzlichen Niedergleiten bereit, kaum noch erhalten konnte. [5]

This sentence comes from page 1 of *Die Verwandlung* and the corresponding translations of Li and Zhang are in page 1, line 2-4 and page 1, line 2-4.

The first half of both translations of this sentence are almost the same. Both have separated the status of 'lying' and the description of 'tank-like hard back'. When translating '*gewölbten, braunen, von bogenförmigen Versteifungen geteilten Bauch*', both translators have abandoned the passive structure and turn to an active structure which is more in accordance with the conventions of the Chinese language. In the latter part of the sentence, Li used an expression of 'the quilt can hardly cover his belly', which is more fluent than the version from Zhang of 'the quilt can hardly stay on his belly' and fits the habit of Chinese expression.

Example 4

Original text:

Nun den Kopf hatte er nicht vorsichtig genug gehalten und ihn angeschlagen; ... [6]

This sentence comes from page 8 of *Die Verwandlung* and the corresponding translations of Li and Zhang are in page 53, line 14-15 and page 43, line 6-7.

Li applied a comma to separate the meaning of ‘his lack of carefulness’ and ‘his head has not raised high enough’, which brings a clear sentence structure and avoids semantic confusion as well as allowing readers to pause while reading, thus having a better understanding of the text. In this case, Zhang’s version is lengthier and can interrupt the understanding of readers.

3.3 Text segments

Example 5

Original text:

Warum ging denn die Schwester nicht zu den anderen? Sie war wohl erst jetzt aus dem Bett aufgestanden und hatte noch gar nicht angefangen sich anzuziehen. Und warum weinte sie denn? Weil er nicht aufstand und den Prokuristen nicht hereinließ, weil er in Gefahr war, den Posten zu verlieren und weil dann der Chef die Eltern mit den alten Forderungen wieder verfolgen würde? [4]

This sentence comes from page 10 of *Die Verwandlung* and the corresponding translations of Li and Zhang are in page 54, line 21-24 and page 44, line 12-15.

Li altered the expression method in Gregor’s speculation on the reasons for his sister’s tears. Multiple question marks were used to separate each speculation. Li also refined the text to make it more coherent and more aligned with the daily language of the Chinese people. Compared with Li, Zhang’s translation is more faithful to the original text. He retained almost all the literal meanings and paragraph structures, using semicolons instead of question marks to replace the commas in original text.

4. Conclusion

Although two translations convey almost same object facts, for the most part, Li’s translation performance of *Die Verwandlung* is more in line with Nida’s concept of functional equivalence. Compared with Zhang’s work, Li applied considerable modifications to the original text and retained less of the authentic sentence structure, making concessions in formal equivalence, resulting in better fluency but some deviation from the cold tone of the original story.

Meanwhile, different language habits can be found in both translators’ works. It can be seen that the traces of the translator are an inseparable part of the translated work, as Benjamin described translation as ‘afterlife’ of the original work [7]. Translators’ preferences in language using can be results of their respective living environment. Since Li’s translation was released in 1979 and Zhang’s in 1996, daily and standard expression of Chinese language could have evolved over these two decades.

A conclusion can be drawn that, translators’ residue exists inevitably, despite translators’ possible attempt to reproduce the style of original text in the target language. The original text and the trace from translator together culminate in the final translation work.

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