

A Corpus-Based Study on the Styles of Three Translators

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Abstract—The present paper is preoccupied with the different styles of three translators in their translating a Chinese classical novel *Shuihu Zhuan*. Based on a parallel corpus, it adopts a target-oriented approach to look into whether and what stylistic differences and shifts the three translations have revealed. The findings show that the three translators demonstrate different styles concerning their word choices and sentence preferences, which implies that identification of recurrent textual patterns may be a basic step for investigating the style of a translator.

Keywords—Corpus, lexical choices, sentence characteristics, style.

I. INTRODUCTION

THE rise of corpus linguistics has serious impacts on the study of translation. Since Baker explored the synergy between these two emerging disciplines in her seminal paper *Corpus Linguistics and Translation Studies-Implications and Applications* [1], there have been many researches on parallel corpora including both literary texts and non-literary texts. Most of those focus on the description of specific aspects of translation language with aims to identify universals in translation on one hand and investigate idiosyncratic styles of individual translators on the other.

A quantity of large-scale parallel or translation corpora have been built such as The Translational English Corpus (TEC), The Lancaster Corpus of Mandarin Chinese (LCMC), The Corpus of Translated Finnish, The English-Swedish Parallel Corpus, and The Babel English-Chinese Parallel Corpus. The present study is based on a parallel corpus called The Parallel Corpus of Four Chinese Classics. They have granted me access to this corpus, which makes it possible to incorporate a corpus-based methodology into this descriptive translation study.

Among the four Chinese classics, the most frequently researched is *Honglou Meng*, whereas the other three seem to be left in the shadows despite the fact that these four actually enjoy equal status in Chinese literature. The present study shall take one of the less-researched classics—*Shuihu Zhuan* and its English translations as the objects of study. *Shuihu Zhuan* is a 14th century novel written in vernacular Chinese. The story, backgrounded in the Song Dynasty, tells of how a group of 108 outlaws gather at Mount Liang (or Liangshan Marsh) to form a sizable army to rebel against officialism and assert justice. The corpus used here includes one Chinese source text and three

English target texts. A target-oriented approach is adopted so that primarily focuses on three English texts to investigate the different styles of the three translators. Brief references are made to the source text only when it is necessary.

The three target texts that shall be examined are *All Men Are Brothers* by Pearl S. Buck in 1933 [4], *Outlaws of the Marsh* by Sydney Shapiro in 1980 [14] and *The Marshes of Mount Liang* by John and Alex Dent-Young between 1994 and 2002 [6]. Because of the complexity arising from different editions of the source text(s), only the 70 chapters which are shared in the three source texts are chosen as the corpora.

II. PREVIOUS STUDIES

The study of style has always been a concern of translation studies, because translation studies have “inherited from literary studies its preoccupation with the style of individual creative writers and from linguistics the preoccupation with the style of social groups of language users” [2]. But for a long time, most of the attempts aimed to apply various interpretations of style to elaborating criteria for quality assessment, most prominently the efforts made by House [7], [8]. Style is used as a parameter to explain the choices made by individual translators or more frequently to prescribe guidelines for the selection of proper strategies on the basis of stylistic categories in relation to text types or registers.

Baker’s investigating the style of a literary translator is probably among the pioneering attempts made to systematically describe the particular language use in translation in combination with corpus studies. She led a team in the University of Manchester to build a large computerized corpus of English texts translated from a variety of source languages, which later became one of the largest translation corpora; the TEC. Backed by this corpus, Baker has conducted a multitude of research projects both on translation universals and on individual translators. She looked into the specific feature of reporting structures used in translation by comparing a sub-corpus of two translators in TEC against the general use in BNC. It was found that there is a marked overall preference for using that connective in reporting structures in translation. However, when it comes to individual translators, she further identified vast variations in their practice, which presumably reflects the characteristic style of each translator.

Thanks to her initiative, the recent decade has witnessed a surge of corpus-based researches across various languages in translation studies. Scholars such as Laviosa [11]-[12], Mauranen [9] and Nilsson [10] have done many corpus-based researches in terms of translated texts from different registers. Some of their findings also shed light on the present study.

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III. ASPECTS OF STYLE

The concept of style is a complex one. In terms of translation, according to Boase-Beier, style at least includes two aspects: (i) the style of the source text as perceived by the translator and (ii) the style of the target text as an expression of choices made by its translator [3]. Since the present study adopts a target-oriented approach, the style of the source text as perceived by the translator does not fall under observation. The present study will mainly focus on each translator's characteristic use of language by describing their preferred or recurring patterns of linguistic behavior rather than individual instances. Comparison shall be made against each other at two levels: Lexical choices and syntactic features.

WordSmith (4.0) is used to process the corpora. In the following sections, we will first describe some patterns we have identified in the three target texts and then offer a number of possible explanations for these patterns with reference to the context, or more specifically the dominant ideology and cultural background behind each translator.

A. Lexical Choices

The patterns each translator has demonstrated in lexical choices relate to such statistics as type/token ratio, word length and frequency. They are presented as they are encountered in the translations as generic features themselves, with little or no reference to the source text.

Obvious differences among the three translators can be found in terms of the overall token number, type number and type/token ratio. The figures in Table I show that the number of tokens in *The Marshes of Mount Liang* is much greater than that in the other two. Many previous studies have indicated that in translation there is a tendency of explicitation in language use [2], [13], [16], [17]. Since the three translations are based on nearly the same edition of the source text with very little variations, the higher token number in *The Marshes of Mount Liang* can be regarded as a sign of the greater extent to which explicitation has been employed by John and Alex Dent-Young, while the other two are not so conspicuous. The great contrast in terms of type number between *All Men Are Brothers* and *The Marshes of Mount Liang* can also evince this prominent feature of explicitation in John and Alex Dent-Young's translation. The various words they have used are twice the variety of the words in Pearl S. Buck's translation, while Sydney Shapiro tends to be intermediate.

Now let us look at the type/token ratios and standardized TTR in the three translations. Baker has argued that type/token ratio is "a measure of the range and diversity of vocabulary used by a language user" [2], whether it is a writer or a translator. Presumably a high type/token ratio means that the language user utilizes a wider range of vocabulary, while a low one suggests a more restricted set of vocabulary items. At the same time, she also points out that standardized type/ratio figures are much more reliable than raw type/token figures, especially if the texts and sub-corpora used are of different lengths [2]. In our case, the figures coming from both the type/token ratio and standardized TTR are rather consistent with each other. Both of them are much lower for Pearl S.

Buck's translation (1.52/34.45) compared with the other two translators (Shapiro: 2.68/44.57; John and Alex Dent-Young: 2.35/42.49). The standardized TTR in TEC narrative sub-corpus is 44.63 [11], to which *Outlaws of the Marsh* and *The Marshes of Mount Liang* are very close. This again indicates that Pearl S. Buck has drawn on a very restricted range of words in her translation. In studies of original English, Baker has found that texts addressed to "non-native speakers of English tend to have a lower type/token ratio than those addressed to native speakers" [2]. Given the fact that Pearl S. Buck is a native English writer with a Nobel Prize for Literature, the very low type/token ratio in her translation might be interpreted as a strong effort to mediate the original Chinese vernacular texts by making them less challenging linguistically. Perhaps as an inhabitant in China for many years, she realized that English readers may encounter sufficient challenges in digesting the details of an alien world, with diametrically different values, behaviors and style of life. Further contextualization shall be made in the discussion part.

TABLE I
BASIC STATISTICS OF THREE TEXTS

| Translator | Pearl S. Buck | Sydney Shapiro | John & Alex Dent-Young |
|----------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Translation | <i>All Men Are Brothers</i> | <i>Outlaws of the Marsh</i> | <i>The Marshes of Mount Liang</i> |
| Tokens in text | 565521 | 534192 | 737729 |
| Types | 8632 | 14324 | 17329 |
| Type/token ratio | 1.52 | 2.68 | 2.35 |
| Standardized TTR | 34.45 | 44.57 | 42.49 |
| Mean word length | 3.91 | 4.33 | 4.28 |
| Sentences | 26095 | 47246 | 48870 |
| Mean sentence length | 21.67 | 11.31 | 15.10 |

TABLE II
PERCENTAGE OF WORD LENGTH

| Translator | Pearl S. Buck | Sydney Shapiro | John & Alex Dent-Young |
|-------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Translation | <i>All Men Are Brothers</i> | <i>Outlaws of the Marsh</i> | <i>The Marshes of Mount Liang</i> |
| 1-letter | 3.14 | 3.02 | 3.10 |
| 2-letter | 17.26 | 15.12 | 15.76 |
| 3-letter | 28.08 | 24.22 | 24.80 |
| 4-letter | 23.13 | 20.43 | 20.49 |
| 5-letter | 11.55 | 12.13 | 11.77 |
| 6-letter | 7.12 | 8.30 | 8.02 |
| 7-letter | 4.83 | 7.41 | 6.93 |
| 8-letter | 2.80 | 4.62 | 4.31 |
| 9-letter | 1.18 | 2.37 | 2.48 |
| 10-letter | 0.65 | 1.48 | 1.34 |

Statistics concerning word length also reveal this divergence in the three translators' consideration. For Shapiro and John and Alex Dent-Young, the mean word lengths are 4.33 and 4.28 respectively, which are very close to the mean word length in the narrative sub-corpus of TEC. Yet, it is much lower for Pearl S. Buck. This reinforces our above interpretation that she is aware of acceptability of her translation in the target system and therefore tends to use more words with relatively simple spelling to decrease reading difficulties for the target audience.

B. Syntactic Characteristics

Syntactic characteristics of each translation can first be reflected in sentence number and sentence length. The figures in Table I show that Pearl S. Buck prefers to write long sentences, while Sydney Shapiro obviously uses a greater number of short sentences. The total number of sentences in *All Men Are Brothers* is only about half of the number in the other two, although its tokens are more than that in *Outlaws of the Marsh*. Laviosa has found that the average sentence length in translation exceeds that of native English texts of the same register to a considerable degree [11]. She examines the differences between original English narratives and translation narrative texts by comparing two sub-corpora at sentence level. The mean sentence length for the former is 15.6 words, whereas the latter is 24.1 words. It follows that narrative translations are characteristic of longer sentences. In the three narrative texts under observation here, Pearl S. Buck exhibits this feature. The mean sentence length in her translation is nearly double that of Sydney Shapiro's. A retrospective study on the source text is likely to reveal more about the strategies adopted by different translators.

The language used in *Shuihu Zhuan* is vernacular in the Northern Song Dynasty, a transitional form between classical Chinese and modern Chinese. Genealogically, this type of vernacular fiction is believed to bear a close affinity to Chinese traditional story-telling art form, so it is characterized by being easy to verbalize with the use of colloquialism. It causes the phenomenon that, although the clauses are rather short, a sentence may include many clauses.

TABLE III
SENTENCE PARALLELISM IN PERCENTAGE

| Translator | Pearl S. Buck | Sydney Shapiro | John & Alex Dent-Young |
|-------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Translation | <i>All Men Are Brothers</i> | <i>Outlaws of the Marsh</i> | <i>The Marshes of Mount Liang</i> |
| 1C-1E | 47.56 | 21.68 | 31.23 |
| 1C-2E | 21.12 | 32.12 | 30.76 |
| 1C-3E | 16.08 | 23.16 | 21.80 |
| 1C-4+E | 3.24 | 13.25 | 4.69 |
| 2C-1E | 1.53 | 1.23 | 3.77 |
| 2C-2E | 4.13 | 3.19 | 2.02 |
| 2C-3+E | 4.83 | 4.31 | 3.93 |
| 3C-1E | 0.91 | 0.62 | 0.91 |
| 3C-2E | 0.28 | 0.36 | 0.48 |

Apart from the general statistics on sentence number and sentence length, a close look at the Chinese-English sentence parallelism with percentage in Table III may reveal more details. First, contrasted with the average sentence parallelism rate of 63.6% for literary texts observed by Wang based on a large-scale parallel corpus of Chinese/English translation of modern literature [17], the percentages of one-to-one sentence parallelism in these three translations (47.56%, 21.68% and 31.23%) are rather low. This comparatively low rate might be attributed to the inherent long-sentence convention in the source text. Therefore in many cases, they have chosen to translate one long Chinese sentence into two or three English

sentences, particularly for Sydney Shapiro and John and Alex Dent-Young.

On the other hand, this might offer a justified explanation to the high mean sentence length in Pearl S. Buck's case. In her translation, the percentage of one Chinese sentence to an equivalent one in English (47.56%) has exceeded twice that of Shapiro's (21.68%), and is also much higher than John and Alex Dent-Young (31.23%). One assumption underlying this contrast might be that Pearl S. Buck regards a sentence as a translation unit at a macro textual level, and so she has made more efforts in adhering to the syntactical structure of the source text while the other two naturally split the long sentences into shorter and more accessible sentences in English. Some examples are shown below.

Examples (1)

TT1. On that day as Ling Ch'ung walked idly along and as he suddenly heard someone call from behind him, when he turned to see who it was he recognized Li The Second, a man who serves in a wine shop who had lived in the eastern capital and one who had received much help from Ling Ch'ung.

TT2. Lin Chong was strolling along, when someone behind him called his name. //He turned around and saw the tavern waiter Li Xiao-er. //When they first became acquainted in the Eastern Capital, Lin had helped him financially several times.

TT3. The story tells that as Lin Chong was taking a stroll that day he suddenly heard someone call his name. //Turning to look, he saw it was Young Li, a waiter whom he had once helped out when he was in the Eastern Capital.

Examples (2)

TT1. And Ch'ai Chin gave him a parting feast, and Wu Sung wore a new red silk, quilted, padded coat and he wore a hat of sheepskin and he shouldered his bundle and took up his club and thought to say farewell and go on his way.

TT2. Chai Jin gave him a farewell feast. //Wu Song was wearing a new red silk robe and a broad-brimmed hat of white felt. //He shouldered his pack, took up his staff, and bid his friends goodbye.

TT3. But first Chai Jin laid on a little send-off party. //Wu Song was wearing a new robe of fine red silk and a white Fanyang hat. //With his pack on his shoulders and carrying his cudgel he was finally on the point of leaving.

Some Western scholars, without referring to the source text, claimed the Pearl S. Buck has adopted a biblical style in her translation [15]. However, our finding may supply a supplementary yet more grounded explanation from the other side—interference from the source text.

IV. DISCUSSION

The results of the present analysis suggest that word choices and sentence preferences have significant implications as a basic step for investigating the style of a translator. Some macroscopic patterns can be identified to reveal the style of each translator and the strategy adopted. But this is not an end

in itself. A further exploration of what might have motivated for the stylistic patterns could be worthwhile and relevant. The three translators have done their translation at different times in history.

Pearl S. Buck was the first translator who brought a full translation of this two-volume Chinese novel into English. Prior to hers, there were only partial translations of some excerpts. She translated the work into English in the 1930s. At that time, most of the target readers had no knowledge about Chinese culture at all, and so the problem of acceptability in the target system must have been brought onto the agenda of the translator. As she stated clearly in the preface, “in the matter of names of persons and places, since Chinese names seem ever difficult for Western readers, I have used one name only for each character throughout, although according to Chinese custom a man has several names” [4]. This paratext, as an explicit manifestation of the translator’s concern and consideration, might well explain the relatively restricted lexical density in her translation. However, at the syntactic level, the translator chose to adhere to the source text. This can also be seen in her preface, “I have translated it as literally as possible, because to me the style in Chinese is perfectly suited to the material” [4]. As a Chinese-based writer and translator, she had the sensitivity to Chinese style and a strong love for Chinese novel. Her Nobel lecture was entitled Chinese Novel and throughout her life, she has been “a human bridge between Chinese and Western cultures” [5]. Indeed she was eager to make the Western world know about China and Chinese culture and “should like readers who do not know that language to have at least the illusion that they are reading an original work” [4]. Therefore, although at the lexical level, she had to make a compromise in certain areas, she made great efforts to translate *Shuihu Zhuan* as literally as possible in order to unfold the real Chinese style before Western readers. This has been plainly manifested in the extraordinary correspondence in token number, sentence number and average sentence length between her translation and the source text.

Sydney Shapiro’s translation activity was carried out between 1970s and 1980s. During that period, the Chinese official publisher, Foreign Languages Press launched a series of translation projects to promote Chinese classics to the world with *Shuihu Zhuan*, *Honglou Meng* and *Xiyou Ji* published jointly with American publishers almost at the same time. As Sydney Shapiro once mentioned, the purpose for the government to have these Chinese classics translated and published is to make Chinese culture accessible to Western readers and to let the world learn about China [15]. This might well explain the reasons why he has been inclined toward a style similar to native English writing at both the word and the sentence levels. Obviously in Sydney Shapiro’s case, patronage and ideology play a decisive role in governing the translator’s strategy-making.

As for John and Alex Dent-Yong, they retranslated *Shuihu Zhuan* into English after the Millennium with globalization as the tide. The cultural gap between the West and China has been better bridged after a nearly one-century traverse. Our further exploration on some specific culture-related translation

problems will show that, unlike Pearl S. Buck’s literal strategy and Shapiro’s adaptation strategy, John and Alex Dent-Yong have chosen a strategy of transplantation combined with explanation. This leads to the fact that John and Alex Dent-Yong have incorporated most cultural notes in their translation, whereas Pearl S. Buck has ever acknowledged that “involving long historical explanation I have omitted sometimes where they are used in the original” [4]. Explanation is simply a way of explication in itself. There might be a reason for the higher token and type numbers in *The Marshes of Mount Liang*.

The present study only presents an initial analysis of some general stylistic features of the three translators. Further explorations of the parallel corpora at specific levels in relation to socio-cultural contextualization are to be made to reveal more details about the style of each translator and about the mechanisms that contribute to shaping their translation behavior.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author would like to thank Dr. Niu Dingjia, an academic staff from Yanshan University of mainland China for his kind help in providing relevant corpus data.

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