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Translation of Idiolect in *Sandalwood Death* Under the Guidance of Perspective Dimension in Construal Theory

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Abstract

The novel *Sandalwood Death* is glugged with many dialects of Shandong Gaomi. Idiolect is one of the most obvious features in this novel, which can present geographical, social, and cultural features of different characters in the story. It is of great significance for the idiolect translation for the wonderful reading experience of western readers. The paper attempts to study the translation of idiolects in *Sandalwood Death* in light of perspective dimension in Construal theory for the purpose of the exploration of the applicability of perspective dimension in idiolect translation as well as the translation methods while rendering the idiolects. The study shows that transliteration, the combination of literal translation and liberal translation, the perspective conversion, as well as addition translation can be adopted in translation of idiolect.

Key word: Construal theory; Perspective dimension; *Sandalwood Death*; Idiolect; Translation

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INTRODUCTION

Dialect is a special language variety which is not only the language phenomenon, but also a social culture presentation. It can transfer sufficient geographical and cultural messages and social customs. There are a great

many of dialects glugged in the remarkable Chinese novels, which facilitate their success to some extent. *Sandalwood Death* written by Mo Yan is full of the geographical and social features of Shandong Gaomi, and thus dialect is the obvious feature in this novel. As a result, the achievement of *Sandalwood Death* is also partly owing to the use of dialect besides the outstanding writing style of Mo Yan. Actually, idiolect is one of the categories of the dialect, expressing the personal features of the character in the novel. The use of idiolect can make the character's feature more vivid and geographical features clearer, conducive to the simulation of the readers feeling and resonance. Therefore, it is of great significance for the translators to render the idiolect well for the purpose of conveying the geographical and social culture and the meaning of idiolect well understood.

In fact, the idiolect translation in Mo Yan's novel of *Sandalwood Death* obtains the recognition of western readers with the help of American translator Howard Goldblatt who reproduces Mo Yan's novel to some degree on the basis of the loyalty principle. Scholars in translation field have carried out much research from different perspectives with the guidance of a variety of theoretical foundations in order to explore how Goldblatt can successfully translate Mo Yan's novel, such as Relevance theory, Eco-translatology, Rewriting theory and etc. However, in light of the previous research on the translation of Mo Yan's novels, there are few studies on the dialect translation from the cognitive perspective. As Construal theory is one of the most important concepts in the cognitive linguistics, which can explain many translation problems in the translation process, this paper aims to study the idiolect translation of *Sandalwood Death* with the guidance of the perspective dimension in Construal theory to probe the feasibility of perspective dimension in the guidance of idiolect and explore suitable translation methods that Goldblatt uses in the process of idiolect translation.

1. IDIOLECT AND SANDALWOOD DEATH

Idiolect, one of the features in *Sandalwood Death* can help readers have a good command of the characters in the novel. The paper will study the translation of idiolect by choosing proper examples from *Sandalwood Death*.

1.1 Idiolect

Halliday believes that the dialects are mainly related with the user (Coupland, 1978, p.35). According to Cartford (1965, p.85), the language variety refers to a subset of form or entity features relative with specific social environment characteristics, which can be divided into geographical dialect, temporal dialect, idiolect, and social dialect. When these features are shared by the people in the same region, it is called geographical dialect; while they are used by people under the same social circumstance, it is called social dialect (Carver, 1987, p.4). Idiolect can show the personal language-use habit while the temporal dialect can manifest the people language-use in a specific age.

Idiolect is a language variety in an “idiosyncratic” ways to use language, including favorite language-use, different pronunciations, and over-use of some specific expression structures, which can illustrate the overlap among different language varieties (Hatim & Mason, 2001, p.44). Owing to the different living environment, educational background, lifestyle and moral value, different people have idiolects of their own to show their personal identity. Certainly, idiolect of a person can change subtly at any different moment or different location to produce new pronunciation, new expression and so on. Actually, idiolect is of great significance in the plot description of literature, which can vividly show the character’s image to some degree, and thus the translator can identify the character and grab the characters’ features to convey the implied theme of the novel well if rendering the idiolect in an equivalent way (Catford, 1965, p.86).

1.2 *Sandalwood Death*

Sandalwood Death, first published in 2001, is one of the representative works of Mo Yan, which is written in a special writing style with the combination of “Zhanghui” (i.e. a type writing style of traditional Chinese novel of which each chapter has its own caption) and Gaomi’s local art form—Maoqiang. As the noticeable feature of the novel, Maoqiang manifests the touching, sad and pathetic tone of the novel.

Sandalwood Death tells the story of a movement in great confusion in war, an appalling cruel punishment, and a moving love happening in Gaomi in 1900 with the background of the construction of Jiaoji railway in Shandong by German, Yuan Shikai’s suppression to the Yihetuan Movement Beijing’s occupation by the Eight

Power Allied Force and escape of Empress Dowager Cixi.

2. PERSPECTIVE OF CONSTRUAL THEORY

We can use different language form to form the same concept content, while each specific way to conceive and describe the same scene definitely exerts a specific construal. Langacker (1991, p.4) holds the view that construal is the competence to understand the same content with different specific way, involving five classifications as specific, scope, background, perspective and prominence.

Perspective, one of the most important dimensions, which includes view point, deixis and subjectivity/objectivity (Langacker, 1987, p.120), may be the most obvious aspect in the construal process. It is familiar for us that perspective dimension relies on the relative position and observing point of view of speaker to a great degree. We are always in a specific position and then construe the subject from a specific position.

View point is one of the aspects of perspective, including vantage point and orientation. Vantage point refers to the situated position while observing a scene (Ibid., p.123). The vantage position of the concept subject decides how to choose the expressions of “left” and “right”, “up” and “down”, “front” and “back”. Under a typical circumstance, the vantage point and the orientation of the observer are relevant. For instance, in the ambiguous sentence “Jack is at the left of Jill”, the vantage point and orientation both play the key role. The position of Jack relative to Jill can be understood from the perspective of speaker or Jill.

The second factor of perspective is deixis which expresses certain phenomenon in the scene by using the situated elements of the subject (more specifically, the subject is the speaker) (Croft & Cruse, 2004, p.59). The most common deixis phenomena are as follows: personal deixis (you, I, he/she/it, we, they), location deixis (here, there), time deixis (now, then) and etc. In fact, many expressions are all non-deictic, such as “pen”, “water”, “listen”, and so on, while some expressions used in the actual reality are deictic to the extent. For example, “paper” is non-deictic, while “this published paper” is deictic. In this phrase, the word “this” shows that the predication is definite which is close to the speaker.

The last element of perspective is subjectivity/objectivity which is the most subtle and elusive aspect, referring to the degree to which an entity functions the “subject” or the “object” of the conception (Langacker, 1998, p.592). That is how human beings conceptualize a scene with themselves involved in it or how they present themselves in a speech event (Langacker, 1987, p.131). While the speakers assume the role of observer alone,

their construal can be subjective at the upmost and become part of the scene. On the contrary, the construal to the scene can be more objective when the speakers are also observed object by themselves (Langacker, 1986, 1987). For example,

[A mother talks to her kid.]

(a). Go shopping with me.

(b). Going shopping with mom.

In this example, (a) represents a more subjective construal of the speaker, which defines her identity by the speech event; while (b) shows a more objective construal of the speaker with the use of the noun of the third person which describes herself without the limitation of the speech event.

In fact, the conversion of perspective is common in translation, which is based on the perspective dimension in construal theory, including such translation skills as conversion of word classes, conversion of clauses, person conversion, positive sentence converting to negative sentence, active voice converting to passive voice and so on. What's more, the translation methods, such as literal translation, liberal translation, domestication and foreignization, are essentially the problem that the translation is based on which kind of perspective or what kind of reference point.

3. PERSPECTIVE AND IDIOLECT TRANSLATION

Different people have their different life styles, customs, values and life circumstances, which result in their different language-use habit, that is, idiolect. Characters in *Sandalwood death* are distinctive in their features, and the idiolects of the characters are of great benefit to the understanding of the characters. According to the perspective dimension in Construal theory, translators can take a variety of translation methods for the render of the original with the dependence on different perspectives of the viewing. Therefore, idiolects can be translated in a proper way under the guidance of perspective dimension through such suitable translation methods as transliteration, literal translation, liberal translation, the conversion of active voice to passive voice, and so on.

Example 1:

那天夜里,俺心里有事,睡不着,在炕上翻来覆去烙大饼。俺的亲爹孙丙,被县太爷钱丁这个拔屌无情的狗东西抓进了大牢。(Mo, 2001, p.5)

My thoughts kept me awake that night, as I tossed and turned on the brick kang, like flipping fried bread. My dieh, Sun Bing, had been arrested and locked up by County Magistrate Qian, that pitiless son of a bitch.

The idiolectal features of Sun Meiniang are as follows: First, the language is vivid with motions, full

of the geographical features of Shandong Gaomi, for example, “在炕上翻来覆去烙大饼”. Second, as she is an uneducated country woman, Sun Meiniang is bold and her language is sort of vulgar. For instance, she calls her lover Qianding as “拔屌无情的狗东西”. Under the guidance of perspective dimension in Construal theory, Goldblatt chooses different translation methods for these idiolects. As for the translation of idiolect “在炕上翻来覆去烙大饼”, Goldblatt chooses the simple expressions to render it into “tossed and turned on the brick kang, like flipping fried bread” with the transliteration and literal translation methods, which takes the maintenance of the original features as the reference. As the “dog” is a respectable animal in the west, the literal translation of “狗东西” may lead to misunderstanding for western readers. Therefore, as for the translation of idiolect “拔屌无情的狗东西”, Goldblatt applies the combination of literal translation and liberal translation to render it into “pitiless son of a bitch”, which takes account of reader's perspective. As a result, the idiolectal features of Sun Meiniang can be caught by western readers.

Example 2:

谁要是敢不敬他,他就会撇腔拿调地说:“竖子不可教也”。(Mo, 2001, p.74)

If he didn't get the respect he thought he deserved, he intoned in a loud voice, “A base man cannot be taught!”

As speaker Li Shizhai is the father of a Xiucai (a person who has passed the imperial examination), his idiolect is always filled with Chinese ancient idioms. The idiolect “竖子不可教也” is an inversion with the purpose of emphasis on “竖子”; besides, the word order of this idiolect should be “不可教竖子也”, which is an active voice. Based on the vantage point of perspective dimension in Construal theory, Goldblatt literally translates the idiolect as “a base man cannot be taught” with the construal of “竖子” as “a base man” and the conversion from active voice to passive voice. With the use of passive voice to make “竖子” become the subject, “竖子” lies in “onstage region” to be more prominence with the vantage point of the speech event changed from the other people to “竖子”. In addition, “竖子” in this idiolect is a pejorative expression for a person, which is literally rendered into “a base man” with the readers as the vantage point. Consequently, the translation meets the understanding need of western readers as well as translates the meaning of this idiolect.

Example 3:

太后擅权,皇帝傀儡,雄鸡孵卵,雌鸡司晨,阴阳颠倒,黑白混淆,小人得志,妖术横行——这样的朝廷,不完蛋才是咄咄怪事!(Mo, 2001, p.101)

The Empress Dowager holds the reins of power; the Emperor is but a puppet. The rooster broods the eggs; the hen heralds the dawn—yin and yang are reversed, black and white all mixed up, with villains holding sway and

black arts running wild. It would be a monstrous absurdity if the death knell of such a royal house were not struck.

Qin Jin in the novel is a successful candidate in the highest imperial examination, whose idiolects, such as “太后擅权, 皇帝傀儡, 雄鸡孵卵, 雌鸡司晨, 阴阳颠倒, 黑白混淆, 小人得志, 妖术横行” are full of scholar’s style with formal expressions. In addition, according to the subjectivity/objectivity of perspective dimension in Construal theory, his idiolects put the speaker Qin Jin at the objective position to make the speaker relatively independent from the speech event, which involves the objectivity construal of the speaker, and thus the critique of the speaker is relatively more objective and credible. In order to maintain the idiolectal features of scholar’s style and objectivity, Goldblatt employs totally literal translation for Qian Jin’s idiolects in light of the perspective in Construal theory. With the use of the literal translation, the relatively formal expressions are applied in the translation, which achieves the semantic equivalence and form equivalence, and the objectivity construal of speaker can be maintained. As a result, the image of Qian Jin, an introspective intellectual, can be transferred to the western readers vividly.

Example 4:

某, 岳鹏举是也, 今受天帝之命, 降灵神坛, 附体孙丙, 传授尔等武艺, 好与那番邦洋鬼决一死战. (Mo, 2001, p.214)

I am Yue Fei, Yue Pengju. I have descended onto the divine altar and taken possession of the body of Sun Bing by Imperial Demand. I shall transmit my martial skills to you who will engage the foreign devils in a life-or-death struggle.

The idiolects of the speaker Sun Bing is full of the Chinese ancient style, such as “某,是也”, “受天帝之命, 降灵神坛, 附体孙丙”, “番邦洋鬼”, for Sun Bing in the original plays the role of the Chinese ancient hero Yue Fei to show off his power. Goldblatt employs the method of addition translation to render “某” into “I am Yue Fei”, which highlights the personal perspective of the speaker in light of the deixis of perspective dimension in Construal theory for the purpose of emphasis on his power. As for idiolects “受天帝之命, 降灵神坛, 附体孙丙” and “番邦洋鬼”, Goldblatt chooses to use literal translation in order to take the maintenance of the original features as the reference under the guidance of view point of perspective dimension.

CONCLUSION

The most distinguished feature of language in Mo Yan’s novel is the use of dialect, which is a huge challenge

for the translators because of its specificity. Idiolect can reflect each character’s features vividly, including the speaking habit, geographical characteristics, social and cultural influence, and so on. Therefore, it is conducive to the comprehension of the character features in the novels and the grasp of the novel’s theme with the proper translation of idiolect. It is proved that the dialect translation of Goldblatt is a success for the recognition of western target readers, which provide some reference for the future dialect translation. The perspective dimension in Construal theory holds the view that it is different for the same subject observed from different perspectives of different observers. Consequently, it is a benefit for the idiolect translation if the perspective construal between the original author and the translator is consistent. The paper finds that the perspective dimension can provide the guidance for the translation of idiolect and such translation methods as conversion, transliteration, additional translation, as well as the combination of literal translation and liberal translation are proper methods for the translation of idiolect.

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