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Cultural Image Compensation in Poem Translation From the Perspective of Gestalt Theory

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Abstract

The integrity principle of gestalt theory asks the translator accurately reproduce the cultural image and content of the source poem, in order to exactly recreate the poem's gestalt essence. Therefore the cultural image of the original poem is subject to and serves for the poem's gestalt essence. When there is no linguistic equivalence to the source language, culture, and image, the translator ought to adopt appropriate strategies for reproduction and compensation, to reproduce the similar gestalt essence or to compensate for the source image, thus to make the original culture and image acceptable, and ultimately to spread the original culture to the target reader.

Key words: Gestalt essence; Cultural image; Reproduction; Compensation

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INTRODUCTION

A. Cultural Image

In definition, the image is made up of two important elements, namely, the physical image and the fabled

meaning. The physical image, which serves as the objective reality of forming images, is the carrier of information; the fabled meaning is the implied sense for the physical image under specific linguistic and cultural contexts.

Cultural image is a kind of symbol, which has comparatively stable and unique cultural meanings. Some of the images are endowed with plentiful meanings and profound imaginations. Whenever these images are referred to, people will relate immediately to their implied meanings. Therefore, communication is easily achieved by cultural images.

B. Reproduction of Cultural Images in Translation

Translation is creative and complex brainwork by human beings. The translator needs to employ imagine thinking to form a certain image in the mind; and based on the image, he produces the appropriate image in the target text. If a translated version is the lack of images, it will be dull and uninteresting. Just as Wilhelm von Humboldt, a Germany linguist and philosopher, puts it, "language is infinite use of finite symbols."

With the current trend of cultural turn in translation, the translator is asked to first become familiar with both the source culture and target culture. In addition, he should be equipped with keen cultural consciousness and superb cultural perception, so that he is able to reasonably handle the images in the source text and accurately reproduce the images in the target text and then vividly convey them to the target-language reader. From the perspective of the target-language reader, the translated version should be in accord with the linguistic norms of the target language, and at the same time be appropriate for the receptive ability of the target culture, so as to achieve the ultimate purpose of translation work (Yan, 2007, p.62). That is to say, the reproduced cultural images in translation should be both readable and acceptable. As a result, the culture of the source language is spread into the target culture,

and the target culture is enriched by the reproduced images. Both cultures will make parallel progress through translation.

1. GESTALT THEORY

Gestalt theory is a school of psychology, originating from Germany at the beginning of the 20th century. The theory was first put forward by Max Wertheimer (1880-1943), Wolfgang Kohler (1887-1967), Kurt Koffka (1886-1941), who were three colleagues in University of Frankfurt. The word “gestalt” means “form”, “shape”, or “mode” in German, so gestalt theory is concerned about the psychological phenomena like the whole, part, form or shape (Xiong, 2011, p.187).

Gestalt theory regards one specific psychological phenomenon as a whole. The whole determines the nature and meaning of its parts. If the parts are separated from the whole, they will lose their present meanings or their meaning will not be precisely understood. Nevertheless, the whole is not literally summed by the parts, but the whole is more than the addition of the parts. For instance, one’s perception of a certain flower does not only refer to the flower’s shape, color, or size; the perception also includes the things like our past experience and impression about the flower. All these things added will make the real perception of the flower.

Gestalt theory holds that the fundamental characteristic of psychological phenomena lies in their integrity and structure in human beings’ mental experience; so the followers of gestalt theory assert that the mental experience is not the pure summation of feeling and emotion, thus the integrity is not the direct summation of parts; likewise, the thought is not the simple link of notions (Che, 1998). Therefore, gestalt is the integrity of experience. The integrity is not the result of added parts, nor is it the random combination of parts. It is actually a new structural body surpassing its parts, and it bears the integral information beyond the meaning of parts (Jiang, 2000). All in all, in gestalt theory, the whole is made up by the parts but it is beyond the addition of the parts, and the whole will thus form a new essence called “gestalt essence”. Gestalt essence does not belong to the parts but it commands and restricts the parts. The parts serve for and help to bring about the gestalt essence which makes the whole distinctive from other matters. So gestalt essence is greater than its parts, and the nature of gestalt essence determines the nature of its parts.

The school of gestalt theory emphasizes the integrity of activities in aesthetics, literature, and arts, applying the integral research strategy to these fields. In specific, the gestalt theory provides a new research perspective and mode for literature study; and Gestalt theory, especially gestalt essence, is particularly helpful and applicable to poem translation.

2. THE GESTALT ESSENCE IN THE POEM

The representative of Gestalt school, Rudolf Arnheim, writes in his masterpiece *Art and Visual Perception* that, “For a piece of music made up of twelve notes, if twelve listeners listen to one note respectively and then if they gather the twelve notes to make the music, do they have the same feeling and experience as that of a person who listens to the twelve notes of the music? The answer is definitely “No”. By this example, Arnheim illustrates the integral function of perceptual thinking. This integral function does not come from one single element, neither is it equal to the summation of all the elements. Instead, perceptual thinking makes prominent a new integrity of those elements which is known as gestalt essence (Lin, 2008, p.116). The school of gestalt psychology especially focus on the integrity of things, which provides new theoretical support and new perspectives for the study of literary translation, particularly poem translation.

Poetry is a kind of unique type of literature, which is constituted by words in poetic style, so as to create a comprehensive atmosphere. As a poem is an independent whole and has its own integrity, namely the poem’s gestalt essence. A poem’s gestalt essence is not simply composed by the addition of the words, but by the synthesis of language, image, sense, perception, experience, etc., which make the poem a complete whole. By employing gestalt theory in translation, the translator can better convey the beautiful images in the source poem to the target reader.

Therefore, the gestalt essence of a poem is not equal to the addition of its words and images; on the contrary, it refers to the overall implication, which integrates the language, image, perception, etc. of the poem. The gestalt essence plays a significant part in poems, and it determines and restricts a poem’s integrity. Thus, when translating the poem, firstly the translator ought to comprehensively analyze its integrity whole, so as to accurately grasp the gestalt essence of the poem and to recreate the gestalt essence in the target language.

To apply gestalt theory to poem translation is to regard the gestalt essence of the poem as integrity. The translator should keep this point in mind and make it prominent at all levels of translation. The translated poem is not only the collection of words, but also the pictures and images revealed by the words. The relationship between gestalt essence and image is that of the whole and the parts. The whole contains the parts, but includes more than the parts; the parts constitute the whole, and the whole exists in every part (Liu, 2005, p.49). The gestalt essence is the very essence that the poet wants to express, therefore the translator’s entire thought and practice will be determined and restricted by the poem’s gestalt essence.

3. THE REPRODUCTION AND COMPENSATION OF IMAGES IN POEM TRANSLATION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF GESTALT ESSENCE

Under the guidance of gestalt theory, in poem translation, the translator needs to take into account the relationship between the poet and the poem (including the poet's life experience, character, cultural background, reasons for creating the poem, etc.), the relationship between the translator and the poet (including the translator's life experience, character, understanding and translation of the poem, etc.), the relationship between the reader and the translator (including the reader's cultural and historical background, value orientation, etc.), as well as the words, images, parts, integrity of the original poem. If the translator does not take notice of these relationships, the translator will not successfully evaluate the poem. As a result, he cannot accurately perceive the gestalt essence of the poem; thus he will surely fail to translate the poem well (Lei, 2010, p.139). All these relationships are indispensable to form the original poem's gestalt essence and they will have the same effect on translated version's gestalt essence.

3.1 Reproduction of Cultural Images in Poem Translation

The gestalt essence determines the theme and implication of the poem, so it restricts the translation of cultural images. Every poem is the condensed fruit of the source language and bears abundant images of the source culture. Thus, images play an especially important role in poems.

Gestalt theory greatly enlightens the translator in poem translation, as gestalt theory emphasizes the integral perception of the cognitive subject; and the integral perception is what the poet and the poem aim to impose on the reader. Every poem has its own characteristic and integral feature, and it is called the gestalt essence of the poem which is not the mere addition of the words of the poem, but the comprehensive integrity of language, images, correlation, etc.. All these enable the poem to feature its unique integral characteristic (Jiang, 2002). Considering the great significance of gestalt essence in poem, the translator has to exert the integration role of subjective consciousness. Therefore, the translator is able to accurately construct the gestalt essence of the source poem, exactly reproduce the gestalt images in translation, and efficiently convey the images to the target reader.

3.2 Compensation of Cultural Images in Poem Translation

Each poem has its distinctive gestalt essence, and in poems gestalt essence is mainly constructed by the images. However, many images in the source poem may

not have the equivalent ones in the target language, and may bring cultural gaps to the target reader, due to the different languages, cultures, religions, conventions, etc.. As for this problem, the translator ought to adopt the compensation strategy to fill the cultural gap in the target culture. While producing the new image to compensate for the source image, the translator should fully use the strategies and means of compensation, at the same time make full use of his imagination and creativity to produce the most appropriate image to the target reader. Thus the translated poem can possess the same aesthetic effect with the original version, and produce the same gestalt image in the target language.

In many cases, the translator needs also to exert the integration role of subjective consciousness to produce a new image to the target reader, in order to make the integral the gestalt essence of the source poem. Sometimes the new image may sound new to the target culture, but the translator should not hesitate in reproduction and compensation of the image, because of the rapid development of globalization, new things or images will no longer be new ones to the whole world.

All in all, in the course of translation, the gestalt essence of the original poem is the final guide line for the translator to follow; otherwise, he will not correctly grasp the integral theme and implication of the source poem.

CONCLUSION

Poems are abundant with images which are significant elements for the translator to express the target language. The gestalt theory provides a new perspective to the translator of poems, and the gestalt essence determines the theme and implication of the poem. Therefore, the poem translator ought to grasp the gestalt essence of the source poem first, and then employ appropriate translating strategies to reproduce or compensate the images to the target reader, so as to make the gestalt essence of the poem integral and eventually accomplish the trans-cultural communication between different cultures.

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