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THE TRANSLATOR'S HAND: A SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL EXPLORATION OF STYLISTIC VARIATION IN TRANSLATION

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ABSTRACT

Translation acts as a vital conduit for intercultural exchange, facilitating understanding between diverse linguistic communities. This study analyzes the core principles of literal and free translation through the lens of systemic functional linguistics (SFL). It posits that effective translation necessitates a nuanced approach, grounded in the source language's characteristics and the target language's demands. By strategically employing varying translation methods tailored to distinct text styles, translators can enhance efficiency and accuracy. This SFL-informed perspective provides practical guidance for translation practice, fostering cultural dissemination and contributing to the advancement of foreign language studies. Ultimately, this research underscores the importance of a theoretically sound and contextually sensitive approach to translation, enabling the seamless transfer of meaning across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

KEYWORDS: Free translation, literal translation, functional perspective.

INTRODUCTION

The dichotomy between literal and free translation has fueled centuries of debate within translation studies, persisting even today. Proponents of literal translation emphasize its potential to preserve original rhetoric and stylistic nuances, arguing that free translation risks diluting the source text's vibrancy. Conversely, advocates of free translation contend that it is the only viable approach, viewing translation as an art that necessitates adaptation to the target language and culture.

This longstanding debate has witnessed prominent figures on both sides. Early Western scholars like Erasmus and Augustine championed literal accuracy, while Kumarajiva is considered a proponent of free translation in Chinese interpretation, contrasted with Dao'an's rigid literalism. In modern China, Yan Fu advocated for hermeneutic translation, while Lu Xun favored a faithful, albeit potentially awkward, rendition over a fluent but inaccurate one.

This paper aims to transcend the historical impasse between literal and free translation by analyzing their nature from a functional linguistic perspective. It will then offer practical suggestions for translation practice. To achieve this, a multi-faceted approach will be employed, integrating linguistic, pragmatic, and empirical research methods. Linguistic analysis will explore language phenomena and rules in translation, while pragmatic methods will examine contextual factors and pragmatic rules to determine optimal meaning conveyance and expression. Empirical research will analyze translation examples, revealing the strategic choices made by translators during the translation process. Through this comprehensive framework, this study seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of these translation methods and their practical applications."

NATURE OF LITERAL AND FREE TRANSLATION

Matthiessen (2001:74) states a general guideline for the relationship between sensitivity and translation: the more information accessible to direct the translation, the more delicate the translation. He also claims that there is a typological principle at work: the larger the environment. Environment here alludes to the size and breadth to which the translator decides to encompass in his translation. The wider the environment, the more consistent the languages are likely to be; the smaller the environment, the more incongruent the languages are likely to be (Matthiessen, 2001:75).

According to Halliday (1994:15), a language is a complicated semiotic system made of numerous layers, or strata, and the rank scale in the English lexicogrammar is: clause-group/phrase-word-morpheme. Thus, the sentence, the most comprehensive element of grammar, has the broadest rank environment, while the morpheme has the narrowest rank environment. As a result, the sentence has the broadest rank context of translation rather than the morpheme or the word.

And, technically speaking, the broadest translation environment is that of system rather than structure; for example, there are likely to be fewer translation disparities between two languages' clause systems than between their clause structures. The most general environment is the broadest, while the most sensitive environment is the smallest. As a result, the most delicate



translation setting is that of the most broad language systems—such as the general mood systems of indicate/imperative, declarative/interrogative. It is to be anticipated that as the level of delicacy rises, so will the translation variations.

With the principle mentioned above, Matthiessen is commenting on the relationship from macroscopical point of view. He points out the ideal state of translation angle: from the maximal environment. Theoretically, it is reasonable because the larger the environment is, the more information the translation will cover. But this arouses another question: the more information for translation, the more difficult the task will be. So in practice, translators do not necessarily choose the largest environment for their translation. On the contrary, translators usually unconsciously choose the possible smallest environment. That is to say, they will automatically consider their task from the possibly highest delicacy of language. The translators usually intend to focus their attention on lexicogrammar, if not morpheme, for the first step for consideration. This again leads to a question: what is the difference embodied in translation when translation environment varies from the largest to smallest?

For a long time, translation techniques have been characterized as falling somewhere between the extremes of literal and free. It is relatively simple to characterize these translation techniques, or strategies, for a stratified linguistic theory, such as Systemic Functional Linguistics, as the retention of characteristics and patterns on various language levels (Catford, 1965). There are three clear levels at which characteristics and patterns can be preserved: lexicogrammar, semantic grammar, and register. Preservation on the first would stipulate a relatively precise translation, while preservation on the last would define a relatively free translation. The exact interpretations are based on high delicacy (specific groups of units), whereas the free versions are based on low delicacy. In terms of the rank scale within lexicogrammar, preserving characteristics and structures on lower ranks, such as the morpheme, results in relatively exact translations, whereas preserving them on higher ranks results in relatively free translations. Consider the following translations:

ENVIRONMENT AND NATURE OF LITERAL AND FREE TRANSLATION

The conventional distinction between "free" and "literal" translation is defined by levels of stratification, position, and axis. The more "literal" the translation—for example,

Table 1. Illustrates the nature of free and literal translation.

Stratification	Rank	Axis	
Context	clause	System	Free
Semantics	group/phrase	↕	↕
Lexicogrammar	word		
Phonology	morpheme	Structure	Literal

Source: Author

Word for word translation (rather than clause-based translation)—the smaller the environment; the bigger the environment, the more "free" the translation. In theory, "free" translation is arguably the most efficient type of translation. However, independence varies in degree. As a result, we must consider how liberated we are in our rendering.

AUTOMATIZATION AND DE-AUTOMATIZATION

The scope of 'free' translation expands to encompass broad contextual considerations, including semantics and cultural equivalence. This becomes particularly relevant when the source text embodies a register absent in the target language, necessitating the translator to identify the closest culturally analogous context. Conversely, translation within narrower contextual boundaries tends towards automatization, where linguistic choices are largely predictable. Halliday (1982) describes this automatization in dramatic dialogue as a process where language operates seamlessly, realizing semantic selections without drawing attention to its form. In essence, words are translated as direct representations of meaning, and sounds as interpretations of those words. This unmarked, automated process typically occurs at lower levels of the language system, resulting in a relatively literal translation.

However, certain translation scenarios demand de-automatization, a process Halliday (1982) defines as the partial liberation of lower-level linguistic systems from strict semantic control. This allows these systems to become independent domains of choice, enabling grammatical selections to transcend purely semantic dictates. De-automatization, therefore, transforms wording into a quasi-independent semiotic mode, capable of projecting multifaceted meanings. Translators must strive to convey the meaning generated through de-automatization, necessitating a shift from a narrow to a broader contextual focus. This liberates the text from rigid word-for-word rendering, enabling the translator to unlock a wider range of meaning potential. This approach is prevalent in literary translation, where stylistic nuances, including sound, are often de-automatized, particularly in poetry.



The degree of translation freedom is intrinsically linked to the level of linguistic stratification. A focus on the lexical-grammatical level, emphasizing precise phrasing and wording patterns, results in a more literal translation. Conversely, a broader focus on higher-level semantic and contextual considerations yields a freer translation. Translation, from this perspective, is essentially a matter of determining which aspects of the source text to preserve and which to adapt. As the translator's focus ascends the hierarchy of linguistic stratification, the translation becomes progressively 'freer,' reflecting a greater emphasis on contextual and cultural equivalence."

TRANSLATION: METAFUNCTIONS VS. STYLE.

The following definitions of literal translation and free translation may be derived from the preceding discussion: In terms of Systemic Functional Linguistics, literal translation is one that maintains lexicogrammatical qualities and structure to the greatest extent feasible within the limits of the target language system. The term "free translation" refers to translation that is not constrained by lexicogrammatical elements and structures. It retains certain characteristics of the original texts in the greater context. Both free translation and literal translation, in particular, are dynamic notions that should not be approached in a static manner.

Translation, from a systemic standpoint, is the preservation of the source texts' ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings. An ideal translation is the one that holds all of the three metafunctions of the source texts. However, in translation practice, we usually automatically set out from the ideational function for consideration. This is coincident with the 'automatization principle' discussed above. Ideational function is mainly realized by the concrete lexical items, from which we often unconsciously initiate our translation. The formal equivalence of lexical items in translation leads to the extreme form of literal translation which is always labeled as '_word for word translation'. Theoretically, it is impossible to get an absolute '_word for word' translation because there do not exist two languages that have exactly same typological structure. Thus, the expression of '_word for word translation' is usually used as a name of '_awkward translation'.

As stated in Section 2 and 3, literal translation closely related to higher delicacy of linguistic items. And since ideational elements contain the most delicate ones from morphemes and wordings to phrases and clauses, literal translation is essentially realized through the preservation of ideational elements, namely: Process, Participants and Circumstances.

In some sense, formal equivalence tends to hold functional equivalence, which is the very aim of the translation. That is why we put literal translation in priority. However, this does not mean that literal translation should always be adopted in translation. On the contrary, we sometimes have to abandon the original ideational components so as to get an interpersonal or textual equivalence in the translation. For example, due to different cultures, greetings in different languages may differ a lot from each other. In translation, we have to first of all consider the most important function the greeting plays---interpersonal function, and we'd better take this function in priority in

Table 2. The middle way between literal translation and free translation.

Source	Transferring	Target	Literal or Free
Ideational function	→	Ideational equivalence	Literal
Interpersonal function		Interpersonal equivalence	↕
Textual function		Textual equivalence	
Source: Author			

Free translation. If it is literally translated, that is, based on ideational components, it will be probably misunderstood by the target language readers. In this condition, the translation should be target culture oriented so as to be comprehensible in target cultural background.

To summarize, literal translation and free translation are two dynamic concepts. Theoretically, literal translation requires formal correspondence of ideational components; free translation usually aims for contextual equivalence; and transferring interpersonal function often needs the middle way between literal translation and free translation. It can be illustrated by Table 2: This article provides a detailed study and analysis of the Foreign Language Education Press.

Translation methods of literal translation and free translation using the perspective of systemic functional grammar. By



exploring the origins of these two methods, their universality in translation work is revealed. Through explanations of automation and de-automation, it is shown that language is to some extent "free", and translation work liberates words from their constraints while conveying the meaning of the source language, especially in poetry translation, where translators have more freedom of expression. From the perspective of systemic function analysis, the appropriate translation method is chosen by combining the explicit and implicit translation characteristics and based on the three elements and three meta functions of systemic function.

CONCLUSION

Literal translation and free translation are two translation methodologies or tactics. They are the expressive forms of language. Simply speaking, language is the form that people take and meaning is the content that people want to convey. As for the relationship between form and content, Li (2000:24) states that one form can convey numerous contents while one content can be expressed with numerous forms. The translator's goal in translating is to express the meaning of the source language in the target language. That is, we may translate one meaning into several forms.

Both literal translation and free translation can convey the same meaning from different angles. Without adequate context, it is often difficult for us to decide which form is better. Thus a good translator can never label him/herself as a literalist or freeist. Translation in fact is an encoding process with target language, swaying between literal translation and free translation.

The essence of the literal or free translation lies in the delicacy of the translation basis. The higher delicacy the translation bases on, the more literal the translation will become, and vice versa. Technically, a translator should always first of all consider literal translation---to focus his attention on transferring ideational function, for the same form is likely to convey the similar meaning. If literal translation fails to successfully convey the other two functions simultaneously, the translator should try to shift his focus to the other meta functions and take a freer translation. An excellent translation of a text is always the proper mingling of literal translation and free translation.

Literal translation and free translation also have some shortcomings, if literal translation transition will cause the target language readers difficult to understand; a free translation transition leads away from the original text. Therefore, we should consider carefully when analyzing the original text, and strive to translate a translation that is both faithful and suitable for readers.

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