

Analysis of Yu Guangzhong's Translation of *An Ideal Husband* from the Perspective of Skopos Theory

Zirui Xiong^{1, a}

¹School of Foreign Languages, Hubei University, Wuhan 430062, China.

^axzr5443@hubu.edu.cn

Abstract

An Ideal Husband is an 1895 comedic stage play composed by Oscar Wilde, who uses a great number of unconventionally paired terms, alliteration, rhyme, parallel structure, allusion and paradox. Due to the cultural difference, it is rather difficult to translate it from English to Chinese. However, Yu Guangzhong, a distinguished poet and translator, manages to do so and his translation enjoys great popularity in China. While few studies have explored Yu's translation of *An Ideal Husband* exclusively, this paper intends to fill the gap. Guided by Skopos theory, the author attempts to find the Yu's purpose in the process of translating the drama. From Yu's books and interviews, it is observed that his purpose of translating the play is to put it on stage for audiences to appreciate. This paper analyzes Yu's translation of *An Ideal Husband* from two perspectives—figures of speech and cultural items and finds that his principles of translating the drama have been put into practice. Most of the translations maintain both the form and the meaning of the original script while a few make compromises to ensure the easy understanding of target readers and audiences. It is hoped that future translators can make reasonable choices and adopt appropriate translation strategies when encountered with linguistic and cultural barriers when translating dramas.

Keywords

An Ideal Husband; Skopos Theory; Drama Translation; Yu Guangzhong.

1. Introduction

1.1. An Ideal Husband

Oscar Wilde wrote *An Ideal Husband* during the decade known as "Naughty Nineties", the twilight years of England's Victorian era. The backdrop of this play is imperial expansion, foreign speculation, and the period's rigid system of mores along with notions of family devotion, propriety as well as both public and personal duties. Wilde, as an aesthete, opted to abandon dreary duties to society in the name of individual freedom and the pleasures of style and affection. In this context, *An Ideal Husband* came into being.

In the play, the main character is Sir Robert Chiltern, who is an undersecretary for Foreign Affairs and an ideal husband to his wife, Lady Chiltern. The play opens with a party in Grosvenor Square held by Sir Robert Chiltern and Lady Chiltern. Brought by Lady Markby, Mrs. Cheveley goes to the party and blackmails Sir Robert Chiltern into supporting the Argentine scheme in which she has invested heavily. As a young assistant of a member of the British Cabinet eighteen years ago, Sir Robert Chiltern sold a Cabinet secret to a foreign banker from whose handsome reward built his political career and wealth. Mrs. Cheveley possesses the letter Sir Robert Chiltern that wrote to the banker and threatens to make it exposed if the demand was not met. However, Sir Robert Chiltern's special commission has proven that the Argentine scheme is a Stock Exchange swindle. His political life as well as personal life would be ruined once the scandal gave away. Thus, Sir Robert, in dilemma, turns to Lord Goring, his close friend, a

dandified bachelor for help, confessing the past secret and Mrs. Cheveley's blackmail. Lord Goring is eager to help and succeeds in forcing Mrs. Cheveley to hand over the secret letter as he finds out her stealing a diamond snake-brooch of his cousin. In the end, Sir Robert's reputation is saved and forgiven by his wife, who identifies him as an ideal husband. Lord Goring makes a proposal to Mabel Chiltern, Sir Robert Chiltern's sister.

In the play, there are conventionally paired terms, irony sarcasm, hyperbole, and paradox through which the play mocks the values and mores of the Victorian society. Kohl (1989:227) believes that "It is neither characterization nor plot construction that endows Wilde comedy with its unique flavor, which is derived above all from the language and dialogue." Wilde's slogan "art for art's sake" is fully presented in this play. Therefore, it is highly important to understand his witty and humorous languages to grasp the essence of the play.

1.2. Chinese Translation of An Ideal Husband and Its Related Research

Since the beginning of twentieth century, Oscar Wilde's plays have been translated into various Chinese versions. In 1915, *An Ideal Husband* was translated by Xue Qiyong. Under the title of "意中人 (Yi Zhong Ren)", it was serialized in *Xin Qing Nian Magazine*. In 1928, Xu Peiren's translation was published by Golden House Bookshop and in 1932, Lin Chaozhen translated it under the title of "理想良人 (Li Xiang Liang)"

The translation of Wilde's play experienced a boom in the 1980s. In 1983, *An Ideal Husband* was translated along with two other plays by Qian Zhide under the title of 《王尔德戏剧选》 (*The Plays of Oscar Wilde*). In 1990, Zhang Nanfeng's translation of *An Ideal Husband* was issued under the title of 《王尔德喜剧选》 (*The Comedies of Wilde*). Yu Guangzhong's translation of *An Ideal Husband* was published by Vastplain Publishing House in 1995 and Liaoning Education Press in 1998. In 2001, Han Shi's Chinese version of *An Ideal Husband* came out, which was included in 《王尔德作品集》 (*The Collection of the Works of Wilde*). The year of 2002 saw the Wen Xin's translation, published by The People's Literature Press in bilingual format.

Despite the great number of Chinese translation of *An Ideal Husband*, related research is relatively few. Ding (2010) discusses how Yu Guangzhong manages to translate the play's culture specific items by adaption and providing explanation in the context for the performance of the play. Hu (2012) analyzes Yu's translation of *An Ideal Husband* from the perspective of Toury's Norms theory. Up to now, little research has done exclusively on Yu's translation of *An Ideal Husband* by applying the Skopos theory. Therefore, this paper aims to fill this gap.

Yu's strategies when dealing with drama could be identified from his interviews and books, so this paper intends to investigate whether these translation beliefs have been put into practice and how he does it. By analyzing Yu's translation of Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband* in light of Skopos theory, this paper aims to provide some useful suggestions for future drama translators.

The paper is structured as follows. Section I presents an overview of Oscar Wilde's work *An Ideal Husband*, Chinese translations of *An Ideal Husband* and its related research. The second section demonstrates theoretical framework which includes Skopos theory and its relation to drama translation, as well as Yu's views on drama translation. Section III includes analysis of Yu's translation of *An Ideal Husband*. The last section makes a summary of the analysis and gives suggestions for the future drama translation.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Skopos Theory

Skopos is the Greek word for "aim" or "purpose" and was introduced into translation theory in the 1970s by Hans J. Vermeer. Translation is perceived as a type of human activity and Vermeer (1989: 35) defines human action as intentional, purposeful behavior that takes place in a given

situation. The prime principle determining any translation process is the purpose of the overall translational action (Nord, 2001:27).

Here are some basic rules of Skopos theory. The Skopos rule is the predominant one, which reads as follows, translate/interpret/speak/write in a way that enables the text/translation to function in the situation in which it is used and with the people who want to use it and precisely in the way they want it to function (Vermeer, 1989:20). It is obvious to see that one source text can be translated in different ways to suit different purposes.

The coherence rule means that the target text “must be interpretable as coherent with the TT receiver’s situation”. This means that the TT should be intelligible to the target-language receiver. The fidelity rule or the intertextual coherence rule means that the target text must be coherent with the source text. The target text should be faithful with the source text but the degree and form of such fidelity is determined by the purpose of the target text and the translators’ understanding of the source text. Nord (2001) later proposes loyalty principle to solve the cultural conflicts, believing that translators have moral responsibility towards the target text-receiver. “To produce a text in a target setting for a target purpose and target addressees in target circumstances” (Nord, 2001:45).

According to the Skopostheorie, the prime principle determining any translation process is the purpose of the overall translation action. As for drama translation, there are two kinds of purpose. If a piece of drama is translated as a literary text, it is intended for readers to read or appreciate. The translators proceed from the original text and attempt to keep the most of its specificity. On the other hand, if a piece of drama is translated for performance, the translators should bear in mind that the readers (i.e. the audience) shall not only follow the written form of the script but also and primarily its spoken versions. The translator should choose words that are easily pronounceable by actors and comprehensible to the audience. Meanwhile, the translator should aspire to maintain the meaning and form of the source text as much as possible so that the translation represents the goal and effort of the original author. Based on these two purposes, the translations of one drama may differ, in which “adequacy” replaces “equivalence” to be the evaluation standard.

2.2. Yu Guangzhong and His Views on Drama Translation

Yu Guangzhong is a prolific poet, prose writer, critic, and translator in contemporary China. Proficient in Chinese and English and a good command of cultures of East and West, Yu has translated a great number of masterpieces, including eight poems, four dramas, two novels and a biography. Fascinated by Wilde’s witty and humorous languages, Yu has translated Wilde’s three social comedies, namely *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *Lady Windermere’s Fan* and *An Ideal Husband*. Even Yu confesses (2002) that it is extremely difficult to translate Wilde’s works as his plays are full of epigrams.

Yu (2002: 89) believes that an ideal translation not only reflects the exotic flavor of the original, but also sounds natural and reads fluent to the readers of the target language. “A translation cannot be regarded faithful to the original if it does not read fluent and smooth”. As for drama translation, Yu has a unique perspective which he shared with Dan in an interview in 2013. “Smooth for readers to read, clear for audiences to listen, and convenient for actors to say”, which reveals his standard of translating the play.

He also argues that the dialogue plays a significant role in drama. “The dialogue in a novel is for reading, while the dialogue in a play is for listening. It is possible for readers to read the play many times for better understanding, but it is impossible for the audience to listen to it if they fail to catch the meaning the first time”. Therefore, the language of dialogues should be concise, precise, and euphonious to create the aesthetic effect of the play; meanwhile it should be colloquial and comprehensible. Yu (2002) proposes that a good way to evaluate the

acceptability of the translation of a drama is to put it on performance, because it will undertake the test of the director and audiences.

Yu's version of *An Ideal Husband* (1995) has also been successful as it is widely-circulated and has been put on stage for many times. Therefore, this paper intends to investigate whether Yu's belief of translating the drama meets his translation practice in *An Ideal Husband*.

3. Text Analysis of Yu's Translation of *An Ideal Husband*

Yu's translation of *An Ideal Husband* will be analyzed from two aspects, namely the figures of speech and cultural items.

3.1. Figures of Speech

3.1.1. Alliteration and Rhyme

Alliteration means the repetition of the same consonant sound in the initial position of two or more words, which is commonly applied in poetry and drama. Rhyme means "similar in endings"—words, phrases, or clauses in close succession end with the same sounding suffix or syllable. The application of phonological devices in the languages of drama can strengthen the power of the speech; however, it is extremely for translators to translate.

Example 1

Mrs. Marchmont: ...as far as she could see, London society was entirely made up of dowdies and dandies. (Wilde, 2013:291)

马太太：...照她看来呀，伦敦的上流社会一半是邋遢，一半是浮华呢。(Yu, 1995:17)

Mrs. Marchmont expresses the opinion of Mrs. Cheveley towards London society. "Dowdies" refers to women who are not fashionable and neat, while "dandies" refer to men who take their appearance and clothing too seriously. The words have different meanings but have the same alliterative sound "d" and final consonants "ies". Mrs. Cheveley's remark is insightful and humorous. Here, Yu translates these two words into "邋遢" and "浮华" respectively and the two characters "邋(lā)" and "遢(tā)" have the same vowel "a" in the Chinese syllable, forming a rhyme. "一半是邋遢，一半是浮华" is also a parallel structure in Chinese. Although the translation does not specify the people who are "邋遢" or "浮华", it reflects the essence of the composition of London society. Yu's purpose of translating the drama is therefore realized as the target readers and audiences will have no difficulty in understanding and remembering the speech.

Example 2

Lord Caversham: Can't make out how you stand London Society. The thing has gone to the dogs, a lot damned nobodies talking about nothing.

Lord Goring: I love talking about nothing, father. It is the only thing I know anything about. (Wilde, 2013:290)

贾大人：想不通，你怎么受得了伦敦的上流社会。这玩意儿早就不象样了；一堆无名小卒尽说些无聊的话。

高大人：我最爱无事空谈了，父亲。只有做这件事我还有点本事。(Yu, 1995:15)

Lord Caversham is criticizing the degenerated London society and "talking-about-nothing" upper class and persuades Lord Goring, his son who is an unambitious pleasure-seeker to spend less time on meaningless social engagements. In Lord Caversham's argument, "nobodies" represents "people of no importance or influence", while "nothing" refers to "no substance or significance". The words "nobody" and "nothing" share the alliterative sound "n", forming the

effect of alliteration. In Lord Goring's response, the words "nothing", "thing" and "anything" share the rhyme. These words combined, if pronounced loudly, would produce strong sound effects and impress the audiences with wonderful arrangements. Although Yu regards the translation of alliteration and rhyme as one of the most challenging parts, he manages to keep the same phonological effect. "无名小卒" and "无聊的话" share the same sound pattern "无(wú)", forming an alliteration. The phrases of "无事", "这件事" and "有点本事" all end with "事(shì)", forming a rhyme. In addition, "talking about nothing" is translated into "说些无聊的话" and "无事空谈" respectively, which contributes to the variety of Chinese expressions and avoids monotone. Therefore, Yu's version not only conveys the original meaning but also maintains the original structure and phonological effect.

3.1.2. Parallelism

Parallelism, also known as "parallel structure" is defined as "consisting of phrases or sentences of similar construction and meaning placed side by side while balancing each other" (Abrams, 2010: 14). Using parallelism makes the utterance more coherent, emphatic, explicit, and expressive; therefore, the audience can enjoy the rhythm and appreciate the audible effects.

Example 3

Lady Chiltern: Robert is as incapable of doing a foolish thing as he is of doing a wrong thing.

Lord Goring (After a long pause): Nobody is incapable of doing a foolish thing. Nobody is incapable of doing a wrong thing. (Wilde, 2013: 314)

齐夫人：罗伯特不可能做糊涂事，同样也不会做坏事。

高大人（停了很久）：谁也不可能不做糊涂事，谁也不可能不做坏事。(Yu, 1995:45)

Lady Chiltern believes that she has succeeded in persuading her husband, Sir Robert Chiltern, to give up the idea of supporting the dishonest Argentine canal scheme as she talks about it proudly. However, Lord Goring who knows the bribery carefully implies that everyone might commit a mistake or an error to achieve one's objective. He deliberately uses the "nobody" to form a double negative sentence to emphasize his point of view. Here, Yu's version keeps the pattern by following the original structure while stressing the opinion that everyone cannot avoid making mistakes. Both the words "糊涂事" and "坏事" end with the phonological pattern of "事(shì)", adding the musicality of the utterance.

3.2. Cultural Items

3.2.1. Allusion

"Allusion" is a brief and indirect reference to a person, place, thing, or idea of historical, cultural, literary, or political significance but does not describe in detail the person or thing to which it refers. The writer expects the readers to possess enough knowledge to spot it and grasp its importance in a text; as a result, English allusions may confuse Chinese readers who lack of background knowledge.

Example 4

Sir Robert Chiltern: Yes, he knew men and cities will, like the old Greek.

Mrs. Cheveley: Without the dreadful disadvantage of having a Penelope waiting at home for him. (Wilde, 2013: 287)

齐爵士：是啊，他见识过许多人物、许多城市，像一个古希腊人。

薛太太：却不像那位古希腊人那么碍手碍脚，回家还有个贤妻在等着他。(Yu, 1995: 13)

Here, the old Greek refers to Odysseus, a hero that proposed the trick of Trojan horse and helped win the Trojan War. Penelope, the wife of Odysseus, has faithfully waited 20 years for

his husband return from Troy. Mrs. Cheveley uses this allusion to indirectly satirize Sir Robert Chiltern who has been married and has a very faithful wife. This allusion is easy for the English audiences to understand but may confound the Chinese readers and audience. Therefore, Yu chooses to domesticate them into “一个希腊人” and “贤妻”. This treatment may compromise the cultural collocation but manages to keep the flow and convey the basic meaning, while trying to keep the satire between the lines.

3.2.2. Idiom

“Idiom” is a phrase or a fixed expression that has a figurative, or sometimes literal, meaning. The phrase is understood as to mean something quite different from what individual words of the phrase would imply. Therefore, it is important for the translator to identify the English idioms first and find a way to convey the same meaning in another language.

Example 5

Mrs. Cheveley: What do you know about my married life?

Lord Goring: Nothing; but I can read it like a book.

Mrs. Cheveley: What book?

Lord Goring (rising): The Book of Numbers. (Wilde, 2013:339)

薛太太：我的婚姻生活你懂什么呢？

高大人：什么也不懂；可是我一目了然，像看一本书。

薛太太：什么书呀？

高大人（起身）：户口簿。(Yu, 1995: 76)

“The Book of Numbers” is the fourth book of the Hebrew Bible, and the fourth of five books of the Jewish Torah. In Numbers, Israelites received their laws and covenant from God, who took up residence among them in the sanctuary. They have the task to take possession of the Promised Land. The people are numbered and preparations are made for resuming their march. But Israelites betrayed the covenant, so God condemned them to death until a new generation grew up and could undertake the task. “The Book of Numbers” also records the population of Israelites that are enumerated twice on their way to the Promised Land. So, this allusion implies that Mrs. Cheveley has been married many times and had many husbands. However, the Chinese readers and audiences who are not familiar with Bible may not understand it. Considering this, Yu translate it into “户口簿”， which registers the information of family members. “户口簿” is familiar to Chinese people, so they can easily relate it to numbers. The connotation is therefore successfully conveyed.

After the analysis of Yu’s version of *An Ideal Husband* from figures of speech and cultural items, it is found that Yu has practiced his purposes and principles of translating the drama, rendering readers and audiences a Chinese version that is not only easy to understand and associate the implied cultural connotation but also euphonic to ears and convenient to pronounce.

4. Conclusion

This paper focuses on the analysis of Yu’s translation of *An Ideal Husband* from figures of speech and cultural items. Figures of speech such as alliteration and rhyme are among the most challenging part. Normally, he creates similar tricks in Chinese to maintain dual meanings or uses two or more Chinese characters with the same vowel formation, which to his point of view are compromising solutions. Yu chooses to follow the original structure of the sentence when dealing with parallelism. When encountered with some cultural items such as idioms and allusions, he opts to apply domestication, a translation strategy of making text closely conform to the culture of the target language sometimes involving the loss of information from

the source text. By applying his translation beliefs—concise, precise, and euphonious to create the aesthetic effect of the play while colloquial and comprehensible, Yu's translation turns out successful as his version of *An Ideal Husband* has been put on stage many times and “audiences burst into laughter dozens of times” (Shan, 2013). This paper enlightens the future translators when translating the plays. First, the translators should have their clear skopos, translating the drama either for reading or performing and stick to it by adopting appropriate translation strategies when encountered with linguistic or cultural barriers.

References

- [1] Abrama, M. A. (2010). *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- [2] Ding, Y. (2010). The Treatment of Cultural Items in Yu Guangzhong's Translation of Drama. *Journal of Chifeng University (Social Sciences)*, 31(7), 137-138.
- [3] Kohl, N. (1989). *Oscar Wilde: The Works of a Conformist Rebel*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- [4] Nord, C. (2001). *Translating as a Purposeful Activity: Functionalist Approaches Explained*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- [5] Shan, D. (2013). Interview with Prof. Yu on Translation. *Complication and Translation Review*, 6(2), 165-209.
- [6] Vermeer, H. J. (1989). Skopos and Commission in Translation Action. Chesterman Andrew. (ed). *Readings in Translation Theory*. Helsinki: Oy Finn Lectura Ab.
- [7] Wilde, O. (2013). *An Ideal Husband*. London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama.
- [8] Yu, G. (1995). *An Ideal Husband*. (Chinese Translation). Taipei: China Land Press.
- [9] Yu, G. (2002). *Yu's View on Translation*. Beijing: China Translation Corporation.
- [10] Zheng, Y. (2017). A Literary Stylistic Approach to the Translation of an Ideal Husband. *Journal of Lizhou Vocational & Technical College*, 17(1), 77-81.