

Cultural Default and Its Translation Compensation Strategies from the Perspective of Relevance Theory — A Case Study of the Yao Naiqiang' Version of *the Scarlett Letter*

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Abstract—This paper takes the Chinese version of *the Scarlett Letter* by Yao Naiqiang, whose version has long been acclaimed as an authoritative translated text in China, as a case study to explore the translator's strategy of compensating cultural default. By comparing the examples of cultural default element in *the Scarlett Letter* with Yao's translation version, the paper analyzes what compensation strategies of Yao has employed and how does he manage to deal with the cultural default based on the relevance theory. This paper finds that the translator has mainly adopted such translation strategies as literal translation, contextual amplification, adaptation, as well as omission to compensate the cultural default in the Chinese version. This paper offers a good comprehension to the relevance theory and provides some effective compensation strategies for cultural default to gap the cultural misunderstandings and promote the cultural exchanges between countries.

Index Terms—Cultural default, relevance theory, *the Scarlett Letter*, translation compensation.

I. INTRODUCTION

As people from the same cultural background will normally reach a consensus to some tacit information in their culture, writers will omit some self-evident background knowledge or cultural common sense to improve communication efficiency when writing literary works, the phenomenon of which is called cultural default. However, in the process of literary translation, if the cultural default cannot be properly and effectively handled and compensated, it will cause difficulties for foreign target readers to understand the original text, thus hindering cross-cultural communication. Therefore, relevance theory, the emerging theory with cognition and communication as its core, shed new light on the rendering of cultural default.

Relevance translation theory is put forward by Gutt, who regards translation as a kind of verbal communicative behavior and it includes the double ostensive-inferential process among the author, the translator and the readers [1]. Therefore, the translator has the responsibility of inferring the informative intention and representing it clearly for target readers [2].

The Scarlett Letter has been acclaimed one of the most popular romantic works in the American history by Nathaniel Hawthorne [3]. This novel mainly depicts Hester's love tragedy in the colonial period. Hawthorne, in this novel, portrays Hester as a beautiful, virtuous, brave woman while exposes the cruelty of law, the hypocrisy of moral and puritanism. Many scholars have studied this novel mainly from the perspective of symbolism, feminism, writing techniques etc. As for studies on its Chinese translation versions, many studies have been done from the perspective of the feminism theory, the reception aesthetics theory, the manipulation theory etc. while few of them have explored the culture level of Chinese versions, let alone from the perspective of relevance theory. Moreover, Yao Naiqiang, a famous translator who emphasizes the combination of literal translation and free translation, with focusing on flexibly delivering the communicative intention and esthetic value of the translated text, has reproduced the original charm of the source text [4]. Despite of various Chinese versions of *the Scarlett Letter*, Yao's version is generally acclaimed as one of the best versions. Thus, this paper takes Yao's version as a case to study the compensation strategies of cultural default in *the Scarlett Letter* from the relevance theory, aiming to analyze some effective compensation strategies for cultural default such as literal translation, contextual amplification, omission, adaptation. Translators should adopt the flexible strategy to reduce readers' inferential effort and help them restore the original information and esthetic appreciation when doing translation works. This paper uses the methodology of content analysis and it aims to explore 3 questions: 1) How optimal relevance can be served as a guideline for tackling cultural default? 2) What compensation strategies does the translation employ to gap the cultural default based on the relevance theory? 3) What translation experience can be concluded by analyzing Yao's strategy for dealing with cultural default?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Though Hawthorne's masterpiece *the Scarlett Letter* was introduced to China early, and there have been many different versions so far, compared with the previous study on the original novel, the studies on various Chinese versions were not massive in China. According to the articles and thesis collected on the website of Chinese National

Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), there are sixty-three papers studying the topic of the translation of this novel, mainly from the following perspective. 1) The comparative analysis of the translation versions from different scope such as from the perspective of feminism translation, skopos theory, rewriting theory, manipulation theory etc. By comparing and analyzing the Chinese versions of *the Scarlet Letter* from different theoretical angles, they explored the translator's strategies in conveying the original meaning, esthetic value of the source text and communicative intention of the author, as well as the advantages and disadvantages of each translation versions. 2) Studies on the rendering of the narrative techniques of the translation versions. For example, Wang Ji [5] conducts an analysis of the translation schemas when presenting the symbolism values of the original text. She finds that translators have employed such translation technique as literal translation, explanation in the text, literal translation with notes, liberal translation and supplementary explanation to restore the symbolic value of the original text.

However, very few scholars have explored the cultural default of *the Scarlett Letter*, let alone from the perspective of relevance theory. Thus, this paper will employ the relevance theory to analyze the compensation strategies of cultural default in *the Scarlett Letter*.

III. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

In recent years, many scholars have turned their focus to the cultural respects of translation and it has been commonly agreed that translation is not simply a process of coding of original image and decoding it to target readers but an activity of intercultural communication [6]. As such, Professor Wang Dongfeng, who emphasizes the relation between translation and culture, put forward the concept of cultural default, which refers to the absence of relevant cultural background knowledge shared by the author and his/her intended readers [7].

As a common way to achieve efficiency and a useful writing technique to create brevity, cultural default, used consciously or unconsciously by the writer, exerts a blanks for foreign readers to fill in omitted elements that impede their understanding and appreciation, and will greatly affect the communicative intention and aesthetic value of the original work. Therefore, how to help the readers from alien culture to overcome cultural gap has become a huge obstacle for translators.

Relevance theory, put forward by Gutt, plays an even important role in illuminating the cultural default and provides some guidelines for translators to effectively compensate them. In view of Gutt, as a kind of communication, translation is viewed as a double ostensive-inferential process and an inter-lingual interpretative use of language under the principle of relevance theory [8]. According to relevance theory, translation is regarded as a dual ostensive-inferential process, which involves the interaction between three participants: the original writer, the translator and the source language

readers. The translator plays the role not only as a recipient but also a communicator [9]. In order to successfully transmit culturally defaulted elements, the responsibility of the cross-language translator is to select proper translation strategies which can create an optimally relevant context to make their cognitive environment mutually manifest so as to present the original writer's intention to the target readers by offering translated versions almost similar to the original one [10]. This dual process can be viewed as the activation of defaulted elements, therefore, the translator is responsible for making efforts to activate schemas stored in the readers' long-term memory to retrieve their past knowledge structures under the guidance of relevance theory, which lets readers get the writer's intention without unnecessary processing efforts [11]. Both cultural default and the relevance theory are cognition-oriented, so the principle of relevance theory can be applied by the translator to deal with cultural default in literary works.

IV. YAO'S COMPENSATION STRATEGIES OF THE CULTURAL DEFAULT IN THE SCARLETT LETTER FROM RELEVANCE THEORY

A. Literal Translation

Literal translation is the rendering of the text from one language to another one conveying the sense of the original whole. It is the way to maintain the contents and the form of the source language in accordance with the culture [12]. When the target readers of the translated text share the same or similar cognitive image with the author or they could easily grasp the implied intention of the author even in a foreign cognitive environment, literal translation can be used to compensate the cultural default. It could maintain the original form as well as retain the original meaning of the source text. Under the situation of optimal relevance, the translator always renders with literal translation strategies for guaranteeing that target language readers would acquire contextual effects as many as possible. In the *Scarlett Letter*, the translator has used many literal translation strategies to make up the cultural default when the target readers share the similar cognitive image of the foreign culture with the author.

Example 1:

The little baggage hath witchcraft in her, I profess," said he to Mr. Dimmesdale. "She needs no old woman's broomstick to fly withal!"

Yao's translation: "这个小东西, 我敢说, 肯定有巫术附体," 他对丁梅斯代尔说, "她根本用不着老女巫的笤帚就能飞行!"

The sentences come from an old clergyman named Wilson. Pearl was always so free, lively, and agile that it seems that she could fly without using the old witch's broomstick, a well-known fairy tale in the western culture, which said that a witch had magic power to fly freely in the sky with a broomstick. However, with the cultural exchange between Chinese and western societies, the story of witch and her broomstick has nearly become a house-hold story in China.

Since Chinese readers need very few inference effort to understand original meaning, the translator chooses literal translation here, which not only preserve the original form to make it faithful to the original text, but also enable the target readers to understand the communicative meaning of the original text without taking much inference effort, establishing the best correlation with the author as soon as possible.

Example 2: "Make my excuse to him, so please you!" answered Hester, with a triumphant smile. "I must tarry at home, and keep watch over my little Pearl. Had they taken her from me, I would willingly have gone with thee into the forest, and signed my name in the Black Man's book too, and that with mine own blood!"

Yao's translation:

"请你替我向他道歉，谢谢啦！"海丝特回答道，面带胜利的微笑，"我得待在家里，照看我的小珠儿。要是他们把她从我手里夺走，我会心甘情愿跟你一块到森林里去，在黑男人的名册上签上我的名字，而且还要用我自己的鲜血签呢！"

As for the image of signing one's name with blood, Chinese and Western culture have shared the similar cognitive meaning. In religion's culture, it is a demonic oath and will curse one forever unless he repents and acquires the redemption of the God. However, people use this kind of signature nowadays to declare their determination or promise that go on until one dies are so firm and unswerving that they cannot easily be changed or broken. Since Chinese reader could easily understand the implied meaning of the original text without taking much inference effort, the translator uses the literal translation strategy to maintain the beauty of the original language as well as faithfulness of the original form.

B. Contextual Amplification

Contextual amplification means that the translator clearly states the content which confuses the reader of the translated text in translation. The purpose of this method is to make information which is manifested to the source text readers clear to the target text ones [13]. With appropriate amplification within the text, it can promote a successful communication with solving understanding breakdowns caused by cultural default. In addition, it helps reconstruct the original cultural image as well as guarantee the coherence and smoothness of the translated text. However, the disadvantage of the method is that it changes the language form of the original text and the reader of the translated text losses the joy of playing imagination. In the Yao's version of the *Scarlett Letter*, he employs this translation strategy as a way to make up the cultural blank of the target readers and guarantee their coherent understanding of the original text without using the footnotes that have the possibility to affect their reading experience.

Example 1: "What have we here?" said Governor Bellingham, looking with surprise at the scarlet little figure before him. "I profess, I have never seen the like, since my days of vanity, in old King James's time, when I was wont to esteem it a high favor to be admitted to a court mask! There used to be a swarm of these small apparitions, in holiday time;

and we called them children of the Lord of Misrule. But how gat such a guest into my hall?"

Yao's translation: "这是什么啊？"贝灵汉总督说，吃惊地望着眼前这个红彤彤的小人儿，"老实说，自从我受老国王詹姆斯恩宠，万幸被召去参加宫廷假面舞会，风风火火过了那阵子以来，我从没有见到这样的小人儿了！当年每逢节假日，总会有这么一大群小精灵，我们把他们叫作节庆老爷的孩子。可现在这样的一位客人怎么进到我的客厅来了呢？"

The Lord of Misrule was an official who presided over raucous holiday celebrations in England through the 16th century. Similar officials were seen in Scotland and France as well. Typically, the Lord of Misrule was chosen by drawing lots, and he was responsible for organizing entertainment and presiding over events at celebrations which could extend from November to January. The author's intended readers must be familiar with the Lord of Misrule and his identity. When the stimulus "the Lord of Rule" is given, its identity and function stored in the intended readers' memories can be activated spontaneously to assist their process. However, for target language readers without corresponding cultural background concerned, they face the vacuum of sense in their cognition. So translating "the Lord of Misrule" into "节庆老爷 (jie qin lao ye)" which is an old man who is a celestial being with responsibility of presiding holiday celebrations, help readers immediately recognize the image and identity of him as well as the communicative intention of the author, maintaining their coherent reading experience with taking less inference effort. In addition, the word "老爷 (lao ye)", is able to give readers a sense of familiarity by retaining the original flavor of Chinese. From the relevance theory, the translator has to acquire the original meaning of the default element and infer the communicative intention of the author, and then come up with appropriate translation method to help readers make up the cultural loss with less inference effort.

C. Adaptation

When the target language possesses the corresponding expressions for the cultural specific objects in the source language, the translator has the flexibility to apply adaptation into translation practice for the sake of reducing target text reader's burden as well as alleviating the difficulties of understanding. As a target-culture-oriented technique, adaptation is an effective technique to keep consistent with the target text reader's reading custom and meet with his reception competence. According to Liu Miqing [14], adaptation intends to seek the optimum method to effectively improve the readability of a translation. There are some examples in the following part.

Example 1:

"I know not Lethe nor Nepenthe," remarked he; "but I have learned many new secrets in the wilderness, and here is one of them, —a recipe that an Indian taught me, in requital of some lessons of my own, that were as old as Paracelsus.

"我不懂什么迷魂汤，什么忘忧草这类药，"他说，"但是我在荒山野林中学到了许多新的秘方，这就是其

中的一个——一个印第安人教我的偏方，以报答我传授给他的如巴拉塞尔苏斯那样。

“Lethe” is a river in Hades whose water make those who drink it forget their past. “Nepenthe” is a supposed substance that people take in ancient times to forget their sadness or troubles, or the plant that produces the substance. In Chinese culture, there is no river that has the ability to help people forget their sadness and painfulness but fortunately, a magical soup called “忘忧汤” (wang you tang) and a miraculous plant called “忘忧草” (wang you cao), in Chinese ancient culture represent the similar image as “Lethe and Nepenthe” in western culture, both of which are able to help people forget their sadness and bitterness when drank in or ate in. Thus, the translator use these two image to replace the Lethe and Nepenthe so as to provide the most relevant cognitive environment for the target readers for the sake of a better understanding of the source text writer’s real intention.

Many other examples are involved in employing the adaptation strategy to make up the cultural default by the translator. For instance: “Better to fast and pray upon it” The original meaning of the “fast” is to eat no food or very little food for a period of time, often for the reason of religions that usually originated from Christianity, which means “禁食 (jin shi)” in Chinese. However, Yao translates “fast” into “斋戒” (zhai jie), which has a corresponding meaning as “禁食” (jin shi) in Chinese Buddhism culture. Yao uses adaptation here to make up for readers’ cultural blank of “fast” by using their familiar cultural image that equate the same meaning with it. Another example is the translation of “alchemist”, a word that occurs frequently in the original text, whose original meaning is someone who tries to change ordinary metals into gold, especially in the Middle Age, which means “炼金术士” (lian jin shu shi) in Chinese. Yao, an excellent translator, substitutes this word by using an equivalent expression in Chinese “炼丹术士” (lian dan shu shi), whose meaning is someone tries to produce an elixir to keep immortal, contributing to a smooth reading as well as maintaining the same cognitive meaning of the original text.

Cultural adaptation outweighs the others in that it favors expressing the source text writer’s real communicative intention and contributes to a coherent and smooth reading for the target readers in terms of their own cultural background.

D. Emission

Omission refers to the translation strategy that directly omits some cultural default elements and eliminates the cultural information that cannot be understood in the cognitive environment of the target readers, without additionally interpreting, adding, or supplementing the cultural losses. In this way, the readers of the translated language can easily obtain the best relevance and understand the author’s intention without having to pay too much processing effort. This strategy, that focuses on the equivalence in content rather than seeks the parallel in form, is expected to convey the basic information and deep

meaning of the original language. However, when using this translation strategy, we should fully consider whether the emission of relevant cultural background information will affect the reader’s understanding and reading experience or whether the cultural default information is necessarily to be complemented for conveying the communication intention of the author and the esthetic value of the original text. If that does not matter, emission can be used to help readers obtain the best relevance with the author with paying least processing effort.

Example 1:

“A wise sentence!” remarked the stranger, gravely bowing his head. “Thus she will be a living sermon against sin, until the ignominious letter be engraved upon her tombstone. It irks me, nevertheless, that the partner of her iniquity should not, at least, stand on the scaffold by her side. But he will be known!—he will be known!—he will be known!”

Yao’s translation: “绝妙的判决！”那个陌生人一边说，一边沉重地垂下头，“这样她就成了劝恶从善的活榜样了，直至那个可耻的字母刻在她的墓碑上为止。不过，犯罪的同伙没有跟她一起站在刑台上总让我感到心里不舒服，好在我相信他一定会让人知道的！一定会让人知道的！一定会让人知道的！”

The most prevail religion in the colonial period of America is puritanism that originated from England and manifested itself in many ways in British North American colonies. Puritans follow very strict moral and religions rules about the proper way to behave and live. To the puritans especially the clergyman, a person by nature was wholly sinful, so they advocated self-discipline and introspection to redeem by God. Moreover, they stay committed to convince and redeem those who they regard as sinful. It can be said that they are “living sermon against sin”. In this passage, the villagers who are gathering here are to see how Hester, the sinful woman to be sentenced. From their perspective, searing a scarlett letter on the bosom of Herster is a reminder of her sin imploring God’s pardon in the rest of her life. As there are similar culture elements in Chinese Buddhism such as “monk” whose task is to preach the principle of morality and virtue among general public while lead them to eliminate their sins, Yao emits the supplemental information about the “sermon” and “sin” because the complement of cultural default is not necessarily contribute to reader’s better understanding and obtaining of exotic flavor.

Other examples based on the emission of cultural default are available in the translated version. For example, there is a sentence like that “I should take in hand to drive Satan out of her” in part three, Yao translates “Satan” into “恶魔” (e mo), which means “monster” in English, rather than transliterates “撒旦” plus additional explanatory words to introduce “Satan” because the identity of it is well-known to Chinese readers. Therefore, emission can be used in the condition that target readers have shared the cognitive image and meaning of the cultural element. It is no necessary to complement the cultural default by additional explanation within the text or out of the text.

V. CONCLUSION

Through the analysis of principles and corresponding translation strategies of the translation of cultural defaults from the perspective of Relevance translation theory, this paper not only explores how relevance theory serves in the translation process but how to deal with the cultural defaults in the novel *the Scarlett Letter*.

From the above analysis of Yao's translation strategy for making up cultural default, the author concluded some translation experience as following: 1) When the target readers of the translated text share the same or similar cognitive image with the author or they could easily grasp the implied intention of the author even in a foreign cognitive environment, literal translation can be used to compensate the cultural default as it reaches equivalence both in form and content. 2) If the cultural default information could clearly and effectively be supplemented and explained within the text without the using of additional footnotes, contextual amplification is recommended as a translation strategy because it reconstructs the original cultural image as well as guarantee the coherence and smoothness of the translated text. 3) When the target language possesses the corresponding expressions for the cultural specific objects in the source language, the translator has the flexibility to employ adaptation as it not only successful renders the original meaning of the source text but also consistent with the reading habit of the target readers. 4. Emission is also can be used as a strategy in the condition that target readers have known the cognitive image and meaning of the cultural element while emission will not cause reader's understanding difficulties of the original meaning and communicative intention of the author.

All in all, the author believes that in order to maximize the relevance between target readers and literary works, and provide readers with better understanding and appreciation of literary works, translators have the necessity to overcome their cognitive limitation through ways of learning more cultural knowledge and improving cross-cultural awareness, and use flexible translation strategies so as to restore the aesthetic value of the original text.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

This research is completed by Li Yan.

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