

# Analysis of Reception Aesthetics Based on Two Translations of Peanuts

Huijie Wei

Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications, Beijing, China

## Abstract

Reception aesthetics believes that the meaning of literary texts is uncertain. The acceptance of texts is closely related to the reader's reading, and the reader's dominant role in the process of reading is emphasized. This also provides a new perspective and method for the study of literary translation. This paper starts from the uncertainty of the textual meaning of the reception theory, reader-centered status, and aesthetic distance. It uses the two translations of peanuts as examples to analyze the reasons for the diversity of literary translation.

## Keywords

Reception aesthetics; Literary translation; Reader-centered; Aesthetic distance; Peanuts.

## 1. Introduction

Reception aesthetic theory is a literary and artistic aesthetic criticism which focuses on the reader. It believes that the meaning of the text is uncertain. Translator is also a reader who can only enter the world of text through the vision developed by his pre-understanding and abilities. Because of the uncertainty of the meaning of the text, there is no definite answer to the understanding of literary texts. The main representative of reception aesthetics is reader's "horizon of expectation". This essay will analyze the reception aesthetic theory based on a famous work *Peanuts* by Chinese writer Xu Dishan. There are two translations of this work to be compared. It will analyze from three aspects: uncertainty of text meaning, reader-centered works and horizon of expectation.

## 2. Uncertainty of Text Meaning and Literary Translation

The traditional translation view holds that translation is to convey the "meaning" of the original text into the target language. Reception aesthetics believes that the meaning of the text is uncertain, and it needs to be made concrete in reading by readers (including translators here). The most direct philosophical basis of reception aesthetics is philosophical hermeneutics. It believes that understanding is the way of existence of human beings, and it is universal. In principle there is nothing beyond understanding. Language is the medium of understanding. The historical nature of understanding forms "bias". Prejudice is the prerequisite and starting point for understanding. The true meaning of the text is not the original intention of the author or its readers' understanding of the original text. The true meaning of the text is in the process of continuous movement with understanding in this period. It is the process in which the reader and the text interact and merge with each other.

The reader is an active or determinant factor in the process of text interpretation. In the process of translation, translator, as a reader, can only enter the world of text based on the vision developed by his pre-understanding and abilities. In the process of realization, the translator's pre-understanding plays an important role. The translator's pre-understanding and ability determine his understanding of the text world. It can be seen that in order to promote the meaning of the text, translators must pay attention to their own pre-understanding and the

horizon of expectations of the reader. The translator must deeply understand the similarities and differences between the two languages in terms of language, history, and culture. They should use their subjective initiative and appropriately adjust their translation strategy to fill the gap in text understanding. After entering the text world, translators begin to analyze, judge and summarize until they are integrated with the text horizon. Iser believes that literary texts have a structural "blank". The so-called "blank" is the unwritten or unclear part of the text. Only in the specific process of reading and the reader's participation, these "blank" can be filled or explained.

Blank and uncertainty are not shortcomings, but have become the most prominent features of literary works. It also helps to distinguish literary and non-literary works. Reception aesthetic theory advocates the openness of the text, which undoubtedly helps us to define the text in the process of translation. The text of literary works is a complex system full of blanks and uncertainties. And according to Iser, the meaning of the works is not included in the text itself, but is obtained during reading.

Due to the uncertainty of the meaning of the text, there is no definite answer to the understanding of literary texts, so there is a saying that "a thousand readers have 1000 Hamlets". As far as translation is concerned, the uncertainty and openness of the text are the important reasons that lead to interpretative interpretation. It provides a broad space for translators to give full play to their imagination in the translation process, so that translators can interpret the text from different perspectives, thereby forming different translations.

In the literary work *Peanuts*, there are many uncertainties in the process of translation. Different translators have translated this work into English, some examples are as follows.

那晚上的天色不太好，可是爹爹也到来，实在很难得！

It looked like rain that evening, yet, to our great joy, Father came nevertheless. (by Zhang Peiji)

The weather was not very good that evening, but even Father put in an appearance, which was a rare event. (by Liu Shicong)

Obviously, the two translators' interpretations of "天色不太好" are different, reflecting the uncertainty of the text. Zhang Peiji adopts the method of free translation and directly translates it into "It looked like rain" according to her own understanding. Liu Shicong is faithful to the original translation of "The weather was not very good". As for "实在很难得!", Zhang Peiji's translation "to our great joy" reflects the hero's excited mood at that time. In Liu Shicong's translation, he does not show a happy mood. He merely states the facts and translates it literally into "which was a rare event".

我说：“那么，人要做有用的人，不要做伟大、体面的人了。”

"Does that mean that people should try to be useful rather than famous or great?" I asked. (by Zhang Peiji)

"Then you mean one should be useful rather than great and nice-looking," I said. (by Liu Shicong)

For the two words "伟大、体面的", Zhang Peiji understands it as "famous or great", and Liu Shicong considers that it means "great and nice-looking", which fully shows the indeterminacy of the text and it requires translators to read the text according to their own understanding. However, this does not mean that the translator can interpret the text arbitrarily, and the text still has relative stability. Otherwise, it is absolutely inadvisable for the translator to perform randomly of the original work due to the poor quality of the translator. From the perspective of reception aesthetic theory, because the meaning of the text is non-independent, any text with uncertainty cannot express any meaning by itself. Literary works are blank and uncertain, and the meaning of their texts always exceeds the author's expectations because of readers'

participation. The meaning of the text is not inherent in the text, but is generated by the reader from the process of reading and reification.

### 3. Centrality of the Reader and Literary Translation

Reception aesthetics believes that works are always created for readers. The only object of literature is readers. Unread works are only a "possible existence". Only in reading can the work be transformed into "real existence". Jauss pointed out that literature is not a "thing in itself", but a "thing for others". Therefore, reading activity is the only possible way to liberate the work from the static material symbols and restores it to fresh life. He believes that in the acceptance activities, each reader always looks at the work from the "horizon of expectation" of his own life and literature. The different horizon of expectations makes different readers' needs for reading objects different. In the process of reading, the reader fully mobilized the subject's initiative, decoded the symbols of the work, not only reproduced the rich content contained in the artistic image in the work, but also fully understood, experienced, and re-created each unique artistic image. Therefore, the translator of a literary work is not on a passive place, and they should use their subjective initiative to recreate the original text. In fact, it is with this kind of interactive reading between literary works and readers that the meaning of literary works will not fade or be eliminated in the long history. It can be said that the meaning of works is produced in reading and it is the reader and the author together created literary works. Therefore, blankness in meaning or linguistic ambiguity is the basic structure of literary works and the prerequisite for readers to react after reading the works. The potential of a good literary work is in its blankness of meaning.

In the process of translation, in addition to considering the reader's expectation horizon, we must realize that the translator is the original reader before translating, that is, the translator as the original reader also has his own pre-understanding or expectation horizon, which is limited by his aesthetic experience and life experience when translating. When the translator thinks that some content in the work is beyond his aesthetic distance but it is very important, then this new knowledge will improve the reader's quality, and gradually turn into a new reading experience, which will be integrated into the reader's orientation of thinking or structure. It expands the readers' horizon of expectations.

Here are some examples from Peanuts.

这小小的豆不像那好看的苹果、桃子、石榴，把它们的果实悬在枝上，鲜红嫩绿的颜色，令人一望而发生羡慕的心。

It's not like the apple, peach or pomegranate, flaunting their bright, beautiful fruits on their branches for all to see and admire. (by Zhang Peiji)

Unlike nice-looking apple, peaches and pomegranates, which hang their fruit on branches and win people's instant admiration with their brilliant colours, ... (by Liu Shicong)

Translators, as readers of the original text, each have their own interpretations. In Zhang Peiji's understanding, the practice of "apples, peaches, pomegranates" "hanging their fruits on branches" is a showy behavior, so he uses the word "flaunting" in the translation, and in Liu Shicong's understanding, he translates it truthfully, which does not reflect the purpose of this behavior.

### 4. Horizon of Expectation and Literary Translation

The main representative of reception aesthetics, Jauss, proposed to pay attention to the reader's "horizon of expectation". "Horizon of expectation" refers to the appreciation requirement and level of appreciation for literary works formed in readers' various reading experiences and society, life experience, interest, literacy, and ideals in the literary acceptance

activities. It is expressed as a potential aesthetic expectation in the real reading. "Horizon of expectation" is of great significance to the existence of literary works. This expectation determines the reader's evaluation of the work. When a work satisfies the reader's expectation horizon, it will stimulate the reader's aesthetic interest, but if the aesthetic distance is too small, that is, consistent with the expectation horizon of the reader, it will cause the reader's aesthetic fatigue. And if the aesthetic distance is too large, that is, beyond the expectation horizon of the reader, it will make the reader fail to appreciate the beauty of the translation, let alone the beauty of the original. "Horizon of expectation" is the prerequisite for readers to accept a work. Without this aesthetic expectation formed by previous understanding, readers cannot accept new works. According to the perspective of reception aesthetics, the realization of the meaning of the work cannot be achieved without the active participation of the readers. It is precisely because of the reading of the reader that the work can enter the reader's vision. At the same time, the reader's original reading experience, reading level, life experience all affect readers' understanding and acceptance of the work. Therefore, whether a translated work is popular or successful is determined by the reader's expectation. Literary translation should also pay full attention to readers' expectations, aesthetic preferences and aesthetic abilities in selecting materials. In the process of translating, the translator must consider the needs of the target readers, even predict the target readers' expectation of the translation in advance. They also need to consider the target readers' reading experience and reading level, so that the target readers' expectation and the translation are fully integrated. The readers' horizon of expectation is not static, it varies from person to person and constantly develops with the change of the times. Readers do not accept text passively, but actively.

我们屋后有半亩隙地。母亲说：“让它荒芜着怪可惜，.....

Behind our house there was a patch of land. "It would be a pity to let it go wild." said Mother.  
(by Zhang Peiji)

Behind our house there lay half a mu of vacant land. Mother said, "It's a pity to let it lie waste."  
(by Liu Shicong)

Due to the differences in geography and living environment, the content that the source language readers are familiar with may be completely unfamiliar to the target readers. Therefore, in the process of translation, in order to fully integrate the target audiences' expectations and the target translation, the translator must consider translation readers' language and cultural acceptance levels, and adjust translation strategies appropriately. Since different readers have different levels of education, they read literary translations for different purposes. Therefore, literary translators should choose translation strategies based on the reader's expectations, for example, whether to add or subtract words during translation so that foreign readers can understand the translation, whether to convey the charm of the original text with free translation, and whether to add footnotes to introduce Chinese style. For English-language translation readers, "半亩" in the above sentence belong to cultural "blanks", which have exceeded their expected horizons and acceptance levels. If they are literally translated, the result will only make the translation readers confused and misunderstood. In Zhang Peiji's translation, translating "半亩" into "a patch of" makes it easier for English culture readers to accept than Liu Shicong's literal translation of "a mu of". Liu Shicong's translation here should add footnotes to explain the meaning of acres.

## 5. Conclusion

Reception aesthetics puts readers to an important position, namely, reader-centered theory, which subverts the unity, objectivity, and absoluteness of author-centered theory, work-centered theory, and literary works, and holds that readers' horizons of expectation have important significance for receiving literary works. The text is an open structure, and the

reader's imaginative creation and filling of blanks are the basis for realizing the value of the work. Literary translation is an aesthetic translation, which is also a kind of literary activity. Translators are firstly readers and receivers. Therefore, reception aesthetics provides a theoretical basis for the choice of literary translation topics, the choice of translation strategies, and the realization of the value of translated texts. However, the limitation of reception aesthetics is to overemphasize the reader's subjectivity and it ignores the status of authors and works. In the process of literary translation, we should "choose the good ones and follow them", so that literary translation can better play the role of a bridge between China and foreign countries.

## References

- [1] Robert Nixon. Reception Theory and African Oral Literature: The Question of Performance [J]. 1985 (2): 53-61.
- [2] Liu Congcong, Zhao Haiping. Translation Strategies of Policy Language in Novels from the Perspective of Receptive Aesthetics—Mo Yan's translation of Frog by Ge Haowen [J]. Language Application Research 2017 (10): 155-157.
- [3] Cao Huihui. The Diversity of Receptive Aesthetics and Literary Translation—An Analysis of Four Translations of On the Stork Tower [J]. Journal of Corps of Education 2010 (4): 36-39.
- [4] Tian Qingwu, Liu Jia. The Influence of Receptive Aesthetics on Translation [J]. Legend·Selected Biographical Literature 2013 (6): 3.
- [5] Wei Xiaohong. The Ambiguity of Literary Works and Their Translation in the View of Acceptance Aesthetics [J]. Shanghai Translation 2009 (2): 61-64.
- [6] Shi Qian. Aesthetic Reproduction of Ambiguous Language in Literary Translation from the Perspective of Acceptance Aesthetics [J]. Shanghai Translation 2012 (1): 27-31.