

On Compensation for Cultural Default in Literary Translation

LI Yuying^[a]; LUO Ying^{[b],*}

^[a]Foreign Languages College, Jiangxi Normal University, Nanchang, China

^[b]Foreign Languages College, Jiangxi Normal University, Nanchang, China

*Corresponding author.

Received 11 March 2018; accepted 23 June 2018

Published online 26 July 2018

Abstract

Translation is a type of transformation both from language and cultural levels. Due to the cultural disparity between the source language and the target language, cultural default is inevitable to some extent. Cultural default is defined as the absence of relevant cultural background knowledge shared by the writer and his intended readers. Translation compensation is of great necessity to make up for the loss resulted from cultural default in an effort to allow the target readers to appreciate the original text as the source readers. A qualified translator is expected to possess corresponding bilingual and bicultural competence, identify the existence of cultural default and exercise appropriate compensation strategies so as to bridge the gap between the original author and the target readers. Based upon the analysis of some typical examples from literary translation, the study proposes some corresponding compensation strategies such as annotation, contextual amplification, adaptation and paraphrase to make up for cultural vacancy, aiming to expand the translator's competence to compensate for cultural default and promote cultural transmission.

Key words: Literary translation; Cultural default; Compensation strategies

Li, Y. Y., & Luo, Y. (2018). On Compensation for Cultural Default in Literary Translation. *Canadian Social Science*, 14(7), 84-88. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/css/article/view/10487>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/10487>

INTRODUCTION

It's generally held that the biggest obstacle in translation is to find an appropriate word or structure in the target language to convey the semantic meaning of the original. The biggest challenge in literary translation, however, is to compensate for the cultural default for the target readers. Translators are expected to understand the meaning of words and sentence structures while being sensitive to the cultural vacancy that occurs. That those who are competent in the two languages involved are qualified translators turns out to be a wrong notion. A professional translator must be acquainted with both the two languages and the relevant cultural knowledge. Without mastery of the cultural background in the original text, an in-depth and panoramic comprehension of the source text could not be genuinely acquired.

The original meaning or information in a context may lose to some degree during the translation process, which is generally referred to as translation loss. Due to the existence of cultural default, translation compensation is of paramount necessity to make up for the loss. Specifically, translation loss means the loss of information, meaning, pragmatic function, cultural implication and the aesthetic value during the translation. Nida (2001, pp.87&33) proposes that this kind of loss is inevitable as "there is no complete same referential meaning and connotative meaning of phonetic system, lexicon, grammar and discourse character to two different communicators" in his book *Language and Culture: Context in Translating*. Translation compensation existed along with translating process, but the study on the issue in China still remains immature, dating back only to the 1980s and the scope of the study was quite narrow, disproportionate with the ubiquitous translation loss and its compensation phenomena. In literary translation, the loss on the cultural level is particularly noticeable and translators are required to employ appropriate compensation strategies to make up for the loss resulted from cultural default.

1. CULTURAL DEFAULT

Wang Dongfeng (1997) defined cultural default as “the absence of relevant cultural background knowledge shared by the writer and his intended readers” in *Cultural Default and the Coherence and Restructure in Translation*. Cultural default usually takes place in the communication process between those with shared background knowledge. Wang Dalai (2016) brought forth the “communication value of cultural default” in his monograph *Study on Compensation Strategy for Cultural Default in Literary Translation*. When communicating, both the speaker and the hearer are supposed to own shared background knowledge or pragmatic presupposition to achieve successful communication. Under these circumstances, the apparent cultural knowledge or fact between both sides could be omitted to improve the communication efficiency, which is referred to as the “communication value of cultural default”.

There are not two people with the exactly same background, inevitably resulting in semantic loss or misunderstanding in verbal communication. The omission of shared background knowledge between the author and the target readers is called “situational default.” If the element omitted is linked with contextual information, this phenomenon is defined as “contextual default” and if the element is related to cultural backgrounds, “cultural default”. Cultural default elements are routinely culture-specific and stand outside the context, so vacuum of meaning exists for the target readers with different cultural backgrounds. From this point of view, because of the lack of corresponding schema, the target readers are unable to connect the contextual information with the knowledge or experience outside the text so that indispensable semantic and situational coherence cannot be established properly. In the translating process, the author and the target readers do not share the same cultural background so that the obvious cultural knowledge in the original text leads to cultural default for the target readers. The inevitability of cultural default contributes to the existence of translation compensation. With the assistance of compensation, the translator could convey the implicit information in the original text to the target readers in an attempt to enable them to obtain a better and more accurate understanding of the original text.

2. COMPENSATION FOR CULTURAL DEFAULT IN LITERARY TRANSLATION

Every culture possesses some distinctive cultural characteristics of its own. If translators translated the original text word by word without any explanation about the relevant cultural knowledge, readers might get confused and it is barely possible for them to appreciate the text as the source readers. Therefore, compensation serves as an effective method to bridge or narrow the gap between

the source texts and the target readers, making up for the loss resulted from cultural default. In literary translation, cultural default is quite ubiquitous and how to compensate for the loss via proper strategies matters to every translator.

2.1 Annotation

Annotation means transplanting the original cultural term and at the same time giving some explanation in distinct forms. When it comes to annotation, various forms abound, the employment of italics, dash, brackets, underline and note being some frequent means. Literal translation with a footnote or an endnote could reflect the artistic motive of the author and the aesthetic value of the original text. Simultaneously, the vacant meaning could be compensated via annotation in a way to ensure the contextual coherence.

Example 1:

SL: The May—day dance, for instance, was to be discerned on the afternoon under notice, in the disguise of the club revel, or “club--walking” as it was there called.

(*Tess of the d’Urbervilles* by Hardy)

TT: 譬如现在所讲的那个下午里, 就可以看出五朔节舞的旧风及联欢会 (或者像本地的叫法, 游行会) 的形式出现。

注释: 五朔节舞: 英国风俗, 五月一号奏乐吹号, 采取树枝、野花装饰门窗。在草地上树立五朔柱, 围柱跳舞, 并选举五朔后。此风古时极盛, 现在穷乡僻壤上还有举行的。

Analysis: This is a typical example of social cultural default. Social culture encompasses every aspect of people’s lives including traditions, social rules, historical backgrounds and so forth. Target readers may get puzzled about the “May—day dance” owing to the lack of relevant cultural knowledge. “May day” is a traditional folk festival in Europe celebrating agricultural harvest or the coming of spring. The “May day” festival has a long history and falls on the first day of May each year. Before the “May day”, people in British, France, Sweden and some other countries may plant some seedlings in front of their yards, which were decorated with plenty of chaplets or flowers. The youngsters sing and dance door by door to send their best wishes to the others, holding a bunch of flowers. The translator chooses to add a note in the translation to explain what “May day” is as he seeks to help the target readers to create the image vividly. In this way, the target readers are more likely to appreciate the original text. Xia Tingde (2006, pp.190-200) absorbed and further developed research findings of scholars at home and abroad to bring forth six types of compensation principles including principle of demand, principle of relation, principle of focus, principle of minimal distance, principle of the same functions and principle of consistency in *A Study On Translation Compensation*. With the annotation, the principle of demand is exactly and properly met in this case.

Example 2:

SL: 但从我的文章着想, 因为文体卑下, 是“引车卖浆者流”所用的话, 所以不敢僭称, 便从不入三教九流的小说家所谓“闲话休题言归正传”这句套话里, 取出“正传”两个字来。
(《阿Q正传》)

TT: But since I write in vulgar vein using language of hucksters and pedlars, I dare not presume to give it so high-sounding a title. So I will take as my title the last two words of a stock phrase of the novelists, who are not reckoned among the Three Cults and Nine Schools. “Enough of this digression, and back to the true story.”

Note: The Three Cults were Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. The Nine Schools included the Confucian, Taoist, Legalist, Moist and other schools. Novelists, who did not belong to any of these, were considered not quite respectable.

(杨宪益、戴乃迭译)

Analysis: In this example, note is employed by the translators to explain the real meaning of “三教九流”. If the translators simply translated “三教九流” into “The Three Cults and The Nine Schools” without any further explanation, the target readers would be at a loss as to the real meaning of the expression and what it stands for. On the contrary, with the annotation, the readers may form a fundamental understanding about “三教九流” and the note can serve as a compass to some degree, guiding them to search for more information about the Chinese expression. Perhaps after looking it up on the Internet, the readers may have a deeper comprehension about Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. This example falls into the category of religious cultural default. Religious culture is a significant element of human culture and therefore exercising relevant strategy to compensate for the loss brought about by religious cultural default is of great importance for adequate translation. In the same way, readers may also form a panoramic understanding about the “Nine Schools”.

2.2 Adaptation

Zhu Guangqian (1984, 362) proposed in his monograph *On Translation* that adaptation means to use the linguistic forms containing the cultural image in the target language to replace those in the source language. If the author utilizes some unique cultural images including allusion or idiom and the main purpose is not to show the artistic motive, adaptation is a recommendable choice to make the original text more understandable and the target readers with different cultural backgrounds are more likely to enjoy the text to the largest extent.

Example 3:

SL: I love my love with an E, because she's enticing; I hate her with an E, because she's engaged; I took her to the sign of the exquisite, and treated her with an elopement; her name's Emily, and she lives in the east.

(Dickens: David Copperfield)

TT: 我爱我的爱, 因为她长得实在招人爱。我恨我的爱, 因

为她不回报我的爱。我带着她到挂着浮荡子招牌的一家, 和她谈情说爱。我请她看一出潜逃私奔, 为的是我和她能长久你亲我爱。她的名字叫爱米丽, 她的家住在爱仁里。

(张谷若译)

Analysis: In this example, the recurring alphabet “e” in English is adapted to the diphthong “ai” in Chinese to simultaneously convey the referential and verbal meanings of the original text. If translated literally and mechanically, the rhyme of the text would vanish and so would the aesthetic value of the original. This phenomenon belongs to the linguistic cultural default and the linguistic culture is the most unique and distinctive cultural feature in each nation. The characteristic of English is more functional while Chinese vivid and intuitive. The difference between the linguistic culture requires translators to employ adaptation to make up for the loss caused by linguistic cultural default because other strategies can hardly achieve the same effect as adaptation. The principle of the same function is achieved in this translation as it maintained the similar aesthetic value of the original text.

Example 4:

SL: He returned south to make arrangements for their marriage, when, most unexpectedly, his letters were returned to him by mail, with a short note from her guardian, stating to him that ere this reached him the lady would be the wife of another.

(H.B. Stowe: Uncle Tom's Cabin)

TT: 他当即回到南方去筹备婚礼。可是, 完全出乎意料之外, 他给她的信件忽然都被退了回来。她的监护人附了一张便笺, 说是在他收到信之前, 那位小姐早已琵琶别抱。

(黄继忠译: 《汤姆大伯的小屋》)

Analysis: In this example, the translator used the Chinese expression “琵琶别抱” in the translation. “琵琶” is a unique Chinese musical instrument with four strings. There is a considerable number of disagreements about the origin of “琵琶” in Chinese. An array of people believe that “琵琶” derives from the Han Dynasty. The story goes that Liu Xijun, the Chinese princess of the day, was forced to marry a barbarian Wusun king against her own will at which he felt extremely painful and was suffering from the misery life all day long. Eventually, Liu Xijun brought the instrument “琵琶” with her to soothe her longings all the way. “琵琶别抱” refers to the remarrying of a woman in Chinese culture. In the original text, “the lady would be the wife of another” is exactly equivalent to the meaning of “琵琶别抱” and by adaptation, the Chinese readers would better enjoy the flavor of the tale.

2.3 Contextual Amplification

Xia Tingde (2006, p.203) proposed that contextual amplification is a way of translating the source language literally with an addition of some appropriate words in the target language to better explain the original schema in his book *The Study on Translation Compensation*. Contextual amplification means to explain the content which the

source readers take for granted while the target readers get puzzled at. This compensation strategy helps to reserve the original cultural image and simultaneously to compensate for the loss resulted from the cultural default. If the cultural information needed for the target readers is not too much, then contextual amplification is an optimal option to ensure the coherence and clarity of the translation.

Example 5:

SL: “喂，阿驹，你现在是党老爷了，地面上的情形一点也不熟悉，你这党老爷怎么干的下去呀！”

(茅盾：《子夜》)

TT: “But now: you are a party man—one of the elite! If you are going to do your job properly, you must get to know about local conditions.”

(许孟雄、A.C.Barnes 译)

Analysis: In this example, ‘党老爷’ is a unique Chinese expression, suggesting those with high social status in the party. When translating the Chinese term, the translator did not mechanically translate ‘党老爷’ into “a party man”, but added several new words to make a further explanation about this expression. ‘One of the elite’ is used to compensate for the meaning of “a party man” and the image of ‘党老爷’ is depicted vividly so that the target readers could form a comprehensive understanding about the character. Social cultural default exists in this context and by contextual amplification, the cultural image in the original text could be retained and the cultural default compensated adequately. In this case, amplification is in line with the principle of demand.

Example 6:

SL: There is no institution for whose history I have a deeper admiration; but I can not honestly be ordained her minister, as my brothers are, while she refuses to liberate her mind from an untenable redemptive theology.

(*Tess of the d'Urbervilles* by Hardy)

TT: 任何制度的历史都没有能像这种制度的历史那样使我敬慕。但是有一件，要是它的思想不能从让人没法拥护的“供奉上帝来赎罪”的观念里解放出来，我就不能忠诚地老实地受委任做它的牧师，像我那两个哥哥那样。

(张谷若译)

Analysis: In this example, ‘redemptive theology’ is a unique term with special cultural characteristic, closely associated with Christianity. In Christian theology, redemption means the deliverance of Christians from sin and freedom from captivity. In other words, redemption is an important religious concept referring to the absolution or forgiveness for past sins and has something to do with Jesus, believed to be the incarnation of the God the Son. When translating “redemptive theology”, the translator did not simply deal with it literally but added several words to explain the meaning of the expression—to atone for his or her crime via consecrating the God. The translator made further explanation about the unique English term through

amplification as an effort to assist the readers form a better understanding about the text. This case could be categorized into religious cultural default. To employ relevant strategy to compensate for the loss resulted from religious cultural default is of great significance in literary translation. In this case, principle of focus is achieved to highlight the most important content of ‘redemptive theology’ in this text so as to maximize the function of compensation.

2.4 Paraphrase

Paraphrase means that the translator abandons translating the original schema of the source language, which is devoid of the counterpart in the target language and is reduced to representing the main idea of it in the translation. If there are too many cultural images or too much information in the original text, annotation will not be an effective way to compensate for the loss and under this circumstance, paraphrase seems to be more efficient to make up for the loss caused by cultural default.

Example 7:

SL: 所以过了几天，掌柜说我干不了这事，幸亏荐头的情面大，辞退不得，便改为专管温酒的一种无聊职务了。

(《孔乙己》)

TT: So after few days my employer decided I was not suited for this work. Fortunately I had been recommended by someone influential, so he could not dismiss me, and I was transferred to the dull work of warming wine.

(杨宪益、戴乃迭译)

Analysis: In this example, “掌柜” refers to those in charge of the counter and currently means the shopkeeper or the manager of a shop in modern culture. In this context, the translator chooses to use “my employer” to directly explicate the real meaning of “掌柜” in an attempt to help the target readers to comprehend what the Chinese term means. The appearance of “掌柜” leads to social cultural default. Translators are supposed to employ proper paraphrase to ensure readers to develop a correct comprehension about the source text so as to better appreciate the text.

Example 8:

SL: “I know, Dad,” she said, “I’m a selfish pig. I’ll think about it.”

(J.Galsworthy: A Modern Comedy)

TT: “我知道，爸爸，”她说，“我是个自私自利的蠢人。我会考虑这件事的。”

(汪偶然译)

Analysis: In this example, the image of “pig” was translated into “蠢人” owing to the fact that the word “pig” is not an appropriate expression in this context. In Chinese culture, pig stands for something filthy or dirty, suggesting derogatory sense. People will not usually use the word to describe a person, let alone a decent lady. It is extremely hard for the Chinese readers to envisage that the word

may be uttered by such a gentlewoman. The image and implication of the animal pig is quite different in Chinese and western cultures. While translated into ‘蠢人’, the expression is in accordance with the context in a way to better convey the cultural information in the original text. Ecological cultural default exists in this case, which includes animals, plant, geographical environment and so forth and the referential meanings of these images vary from culture to culture. Translators are expected to iron out the problem caused by ecological cultural default via paraphrase. In this case, the principle of the same function is obtained to compensate for the image in original text.

CONCLUSION

Cultural default always gets in the way of translation. If translators choose to be faithful to the original text, the target readers may get confused about the meaning. Conversely, if translated thoroughly, the aesthetic value would be impaired. In terms of the cultural default, the translator is supposed to feel obligated to take relevant methods to compensate for the loss caused by cultural default and help the author and target readers to cross the cultural gap as part of the efforts to promote cultural exchanges. Nida brought forth that for truly successful translating, biculturalism is even more important than bilingualism, since words only have meanings in terms of the cultures in which they function in his book *Language, Culture and Translating* (1993:110). One of the principles for translation compensation is to assist the target readers to enjoy the cultural exploration. Without

compensation, the cultural information and aesthetic value could not be conveyed properly. In translating process, to truly compensate cultural default and maximize the equivalence between the source language and the target language require more than one or two strategies. The translator must combine different methods to formulate a most appropriate strategy so as to satisfy the demand of both the original author and the target readers. To set up a bridge for cultural communication between different nations is the top priority for translators and they have to sum up their translating experience via practice and use the compensation strategies in a more flexible way to create translation with high caliber.

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