

Analysis of Two English Versions of The Border Town from the Perspective of Contrastive English and Chinese

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Abstract

Among the many outstanding works in the history of Chinese literature, the novella "Border Town" published in 1934 is one of Shen Congwen's masterpieces. In the past 80 years, many translators have translated "The Border Town" in different languages, spreading Chinese literature and Chinese culture overseas. There are two popular English versions of Border Town: Gladys's The Border Town, published in 1981, and Jeffery C Kinkley's Border Town in 2009. So far, Kinkley's Border Town, as the latest version of the English translation of Border Town, has received little attention. This article aims to compare Shen Congwen's "Border Town" and its two English translations from the perspective of vocabulary, and make a comparative analysis from the static to dynamic level, revealing the differences in expression between the two languages of English and Chinese, and how to achieve flexible conversion between static and dynamic in translation, thereby improving translation quality. Research has found that Chinese tends to use verbs, which is thus dynamic, while English often uses nouns and prepositions to express the meaning of verbs, making English more static.

Keywords

Static; Dynamic; Way of thinking; Comparative analysis.

1. Introduction

Border Town, written by Shen Congwen, is an excellent novella expressing rural feelings in the history of Chinese literature. It is set in the border town of Chadong on the border of the three provinces in the 1930s. It depicts the unique customs of Xiangxi with the beautiful brushwork of both lyrical poems and essays. The love tragedy of the boatman girl Cui Cui highlights the kindness and purity of the soul. It has attracted many readers at home and abroad with its unique artistic charm and vivid local customs, and it has also determined the towering status of "Border Town" in the history of modern Chinese literature. In recent years, scholars' research on the English version of "Border Town" has gradually increased, but the overall number is still very small. The research on it mainly focuses on the perspective of translation aesthetics, and the research and analysis under the contrastive perspective of English and Chinese is still relatively small. This article mainly takes the English translations of Yang Xianyi, Gladys and Jeffery Kinkley as examples to explore the differences between Chinese and Western thinking from the perspective of contrasting English and Chinese.

2. The Structural Characteristics of English Sentences

2.1. Nominalization Advantage

Nominalization is a common phenomenon in English. It mainly refers to the use of nouns (phrases) to express the information originally expressed by verbs (phrases), such as the use of abstract nouns to express actions, behaviors, changes, states, etc. English is accustomed to

using nouns. Even where verbs can be used, English will try to use the noun form of words to show a sense of static, for example:

原文：渡船头竖了一枝小小竹竿，挂着一个可以活动的铁环，溪岸两端水面牵了一段废缆，有人过渡时，把铁环挂在废缆上，船上人就引手攀缘那条缆索，慢慢地牵船过对面去。（沈从文，2015）

译文：A movable iron hoop is attached to a bamboo post in the bow while a hawser spans the stream. To across, all you need do is slip the hoop over the hawser and pull yourself slowly to the other side. (杨宪益，戴乃迭, 2011)

译文：Hitched to a little upright bamboo pole in the prow was a movable iron ring that went around a heavily worn cable spanning the stream all the way to the other side. To ferry across, one slowly tugged on that cable, hand over fist, with the iron ring keeping the boat on track. (Kinkley, 2009).

In Shen Congwen's writings, he used a series of verbs "upright", "hanging", "holding", "hanging", "leading hands", "climbing" and "leading" to show us the structure border city ferry and its operation. These verbs are simple and concise, making the sentence more smooth, and also reflecting the orderly and harmonious scene of the small city.

In the translations of Yang Xianyi and Gladys, they treated the verb 竖 as a past participle to modify "竹竿", which weakened the dynamic sense of the verb. In addition, "hang" is the active form in the original text, and here they are treated as passive form, which increases the static sense of the sentence.

In Kinkley's translation, the verb 竖 in the original text is also treated as a past participle as an attributive, and the subsequent "was" as a form of the verb Be has the weakest sense of action, which weakens the original text to a certain extent. 挂 is processed in the attributive clause to modify the hoop, and 牵 is processed as the present participle spanning here. Throughout this sentence, Linkley used a series of methods such as past participles, attributive clauses and present participles to replace a series of verbs in the original text, making the whole sentence imply a sense of static.

2.2. Preposition Advantage Caused by Noun Advantage

As we know, nouns are frequently used in English. As a result, prepositions are also frequently used combined with nouns. The fundamental feature of a prepositional phrase is that it cannot be used as a subject, an object, or a predicate verb like a noun. Therefore, the clauses composed of prepositional phrases are generally static. The combination of prepositional advantage and noun advantage makes the static tendency of English more prominent. For example:

原文：水面上第一次听到了鼓声，许多人从这鼓声中，感受到了节日临近的欢悦。

译文：The first roll of drums on the water brings home to all who hear it the happy realization that the festival is at hand. (杨宪益，戴乃迭, 2011)

译文：The very first drumbeats coming from the river brought joy to those who heard them, a sign that the festival was close at hand. (Kinkley, 2009)

This sentence is about the dragon boat race in the border town on the eve of the Dragon Boat Festival. The scene is very lively, and everyone is looking forward to the festival in their hearts. In original text, the verb 临近 reflects the urgency of the upcoming festival, and also reflects the expectations of the people. In the translations of Yang Xianyi and Kinkley, they all used the prepositional phrase at hand to express the verb, making the excitement and expectation seemed to be greatly reduced in the English translation.

原文：祖父抿着嘴把头摇摇，装成狡猾得意神气笑着，把扎在腰带上留下的那枚单铜子取出，送给翠翠。

译文: He purses his lips and shakes his head with a knowing wink, then extract from his girdle the ten-cent coin he has kept and gives it to her. (杨宪益, 戴乃迭, 2011)

译文: Grandpa shook his head and pouted. Then he winked and smiled knowingly, taking out from his belt the lone copper he had stuffed there. He gave it to Cuicui. (Kinkley, 2009)

The sentence in the original text describes the conversation between grandpa and granddaughter Cui Cui after he was reluctant to accept the extra money from the businessman and insisted on returning it. The use of the words 装成 and 笑着 in this sentence portrayed Grandpa as a childlike, clever and cunning, but with a simple and honest image nurtured from the small town of the border town. In the translations of Yang Xianyi and Gladys, the verbs and adjectives 狡猾得意神气笑着 was expressed by a simple preposition phrase with a knowing wink, which failed to show the vivid image of grandpa in the original text. In Kinkley's translation, the adjectives 狡猾得意神气 are expressed with an adverb knowingly, which reduces the complexity to simplicity.

3. Noun as Agent

There is also a static expression in English, that is, instead of directly using verbs, the verbs are transformed into agents, which are nouns, to express the meaning of the original verbs, making the sentence more static. For example:

原文: 两个年轻人皆结实如小公牛, 能驾船, 能泅水, 能走长路。

译文: Strong as a pair of young oxen, good boatman, swimmers and walkers, they excel in all the activities that village youngsters go in for. (杨宪益, 戴乃迭, 2011)

According to Shen Congwen, he described the abilities of two young men, using three parallel verbs: 驾船, 泅水, and 走长路. In the translations of Yang Xianyi and Gladys, these verbs do not appear. Instead, the nouns good boatman, swimmers and walkers are used as the agents of these verbs, emphasizing these two more What kind of person young people are now, rather than what they will do, makes sentences almost completely static.

4. The Structural Characteristics of Chinese Sentences

4.1. Conjunctive Use of Verbs

Both Chinese serial verb construction and telescopic form sentences contain two or more verbs, forming a variety of multi-verb predicate sentences. For example:

原文: 且因为那人比渡船老人更孤单, 身边无一个亲人, 也无一只狗, 因此便约好了那人早上过家中来吃饭, 喝一杯雄黄酒。

The two verbs "yue" and "guo" in this sentence are in a conjunctive style. The grandfather invites the elderly to come to the house, which makes the sentence more compliant, eliminating the need for complexity and verbosity.

原文: 客人又望着翠翠笑, 翠翠仿佛明白为什么被人望着, 有点不好意思起来, 走到灶边烧火去了。

In the original text, Cui Cui was laughed at, and Cui Cui was embarrassed. Cui Cui walked to the stove and Cui Cui burned the fire. These verbs are connected and used together, belongs to category of serial verb construction.

4.2. Verbs (Phrases) as Various Components

原文: 五月端阳, 渡船头祖父找人作了代替, 便带了黄狗同翠翠进城, 到大河边去划船。

The verb phrase 作了替代 was used as an adverb of purpose in the original text, indicating the determination of grandfather to take Cui Cui into the city.

原文：河边站满了人，四只朱色长船在潭中划着，龙船水刚刚涨过，河中水皆豆绿色，天气又那么明朗，鼓声蓬蓬响着，翠翠抿着嘴一句话不说，心中充满了不可言说的快乐。

抿着嘴 here is a verb phrase, but it is used as an adverb in the sentence, as an adverbial, which shows Cui Cui's seriousness, indulgence and joy when watching the boating by the river.

4.3. Repetition or Overlap of Chinese Verbs

The repetition or overlap of Chinese verbs, as well as the related sentence pattern of parallelism or antithesis, can obviously strengthen the dynamic sense of Chinese. English verbs generally cannot be overlapped and less repetitive, and they are even omitted where repetition is needed.

原文：但过了一天，翠翠又反悔回来，以为要看两人去看，要守船两人守船。

译文：But the next day she changes her mind, insisting that either both go or both stay with the boat. (杨宪益, 戴乃迭, 2011)

译文：Yet, a day later, Cuicui changed her mind again, insisting that they must both go to the races or stay with the ferryboat. (Kinkley, 2009)

In the original text, 看 and 守 appeared twice, indicating Cui Cui's psychological activities. She believed that she and her grandfather should watch the boating together or guard the boat together. The repeated use of these two verbs shows that Cui Cui felt regret for her previous decision. In these two translations, the use of this verb is replaced by the conjunction both, avoiding the repetition of words in English.

原文：她欢喜看扑粉满脸的新嫁娘，欢喜说道关于新嫁娘的故事，欢喜把野花戴到头上，还欢喜听人唱歌。

译文：She loves to see young brides, painted and powdered, to repeated stories about them, to wear wild flowers in her hair, to listen to songs. (杨宪益, 戴乃迭, 2011)

译文：She loved now to look at brides with powder and makeup, to adorn her own hair with wildflowers, and to listen to songs. (Kinkley, 2009)

In the original text, Shen Congwen used three 欢喜 to fully describe the image and thoughts of a young girl who is onset of puberty. In the two versions of the translation, they did not translate the word 欢喜 three times, but used a verb love followed by three infinitives with to, thus avoiding the repetition makes the translation concise and easy to understand.

5. Conclusion

This article analyzes Shen Congwen's 《边城》 and its two English versions, making a comparative analysis of the three from the perspective of vocabulary. The study found that English mostly uses nouns and prepositions, which are static; Chinese uses verbs, which are static. Understanding the differences in the characteristics of words used in the two languages can help us improve the quality of translation and promote exchanges between different cultural forms.

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