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Translation Strategies of Culture Factors From the Perspective of Game Theory

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Abstract

Translation is what makes cross-cultural communication possible by crossing language and cultural barriers. Standing among the cultures, the translator has a major role to play and strategies to choose from as to how to produce a satisfactory outcome. The game theory, dealing with the conflict and cooperation of rational decision-makers, has a wide range of applications and is significantly enlightening. The paper aims to bring the choices of translation strategies under rational and objective guidance of the game theory rules so that translation can better serve as the bridge of cultural communication.

Key words: Translation; Culture; Game theory; Domestication; Foreignization

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INTRODUCTION

Translation is a language communication activity and language is known to be the carrier of culture. Therefore, translation is undoubtedly a cross-cultural communication activity, which can be aware of on second thought.

Translation can not happen without referring to language or culture. The three of them are tightly bound to achieve communication purpose. The contents of culture as well as languages will interact in the process of translation. Accordingly, there has been a great many of impressive researches on cultural translation theories and strategies. However, it still remains a big problem for translators to stand rightly between SL culture and TL culture. Namely, they are still confused as to how to find balance between foreignization and domestication. This paper will analyze the problem and bridge the gap.

1. GAME THEORY

Game theory is the study of mathematical models of conflict and cooperation between intelligent rational decision-makers (Shen, 1999). It did not stand as a unique field until John von Neumann published a paper in 1928, which was followed by his book *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior*. The book is a sign that the author's work in game theory culminated, laying the foundation and theoretical system for the discipline. Around 1950, John Nash put forward a criterion for mutual consistency of players' strategies, namely Nash Equilibrium. The equilibrium applies to not only cooperative games but also non-cooperative ones. Nowadays, Game theory is broadly used in economics, political science, psychology, logic, computer science and biology. Being enlightening, it also plays an important role in people's daily life.

1.1 Prisoner's Dilemma

The prisoner's dilemma is non-zero-sum game, for the outcome has net results greater or less than zero. It is a game theory model made by the US Rand Corporation in 1950. With different versions, the prisoner's dilemma is basically a story about two suspects' choices.

Two suspects have been arrested and placed in separate cells. Both of them care much more about their personal

freedom than about the welfare of their accomplice. The police are aware that the two men are guilty but can do nothing without sufficient evidence. So they come up with an idea. They tell each man that if both of them remain silent, each will receive 1 year's sentence; if one of them confesses while the other remains silent, the former will be set free immediately but the latter will receive 5 years' sentence; if both of them confess, each will receive 2 years' sentence. In this situation, each suspect has two choices: confessing and staying silent. They have to choose one and the police have promised that the other man will not know the choice. What will they do?

The fact is that confessing is the optimal choice for each man no matter which one his accomplice chooses. If suspect A is sure to remain silent, suspect B will be free at once on confessing but will receive 1 year's sentence on staying silent, confessing being a better choice; if the suspect A is sure to confess, suspect B will receive 2 years' sentence on confessing but 5 years' sentence on staying silent, confessing still being a better choice. On both conditions, confessing is always a better choice for individual benefit. So both of them will choose to confess and both of them will have to receive 2 years' sentence, even though they can only receive 1 year's sentence by remaining silent both. Obviously they do not take the risk to cooperate. Caring only about reducing the individual time in prison, cooperating (remaining silent) is strictly dominated by betraying (confessing) so that the equilibrium of the game is for the both of the suspects to confess.

The above result is achieved on the condition that the game is only played once and it can be quite different if played repeatedly. The player (suspect in the prisoner's dilemma) will try to "punish" the other one for not being cooperative. Then cooperation may occur as an equilibrium outcome. The motivation of gaining individual benefit is overcome by the threat of punishment, which is likely to produce a better and cooperative result. It is the model that is closer to real life, because suspects have to take other factors (more than their prison time) into consideration and can not just focus on the benefits (reducing prison time) offered by law enforcers. After all, they are afraid of being retaliated on betraying their accomplice. Disturbing factors do exist in practice. There are conditions where two (or more) players want to cooperate to achieve better outcomes for both but give up in the end by realizing the difficulty, cost or the necessity to do so.

Players can choose to cooperate with each other to bring the optimal benefit for the "team" as a whole. They can also refuse to cooperate for their own benefit. Betraying the accomplice can bring one player benefit (reducing prison time) and being betrayed can bring the other benefit. So even if betraying each other violates the optimal benefit for the "team", it can achieve the optimal benefit for the individual. A big problem and precondition

are that each player does not know what the other's choice is. That is how they get caught in the dilemma. The self-interested decision will produce a worse result instead, not as beneficial as the outcome of caring about the other and cooperating. In game theory, it tells us Nash Equilibrium is not necessarily a Pareto optimum in a non-zero-sum game.

1.2 Pareto Optimality

Pareto optimality, also known as Pareto efficiency, is named after Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto who adopted the concept for the first time in his research on economic efficiency and income distribution. Being an important concept of game theory, it has a wide range of applications in economics, engineering and other social sciences as well as resource and service industries.

To put it simply, Pareto optimality refers to a static state of a defined allocation system in which nobody can be made better off unless it is at the cost of making another worse off. Pareto improvement refers to a dynamic change in which one individual is made better off without making any other worse off. Pareto improvement is the optimal method to realize Pareto optimality. In other others, Pareto optimality is achieved when no more Pareto improvement can be made. It is the "ideal kingdom" of fairness and efficiency.

If an economic system is not in the state of Pareto optimality, there are still some participants who can be better off through certain changes (Pareto improvement) without making others worse off. It is generally believed that such kind of inefficient output needs to be avoided, and therefore Pareto optimality is a very important criterion for evaluating economic and political policy.

In economic theory, it is accepted that various walks of people in the society can help to make the economic resources of the entire community realize the most reasonable configuration in the process of their constant pursuit of maximizing their own interests. Improving economic efficiency means reducing waste. If nobody of the economic system can be better off without making another one worse off, the system has achieved the optimal allocation of resources. If an individual can improve his situation with no harm to the interests of others at the same time, he achieves a Pareto improvement in the allocation of resources and improves economic efficiency as well.

2. GAME THEORY AND TRANSLATION STRATEGIES

How are translation and game theory related? Translation can be seen as a kind of non-zero-sum game in which the original author, the translator and the reader are players. With reasonable strategies, all of them can benefit even though they may stand oppositely at times. The author wants his work act as a medium of culture transmission. The ideal goal is that the target readers both like his

work and appreciate his culture. But it is clear to the translator how difficult, risky and time-consuming for the target reader to accept a new culture. He needs to weigh seriously to find a balance and a strategy good enough to benefit all.

2.1 Translation Strategy and Prisoner's Dilemma

To translate is to realize cultural communication between SL culture and TL culture. The translator has a significant role to play in promoting communication and understanding of cultures. If he does not choose to cooperate but adopts the "dominant strategy" in the prisoner's dilemma, either plagiarism or domestication are unavoidable. Plagiarism occurs when the translator decides to "betray" the author and make the work his own, which is beneficial to the translator himself only. Domestication is adopted for the benefit of the target readers and the TL culture, because it is a process to show the original author's thoughts or stories in totally native ways: native language, native expressions and native ways of thinking. Readers will not find it difficult to understand and the target language culture will not be "disturbed" or "threatened" by anything alien.

Cross-cultural communication has never been easy because of misunderstanding, mistrust and one's deep love for his native culture. That is why translation is desperately needed to work as a bridge and make the communication possible and efficient. During the process of cross-cultural communication, both of the cultures should show respect and make the necessary compromises. By doing so, middle culture or inter-culture may appear and bring inconvenience with unfamiliar expressions or awkward interactions. The readers may suffer a little bit in the beginning. However, the efforts are rewarding because both cultures will develop through communicating. Just as what happens in the "prisoner's dilemma", if the two suspects care about each other and are willing to cooperate, both will only receive one year's sentence. This is the best result for them even though being set free seems more tempting. On the contrary, it is not wise for the translator to focus on individual interest and adopt the "dominant strategy" of the suspects, namely, domestication to cater to the native readers by ignoring the SL culture, because it is not beneficial to cross-cultural communication at all.

From the above discussion and analysis, it becomes clear that how the rules and experience of the prisoner's dilemma can apply to the problems of translation. Translating is just like a game in which translators (players) will have a number of choices to choose from. Through prisoner dilemma, we can see that the "dominant strategy" is not necessarily the only solution. Similarly, domestication is not all that the translator can adopt when translating. Instead, to promote cultural understanding, communication and mutual progress, foreign elements (foreignization) are acceptable in translation.

Based on the game theory, foreignization in translation can bring benefits and realize a win-win situation. But over-foreignization will lead to a different and unpleasant result, for the readers will gradually lose patience and interest in the "alien stuff". It can be worse if absolute foreignization is adopted. Confusion and misunderstanding may make communication impossible, which is the initial purpose. Therefore, the translator needs to cooperate with the original author so that foreignization and domestication can work harmoniously to benefit all. Only in this way, can be the translation work win the recognition of the readers and truly become a cultural bridge.

Basically, translators work for the author, but to readers. Translators are expected to bring foreign culture to readers, as simply as possible. They need to make sure there are enough cultural elements to satisfy readers, but not too many to make them lose interest or patience. So the percentage of the cultural factors surely has an influence on the translator's choice. Let us take "half" as the division and see how the influence work.

2.1.1 Cultural Factors Accounting for Less Than Half of the SL Content

Distinct cultural factors will always catch the translator's sight. They are challenging as well as highly rewarding, for they may help to win the favor of readers or lose it forever. Especially when there are factors in the right amount (less than half) to arouse their interest, the way to deal with those factors is crucial. The following examples show how different translators deal with the same text.

Xin jiao Bi Gan duo yi qiao, bing ru Xi Zi sheng san fen. (In Chinese)

A: She looked more sensitive than Pikan, more delicate than his Shih.

(Pikan: A prince noted for his great intelligence at the end of the Shang Dynasty; Shih: A famous beauty of the ancient kingdom of Yueh) (Translated by Yang Xianyi)

B: She had more chambers in heart than the martyred Bi Gan; and suffered a tithe more pain in it than the beautiful Xi Shi. (Translated by David Hawkes)

The original sentence is from the famous Chinese literature work *A Dream of Red Mansions* to describe the beauty of Lin Daiyu. "Bi Gan" and "Xi Zi" are the dominant cultural factors but they do not dominate the whole sentence. With the comparative sentence structure, readers can realize what the basic meaning is even if they are unfamiliar with the two Chinese persons. For the sake of cultural communication, both translators have adopted the foreignization strategy. Besides, Yang Xianyi provided notes and David Hawkes added adjectives for the convenience of readers to fully understand the cultural factors.

Pang tai jian shuo de hao, zan men jiu ba xian guo hai, ge xian qi neng ba! Ha ha ha! (In Chinese)

A: Eunuch Pang: Nicely said. Like the Eight Immortals

crossing the sea, we each have our own strengths, eh? (Laughs heartily) (Translated by Howard)

B: Eunuch Pang: Well said! Let's both try our best, and see what happens. Ha! Ha! Ha! (Translated by Ying Ruocheng)

The original sentence, which is from *Teahouse* by Lao She, contains a Chinese proverb. The cultural factor only accounts for such a small part that it can be ignored without even disturbing the meaning of the author (speaker). Just as Ying Ruocheng does, he gives up on the Chinese proverb and translates by domestication. Readers will find it easy to understand but they will feel the cultural blank as well. Making it easy is not always the most important goal. Howard, with foreignization, manages to introduce the Chinese story of Eight Immortals crossing the sea to readers. Without many details, it may seem a little strange but the meaning is obvious.

The rules of prisoner's dilemma are working in choosing the strategies. The cultural factors are known to be less than half of the original content. The domestication translation strategy makes readers feel free to understand but there is a loss of cultural interaction. (Betraying, 2 years in prison) Despite the reading inconvenience (acceptable) the foreignization translation strategy brings to readers, the purpose of cultural communication will be served (Cooperating, 1 year in prison). Therefore, the foreignization strategy can benefit all when the cultural factors are less than half of the original content. Cross-cultural communication can be realized in a harmonious way.

2.1.2 Cultural Factors Accounting for More Than Half of the SL Content

The situation is quite different when the cultural factors account for too much (more than half) of the text. Readers are more likely to get puzzled and lose patience if the translator does not deal with the abundant foreign information carefully.

What will it be like if the percentage of the cultural factors is 100%? In the 1950s, Premier Zhou Enlai invited some foreign guests to see the play "Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai", one of the most famous plays in China. A translator had difficulty making the foreigners understand and even tried to explain the whole story. But when Premier Zhou told them that it was a "Romeo and Juliet in China", the foreigners got the essence immediately. "Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai" are totally culturally equipped and lead foreigners nowhere to get the meaning, let alone communication. In this situation, domestication is undoubtedly the perfect choice. This is also why the film "Final Destination" is translated into "Si shen lai le" (In Chinese). And similar idioms abound, like "Luo tang ji (In Chinese) - a drawn rat", "Ai wu ji wu (In Chinese)-love me, love my dog", "spring up like mushrooms - yu hou chun sun (In Chinese)" and "beauty is in the eye of the beholder - qing ren yan li chu Xi Shi (In Chinese)" and so on. Sometimes, if one culture wants to be known, it has to learn how to show itself with the help of other cultures at first.

Su yu shuo de hao: "sha ren bu guo tou dian di." (In Chinese, from A Dream of Red Mansions)

A: Remember the proverb "A murder can only lose his head." (Yang)

B: You know what the proverb says: He who checks a moment's rage. Shall calm and carefree end his days." (Hawkes)

Proverbs are used to explain the meaning of the author (speaker) more clearly. Yang adopts foreignization to spread Chinese culture, which is carried by "*sha ren bu guo tou dian di*". But no such proverb as "a murder can only lose his head" exists in the English language. Even though readers can understand it literally, they can not get how the proverb is connected to the context. Such translation can not help readers and satisfactory outcome will not appear. Domestication, as we can see in Hawkes' translation, can let readers know the original meaning quickly and accurately. It is easy to understand and works well with the whole story. Undoubtedly, domestication is the preferred strategy in this situation.

Again, the rules of prisoner's dilemma work. The cultural factors are known to be more than half of the original content. If the foreignization strategy is adopted, the original culture can be delivered to the greatest extent. Can readers get to know it in the same degree? No. Without help, it is a tough task to understand it. Even worse, it may cause misunderstanding or a bigger cultural gap (Betraying, 2 years in prison). On the contrary, domestication can help readers to get close to the SL culture easily and willingly (Cooperating, 1 year in prison). It may make the cultural transmission go slowly, but it does create a good beginning. Therefore, domestication is a better choice when the cultural factors are more than half of the original content. It makes sure that communication is still undergoing even though it is not completely "cross-cultural" for the moment.

2.2 Translation Strategy and Pareto Optimality

The above discussion has revealed the "one-or-the-other" relationship of domestication and foreignization, which is not all of them. The Pareto optimality shows another side of the picture: the two strategies can co-exist. In fact, the adversarial nature of the concept of domestication strategy and foreignization strategy is not mutually exclusive, but complements each other (Cai, 2002). When we take foreignization strategy as the main translation strategy, we should also pay attention to the limits and the propriety; if this strategy did not work, we should use the domestication strategy as a subplan, the two methods are complementary and mutually reinforcing (Myerson, 1991). There are also occasions where they work together to create excellent translations or work separately for different purposes or readers with the same great effect. The Pareto optimality makes the phenomenon well-founded. For example,

“He is a millionaire. To give him money is simply carrying coals to Newcastle.

A: *Ta shi ge bai wan fu weng, gei ta qian jian zhi shi wang niu ka si er yun mei.* (In Chinese)

B: *Ta shi ge bai wan fu weng, gei ta qian jian zhi shi duo ci yi ju.* (In Chinese)

C: *Ta shi ge bai wan fu weng, gei ta qian jian zhi shi wang niu ka si er yun mei - duo ci yi ju.* (In Chinese)

In A, the foreignization strategy is adopted to show the respect to the SL culture and make it known to readers, but most of them will get totally puzzled by the translation: What does *carry coals to Newcastle* mean? The second version is just the opposite. With the domestication strategy, the readers will not find any difficulty in understanding, but they have no idea that the original expression has certain cultural element in it. They are deprived of the chance to learn. Why not combine the two strategies? The third one enables readers to know the meaning both literally and culturally. And the original author (speaker) will be happy to see his culture understood and known. Readers manage to learn something new in a comfortable way. This is the best solution to promote cultural communication: Making foreignization and domestication work together to benefit all. With the same principle, “to shed crocodile’s tears” can be best translated as “E yu diao yan lei – jia ci bei”.

Wen cong tu, yue “Nan xing shi li ji tai xing xian cheng”. (Shen Fu) (Sun, 2002) (in Chinese)

A: *I asked them for directions and they told me that I was to go straight south for ten li until I should reach Taihing City.* (Translated by Lin Yutang)

B: *I asked them the way, “Go south about three miles”, one of them directed me, “when you reach the city of Tai-hsing.”* (Translated by Shirley M. Black)

To translate “shi li” (In Chinese), which is a unique Chinese way of expressing distance, Lin Yutang adopts foreignization while Shirley M. Black chooses domestication. The former wants to introduce the

Chinese culture to foreign readers by keeping its original characteristics. The latter, however, attempts to tell a Chinese story as simply as possible. Both translators have made the right choice to serve their own purposes well, showing that the two strategies can be the best at the same time.

CONCLUSION

As the bridge for various cultures to know each other, learn from each other and develop mutually, translation has been making great contributions to human civilization. With such a significant role to play, it calls for rules and logic. That is rightly what the game theory can offer. The rules of prisoner’s dilemma enable the translator to adopt proper strategies by taking the percentage of cultural factors into full consideration. The domestication strategy and the foreignization strategy can cooperate to create a beneficial result. Pareto optimality, an ideal state, enlightens the translator to make a decision with an objective and clear purpose. The outcome as well as the choice of strategies may vary with the translation motive. Domestication and foreignization can be the best strategies at the same time. Therefore, even though there is conflict, they can work together for culture communication and dissemination. With the game theory, the translator can know how to make that happen.

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