

## Translation of Geographical Dialect in *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* From the Perspective of Specificity

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### Abstract

*Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* is the representative work of Mo Yan with a great many of geographical dialects, which can convey the regional characteristics and the theme of this novel. A good translation version by Goldblatt can transmit the original text meaning for western people. The paper aims to study the geographic dialect translation in Mo Yan’s novel *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* in the light of specificity of Construal theory for the purpose of proving the feasibility of specificity in geographical dialect translation. Higher level of specificity can make the translation more detailed and precise by the use of annotation and further explanation, while lower level of specificity can guide translators using omission in their translation process to achieve the concise effect. Guided by proper specificity, remarkable translation of geographical dialect can be produced by taking advantage of suitable translation methods, which is conducive to the understanding of Mo Yan’s novel for the western readers.

**Key words:** Construal theory; specificity; *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*; geographical dialect; translation

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### INTRODUCTION

As one of the most outstanding writers in China, Mo Yan has aroused scholars’ great attention and interest at home and abroad. His achievement attributes not only to his writing quality and special skills, but also the perfect translation of Goldblatt, and thus the translation of Mo Yan’s novels should be given more focus on by translators and scholars. There is no doubt that great translation version can represent vivid stories that original texts expect to show for foreign readers, and provide remarkable reading experience for readers. Goldblatt tries his best to do faithful translation work based on his understanding of Mo Yan’s novels, including cultural, social and historical factors which affect Mo Yan’s novels writing. At the same time, Goldblatt also give some reproduction to cater to target language reader’s needs. The national scholar Wang Ning (2012, pp.5-11) points out that although there are many outstanding writers in our country, Mo Yan is definitely lucky for meeting an excellent translator—Goldblatt, whose translation is not only retelling Mo Yan’s stories in English to some extent, but also greatly improving the language expressing.

Translation of Mo Yan’s novels attracts a great number of scholars to study, and up to now, many scholars have made great contributions to the study of Mo Yan’s novels translation from different perspectives by adopting different theories, which also summarized detailed translating strategies suitable for Mo Yan’s works translation. In light of the previous researches on Mo Yan’s novels translation, the most frequently adopted theories are the Rewriting Theory and the Skopos Theory, and other theories also applied are the Relevance Theory, Translation Compensation Theory and the Eco-translatology. However, few have introduced Construal Theory in the explanation of Mo Yan’s novels translation. According to the previous studies on Goldblatt’s translation of Mo Yan’s novels, it is clear that Goldblatt tries his best to restore the content of original text and

makes some reproduction in his translation to meet the target reader's demand, which is caused by different construal ways between the author and translator.

One of the most noticeable characteristics in Mo Yan's novels is the combination of dialect and standard languages, and dialect, as the important component of geographic culture, plays greatly important role in revealing Mo Yan's literary creation concept and its theme and style, which deserves to attach great importance to the study of the dialect. Owing to the use of dialect, Mo Yan's works are abundant with local flavor and the unique charm of human nature in his hometown. This paper analyses the translation of one kind of the dialects—geographical dialect in the light of specificity in Construal theory through choosing cases from *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* in order to demonstrate that specificity is applicable in the explanation of the dialect translation in Mo Yan's novels.

## 1. GEOGRAPHICAL DIALECT AND LIFE AND DEATH ARE WEARING ME OUT

One of the distinctive features in Mo Yan's novel *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* is the use of geographical dialect which is one of categories of dialect. The paper will study the translation of geographical dialect by choosing proper examples from *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*.

### 1.1 Dialect

Dialect refers to linguistic varieties which are grammatically, lexically as well as phonologically different from other varieties. It can be regarded as subdivisions of a particular language (Chambers & Trudgill, 1990, pp.3-5).

According to Catford (1965, pp.85-89), dialect can be divided into geographical dialect, temporal dialect, social dialects, and idiolect. Geographical dialect refers to the language differentiation with regional characteristics, such as Shandong dialect, Beijing dialect and Cantonese; when dialect is shared by speakers of a social group, it is called social dialect, such as trade terms and jargon; an idiolect is a language variety of an individual speech, which has to do with "idiosyncratic" ways of using language. Temporal dialect originate in the different times that different users apply this kind of linguistic variety in.

### 1.2 Geographical Dialect

Language varieties correspond to geographical variation, giving rise to different geographical dialects (Basil Hatim & Ian Mason, 1997, p.40). The demarcation lines among different geographical dialects lie in linguistic respects as well as political or cultural consideration. According to Basil Hatim and Ian Mason (1997, p.41), it is obvious that to achieve dialectal equivalence in translation is a little difficult for the translators. If translators render ST dialect

by TL standard, special effect intended in the ST may be lost, whereas unintended effect may be created while rendering dialect by dialect. Therefore, it is the hallmark of the competent translators to be sensitive to the features of different geographical dialect.

### 1.3 *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*

Although it is criticized a lot in China, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, published in 2006, is the most famous novel in western literature circle. It won Fukuoka Asian Culture Awards in 2006, and achieved the Second Dream of Red Mansion Awards and the Newman Prize for Chinese Literature in 2008. Among all the Mo Yan's works, the reason that *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* awarded significant admiration in the internet arena is partly owing to its combination of history and contemporary, hallucinatory realism and folk tales.

The novel reflects the relationship between the land and farmers and the critical issues in the history and the contemporary of China as well. What is distinctive is this novel is described by a variety of animals, and the huge changes and reforms in China's rural life are shown graphically for readers from the perspective of animals.

## 2. SPECIFICITY OF CONSTRUAL THEORY

Many scholars believe that translation should be faithful to the original work. However, it is impractical for translators to be totally faithful to the original work. Translation process includes two activities, that is, the understanding of the source language text and the production of target language text. Translators have different construal during translation process and thus have their own opinions while doing the translation work. However, although translation of Mo Yan's novels has attracted a great deal of people's attention and many scholars have made many researches on it under different theories, few studies have applied Construal Theory.

What is important when understanding an expression's meaning is not only the conceptual content, but also the construal process in the content understanding. According to Langacker (2008, p.55), the content can be compared as a scene, and construal as a special and specific way to look upon it. While we see the scene, what we view in fact is up to the distance that we examine it, the subject we choose to pay attention to, the elements we value highly of, and the position in which we view it. These respects can be corresponding to the construal phenomena, that is, specificity, focusing, prominence, and perspective respectively (Langacker, 2008, p.55). Afterward, Langacker (1991, p.4) defines construal as the ability to construe the same content with different methods, and he affords a reclassification of construal, that is, specificity, domain, background, perspective, and prominence.

As one of the dimension of construal, specificity can be termed as the degree of precision and detail based on the communicative need and describers' purposes at which a situation is characterized (Langacker, 2008, p.55), which can also be called granularity and resolution. Different construal can be generated by applying different specificity while speakers describe the same thing. More specific expressions can describe a situation with fine-grained detail and high resolution, while lesser specific expression just can reveal the macro characteristics and general features with coarse-grained and low resolution.

Specificity can be represented from both lexical and sentential level, which can describe a situation by different words or sentences with different granularity and resolution.

On the one hand, specificity can be embodied in the lexical level.

- a) Color> green> deep green
- b) Aircraft> airliner> jet engine
- c) Musical instrument> strings> violin
- d) Subject> creature> animal> bird> magpie
- e) Discipline> chemistry> organic chemistry> chemical equation
- f) Equipment> computing settings> computer> laptop> monitor

On the other hand, specificity can be embodied in the sentential level.

- a) Something happened.
- b) Somebody broke something.
- c) Somebody broke the vase.
- d) Somebody totally shattered the vase in the bedroom.
- e) Amy totally shattered Tom's vase in the bedroom by hitting it accidentally with a brand-new wooden-handled claw hammer.

The following word or sentence is more specific and detailed than the last one, which is the refining mode on the basis of the last word sentence and provides more information for us.

### 3. SPECIFICITY AND TRANSLATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL DIALECT

Some mistranslations of geographic dialect in translation are due to the unsuitable translation methods guided by inappropriate application of specificity, which gives rise to the incompletely comprehension of the original for western readers. Consequently, geographical dialect should be translated with the proper application of specificity theory as well as suitable translation methods and skills for the reading and understanding purpose. The following part will analyze several cases of mistranslation as the result of the unsuitable guidance of specificity and appropriate specificity should be employed for the choice of several suitable translation methods during the translation process in order to reduce the risk of

mistranslation and provide remarkable translation and reading experience for western readers.

#### 3.1 Mistranslation of Geographical Dialect

As the specificity that Goldblatt applies is not proper, some mistakes exist in his translation version so that the geographic dialect translation does not be translated fully and the connotation does not be conveyed completely with the risk of reducing of regional characteristics.

Example 1:

地主羔子猛地一撅屁股，将我撅到一边。(Mo Yan, 2006, p.115)

The landlord's kid arched upward and flung me off his back. (Goldblatt, 2008)

“地主羔子”，a derogatory term, refers to the kid of landlord, which is used as an abusive expression to somebody. Goldblatt does not further explain “地主羔子” in order to make the target readers understanding the literal meaning of the phrase and maintain the flavor of geographical dialect in literature, which is the embodiment of the lower level specificity. However, the lower level of specificity does not show the foreign readers the derogatory meaning of “地主羔子” and the translation of “landlord's kid” is not suitable for the context. Therefore, the choice of the application of lower level of specificity is not suitable here owing to reduce details and precision.

Example 2:

在我大口吞咽时发出的“呱嗒呱嗒”的响声里，白氏总是要感慨万端地表扬我：“猪十六啊，猪十六，你真是头不挑食的好猪啊！”(Mo, 2006, p.247)

I gobbled it up so noisily she invariably said with an emotional sigh: “Pig Sixteen, you're such a good little pig, you eat whatever I give you.” (Goldblatt, 2008)

“呱嗒呱嗒” is the phrase to describe the sound of a Pig Sixteen eating food here, which has the rhythm. Goldblatt omits “呱嗒呱嗒” and just translates “响声” into “noisily”. In the sight of specificity, lower level of specificity can make the text more concise, and can directly transfer the consequence of “呱嗒呱嗒”，and the word “noisily”，can make the readers understand the context easily. However, the application of lower level of specificity does not convey the rhythmic sound while the Pig Sixteen eats food.

Example 3:

“洪书记？”金龙乜斜着眼说，“洪书记算个鸡巴？！他找我训话，我还要找他训话呢！”(Mo, 2006, p.261)

“Secretary Hong?” Jinlong looked up out of the corner of his eye. “Secretary Hong's a prick! I'll give him hell!” (Goldblatt, 2008)

“乜斜” describes a look of dissatisfaction and arrogance by squinting at something out of the corner of one's eye. According to the words of Jinlong, readers can perceive his dissatisfaction and arrogance, therefore Goldblatt applies the less specific translation to just

translate the word “斜” into “looked up out of the corner of his eye” and does not translate the word “乜” to show Jinlong’s dissatisfaction of arrogance. Although lower level of specificity can make the text concise without influencing the understanding of the context, the geographical dialect “乜斜” does not fully be translated and its flavor does not be shown for the western people.

### 3.2 Translation of Geographical Dialect Under the Proper Specificity

With the inappropriate application of specificity, Goldblatt could not convey the meaning of geographic dialect totally, which reduces the geographical flavor for the western readers and does not construe the geographical dialect equally with Mo Yan.

Therefore, based on the specific situation and different objectives, translators should adopt various translation methods and skills when translating geographical dialect in the light of proper specificity, such as annotation, omission, further explanation and so on to decrease the errors in translation caused by inappropriate application of specificity. Higher level of specificity is to make the information more specific and detailed by adding some information or further explanation, while lower level of specificity results in the concise text to reduce the cumbersome or repeated messages in order to simplify the original text.

#### Example 4:

地主羔子猛地一撅屁股，将我撅到一边。(Mo, 2006, p.115)

The landlord’s kid arched upward and flung me off his back (Goldblatt, 2008).

The meaning of “一撅屁股” is making the body as an arch by bending the bow to make the bottom high with a great force. “Arch upward” provides readers the vivid picture that the author wants to show, which also expresses the strength of the “撅”. With the omission method, Goldblatt does not translate the word “屁股” into “bottom” based on his construal with the application of lower level of specificity, in order to reduce the cumbersome expression to make target readers understand the original text vividly and clearly. Based on the context, “撅到一边” here has the implication that “I” was pushed off the back of Jin Long, not push off in front of Jin Long or beside Jin Long. Based on the higher level of specificity, Goldblatt uses the annotation to add the expression “back” to make the information more specific which is better for the understanding of the target readers.

#### Example 5:

但正如俗谚所说：“打不瘸的狗腿，戳不瞎的牛眼”，你的眼睛没瞎。(Mo, 2006, p.117)

But as the saying goes, “You cannot cripple a dog and you cannot blind an ox: your eyesight was spared.” (Goldblatt, 2008)

The author uses the proverb to prove that “Ximen ox could not be blind even though he is whipped by Ximen

Jinlong”. The meaning of the saying is to describe that the dog could not be crippled and the ox is not easy to be blind. Goldblatt omits the verb “打” and “戳” according to the principle of lower level of specificity construing the original text meaning, for “打” and “戳” are not the only actions to make the dog crippled and the ox blind, but just used to emphasize the strong vitality of the dog and ox. The method omission is adopted to reduce the length of the sentence and to make the proverb concise and accurate.

#### Example 6:

我对他这种六亲不认的行为极为反感，不时地拿话刺他。(Mo, 2006, p.128)

His attitude of forsaking friends and family disgusted me, and I took every opportunity to let him know how I felt (Goldblatt, 2008).

“拿话刺他” refers to satirizing somebody with some bad words in order to make somebody know the speaker does not like him/her and the speaker feel angry for his/her behavior. Goldblatt does not translate “拿话刺他” into “satire”, instead he further translates it as “let him know how I felt” which adds the implied meaning and the purpose of the “拿话刺他” in his translation. With the further explanation in his translation, the relationship between “Ximen Jinlong” and “I” can be recognized by the target readers. This further explanation is the application of higher level of specificity of Goldblatt, achieving the purpose that the construal way of Goldblatt is the same as Mo Yan.

#### Example 7:

每当我抓起土坷垃，爹就吼叫：“解放，你想干什么？”“我要教训这个畜生！”我恨恨地说。(Mo, 2006, p.128)

I reached down and picked up a dirt clod.

“Jiefang, what do you think you’re doing?” he roared.

“I want to teach this swine a lesson!” I said angrily (Goldblatt, 2008).

“土坷垃” refers to “clod”. However, Goldblatt does not translate “土坷垃” into “clod” directly, instead he employs the annotation to add the word “dirt” to modify “clod”, which is more specific than the original text. The reason that Goldblatt applies the higher level of specificity is that higher level of specificity can make the original text more detailed and it can make the meaning of the original text construed better. “Dirt” provides the characteristics of “clod” for the target readers, which are also a metaphor to show the dirty heart of Ximen Jinlong. Therefore, with the higher level of specificity, the metaphoric meaning can be presented for readers. Similarly, “畜生”, the gross expression of animals, is the abusive expression to somebody and Goldblatt refines the specificity to translate “畜生” into “swine” to compare Ximen Jinlong as swine which makes the expression more vividly.

#### Example 8:

刁小三这杂种，吧嗒着嘴，把我的尿咽下去。(Mo, 2006, p.223)

He swallowed what for him was top-quality medicine. (Goldblatt, 2008)

When people eat or drink something, they always smash their lips to swallow the food or liquids, that is “吧嗒着嘴”. Goldblatt does not translate the expression “吧嗒着嘴” because this expression has the similar meaning with the following word “swallow”. Consequently, the omission of “吧嗒着嘴” is to simplify the expression by construing the original text with the application of coarse specificity. By using lower level of specificity, the repeated content can be ignored to make the expression more succinct.

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## CONCLUSION

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One of the characteristics of *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* is the use of geographical dialects, which is one of respects to appreciate this novel. Therefore, a good translation of these geographical dialects is beneficial for western readers to understand this novel, which is worthy studying. According to the study of the paper, it is proved that specificity of Construal theory under the guidance of geographical dialects translation is feasible. Higher level of specificity in the translation can make the original text more detailed with high precision by the application of annotation and further explanation methods, while lower level of specificity can cut down the redundancy of information in the original text by

the usage of omission method. For this reason, various translation methods and skills should be used during the geographical dialect translation based on the different cases and various purposes with the guidance of the proper specificity in Construal theory, serving for the geographical dialects in Mo Yan’s novel getting through to the western readers.

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