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## The Application of Gestalt Simplicity Principle in Translation of *Charlotte's Web*

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### Abstract

Children's literature translation plays an important role in children's growth and development. Therefore, it deserves more and more attention from researchers and translators. Many theories have been applied in children's literature translation. In view of the characteristics of children's language, this paper analyzes the simplicity principle in Gestalt Theory in children's literature translation—Ren Rongrong's version of *Charlotte's Web* and the result shows that simplicity principle can improve the translation quality and make his translation better accepted and easily understood by children.

**Key words:** Gestalt theory; Simplicity principle; Children's literature; Translation

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### INTRODUCTION

Nowadays large amounts of foreign children's literary works have been introduced into China. For a long time, children's literature translation was done from adult's

tastes and standard, putting aside children's inherent psychological characteristics, knowledge level, and reception capability. Some children's literary translation works are intended for adults and for educational purpose. Some translators did not attach enough importance to the main target readers—children.

As an important part of literature, children's literature shares some commonalities with adult literature, but also has its own characteristics. Children's literature works are supposed to be simple and active in both forms and content. This makes children's literature translation special and difficult. Therefore, translators should bear the concept of children-orientation in mind and reconstruct the original work from the perspective of children. That means, compared to the effect and benefit of reading, cognition of children should be first emphasized in the process of translation. What's more, translation quality directly influences children's accessibility and appreciation in reading. Translation of Children's literature plays an important role in offering children the incredible opportunity of immersing in the wonderful inner world.

However, the present situation of children's literature translation in China is not that satisfying. What is more serious is that the research and study in this field are less systematic and theoretical. Therefore, the study of children's literature translation is of great importance. In recent years, some scholars have made related studies under the guidance of different theories, which have made the study of children's literature translation a respectably intellectual attention. But few have introduced Gestalt Theory to children's literature translation. Under this situation, this paper attempts to apply simplicity principle in Gestalt Theory to analyze Ren Rongrong's version of *Charlotte's Web* in the hope of providing a new perspective of studying children's literature translation.

## 1. LANGUAGE FEATURES OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE TRANSLATION

Translated versions of children's literature are welcomed by children. They are written in Chinese but originated from foreign works. Some language features of children's literature translation can be summarized from large amounts of children's literature translation. This paper focuses on two of them: duplication words, short and simple sentences.

### 1.1 Reduplication Words

As one of the characteristics of Chinese children language, reduplication words are commonly used in children's literature translation, thus making it different from the language of adults. The reasons of the application of reduplication words in children's literature translation can be elaborated from the following three aspects: Firstly, due to their young age and cognitive level, children do not have enough Chinese characters in store to express their thoughts and feelings as well as to understand others. Nevertheless, reduplication words express meaning by the repetition and organization of the same sound without using too many Chinese characteristics. Therefore, reduplication words make the most of children's limited vocabulary and enable children to reach beyond their capacity to the unlimited literary works. For example, "芳草如茵" in Chinese adult literature would be "绿绿的草" in children's literary works. Secondly, repetition of the same sound, whether it is a syllable or a word, it is subject to the physiological characteristic of children. As for children, whose vocal organ development might be incomplete, the pronunciation of two similar sounds is much easier and more natural than two different ones. This provides a good explanation of children's saying "饭饭" instead of "吃饭". Thirdly, repeated syllables reinforce the harmony of language both in form and voice effect. The thought of symmetry is highly valued in Chinese. "From morphology, it is blatantly self-evidence that the complete repetition of a Chinese character can achieve parallel or symmetrical pattern, which shows the parallelism value in Chinese reduplicated words." (Liu, 2012) On the other hand, reduplication words with bright rhythm and beautiful sound inspire imagination and reduce difficulty of comprehension, especially for those who cannot read and mainly get access to literary works through listening to parents or teachers.

### 1.2 Short and Simple Sentences

In English, the main sentence structure is subordination, which is long and complex. While most of the sentences in Chinese are short in length and with simple structures. Such linguistic difference between two languages provides the implication that translators should transform complex sentences in English into short sentences in Chinese,

especially for children's literature translation, whose readers are children with incomplete cognitive level and limited vocabulary. The short sentences here refer to both short simple sentences and clauses with simple structures in English. Researches in psychological linguistics show that children at first master simple sentences and then learn about complex sentences. Most of the time, complex and long sentences increase difficulty for the young readers and they have to make more efforts to process the information and structures. The preference for short and simple sentences in children's literature translation is quite reasonable. Firstly, compared to long sentences, there is less information in short sentences. While processing a new sentence, children do not pay attention to all the information in it. Instead, they get the meaning of the sentence by only focusing on some information and trying to connect it with the related images from memory (Zhu, 1981). Secondly, generally, the simple sentence structures of short sentences subject to children's comprehension ability. Any sentence can be divided into semantic information and syntax structure. Children tend to comprehend a sentence first by processing the former one rather than the latter one. Only when they fail to connect the new information they come across with what is known in mind will they turn to syntax structure (Wang, 1985). Therefore, short or simple sentences save children the trouble of making extra efforts and are in accordance with children's strategy of processing sentences. Thirdly, children are born to be vivacious and lively, constantly searching for whatever that is active and fresh. Short and simple sentences serve this purpose well with the plain contents and bright rhythm.

## 2. INTRODUCTION OF CHARLOTTE'S WEB

*Charlotte's Web*, first published in 1952, is an award-winning children's novel by great American author E. B. White. The story is about a pig named Wilbur who is saved from being killed by a smart spider Charlotte. As a fairy tale created for children, *Charlotte's Web* is also welcomed by adults. Until now, it has had more than twenty versions of translation. And the books printed amount to more than five millions. Till now, there have been four fully translated versions in China and Ren Rongrong's version is welcomed by both adults and children. When Ren Rongrong's version was produced, the thought of children-orientation and translation for children prevailed in the field of translation, which is one of the reasons why this version is selected in this paper. It was published in 2004 by Shanghai Translation Publishing House and examples extracted from this book will be analyzed. (White, 2004) Ren Rongrong is not only an experienced translator, but also a famous author for children. His translation of *Charlotte's Web* is warmly

welcomed by children, which show that Ren, in his eighties, still remains a good friend of children.

### 3. SIMPLICITY PRINCIPLE IN GESTALT THEORY

#### 3.1 Gestalt Theory and Translation

The connection of Gestalt Theory and translation will be elaborated from two aspects. First, translation is closely related to psychology. Translation works are the creation of translators' mental process. "Only by understanding the process can we hope to help ourselves and others to improve their skills as translators." (Bell, 2001, p.22) Therefore, application of psychology in translation has a positive significance in improving translation ability and polishing the target language text. Second, it is the development of text linguistics that leads to the integration of Gestalt psychology and translation. Traditional linguistics attaches importance to sentences, which result in the sentence-oriented translation theory. Translators try to achieve structure equivalence in translation while ignoring the relationship between sentences and sentences. Later, text linguistics makes up for the deficiency. The text which translator is dealing with is not only a combination of grammatical and lexical items, it is also an integrated whole which is more than the sum of its parts. Translators should try to present the cohesive and coherent whole instead of linguistic structure. Text linguistics laid the foundation of introducing Gestalt Theory into translation. The integrated whole is called gestalt in this theory. It holds that the parts of an integrated whole are determined by the whole. They are meaningless without the Gestalt whole. This inspires translator to adopt a top-down view while translating, which means determining the meaning of words, phrase, even sentence in accordance with the integrated whole. In a word, the focus of translation has shifted from the separate words and sentences to the whole text, from traditional ingredient analysis to comprehensive understanding of semantic field which contains gestalt.

#### 3.2 The Principle of Simplicity

Before we go further, we need to figure out the concept of Gestalt Field, inspired by force field in physics. The force field in physics emphasizes the importance of whole and organizes the changing parts into an integrated whole based on the current condition. Likewise, the force field in our brain coordinates diverse sensory data into a perfect whole. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts and has an impact on them. In viewing gestalt field, the process of our cognition goes from perceiving the parts outside to realizing the dominated whole in our mind. Meanwhile, certain rules are followed in this process. Such rules Gestalt psychologists call gestalt laws

of perceptual organization, a more accurate term would be principles of perceptual organization. These laws were summarized by Max Wertheimer (1880-1943), the founder of Gestalt psychology.

There are more than one hundred Gestalt laws, and this paper is focusing on one of the most important laws -- the law of simplicity. Law of simplicity means that "stimuli is organized in the simplest way possible" both visually and psychologically (Plotnik, 1996, p.117). According to Gestalt laws of perceptual organization, vast ranges of phenomena in perceptual organization have been widely interpreted as revealing a preference for simplicity (Wertheimer, 1938, pp. 45-63).

It is also called the "law of Pragnanz" or "the law of good figure". There exists an effortless temptation to perceive the diverse components in the outside world in the simplest way to form the regular, symmetrical, and stable whole. With such harmony structure in mind, we generate meaning from the seemingly disconnected information.

On the other hand, cognitive objects are supposed to be organized in a simple and regular way. If the number of disconnected parts goes beyond our capacity, we tend to omit extra stimuli in accordance with rules of symmetry, regularity and smoothness. Therefore, the law of simplicity also refers to the fact that because of the impulsion of harmony and simplified structure in the mind, people may delete the redundant bits of information to highlight the most important ones.

### 4. SIMPLICITY PRINCIPLE AND CHARLOTTE'S WEB

#### 4.1 Simplicity Principle in Duplication Words

Duplication is a common phenomenon in children's literature translation. Some examples are extracted from Ren Rongrong's version of *Charlotte's Web* to illustrate the actualization of simplicity in translation.

Example 1

ST: "I get everything beautifully planned out and it has to go and rain," he said. (White, 2004, p.25)

TT: "我什么事情都美美地计划好了, 偏偏下雨." 他说. (Ibid., p.178)

It is obvious that the word "beautifully" in the first example is literally translated into the duplication word "美美地" in Chinese. Here, "beautifully planned out" has the meaning of having made a perfect plan or full preparation for it. Nevertheless, Ren Rongrong does not translate it into "完美的计划" or "充分准备", with the consciousness of simplicity principle in mind, he chooses the simplest pattern "美美", which makes the most of the word "美" and fully conveys the meaning in the original text at the same time. This shows that the word "beautifully" was interpreted in a simple and complete way.

#### Example 2

**ST:** The night seemed long. Wilbur's stomach was empty and his mind was full. (Ibid., p.30)

**TT:** 这一夜好像特别长。尔格肚子空空的，可是心满满的，都是心事。(Ibid., p.183)

In this example, the words "empty" and "full" are converted into "空空" and "满满", which vividly shows Wilbur's state of being hungry and worrying. Ren Rongrong advocates translating for children, therefore he simplifies what he perceives in the simple description. Without the simplicity principle in mind, these words might be polished into "饥肠辘辘" and "心事重重". It is necessary to point out that Ren's adding "都是心事" after "满满的" does not betray the principle of simplicity. The principle of simplicity aims to the least effort of target readers, whose cognitive level is much different from that of adults. That is to say, compared to adult literary, which advocates succinctness of language to express condensed meaning with words as less as possible, the application of simplicity principle in Children's literature translation also refers to selecting simple words and phrases to reduce the effort of children in reading, even though the translated version is not the shortest in form.

#### Example 3

**ST:** Every day was a happy day, and every night was peaceful. (Ibid., p.12)

**TT:** 天天这样，白天快快活活，夜里安安静静。(Ibid., p.168)

Principle of simplicity tells that we tend to simplify the stimuli we perceive in accordance with rules of symmetry, regularity and smoothness. This is where the term *pragnanz*, namely good figure, comes from. In this example, the duplication words "快快活活" and "安安静静" reflect exactly the regularity and symmetry in form and meaning of the sentence, while the original version "happy" and "peaceful" even fails to do that.

#### Simplicity Principle in Short and Simple Sentences

It is easy to find short and simple sentences in children's literary translation. Short and simple sentences have advantages in depicting vivid and active image. Also, short and simple sentences without redundant information convey conciseness.

#### Example 5

**ST:** "Anywhere you like, anywhere you like," said goose. "Go down through the orchard, root up the sod! Go down through the garden, dig up the radishes! Root up everything! Eat grass! Look for corn! Look for oats! Run all over! Skip and dance, jump and prance! Go down through the orchard and stroll in the woods! The world is a wonderful place when you're young." (Ibid., p.17)

**TT:** "你爱上哪儿就上哪儿，爱上哪儿就上哪儿，"母鹅说，"穿过果园，拱草皮!穿过花园，拱出萝卜!拱出所有的东西!吃草!找玉米!找燕麦!到处跑!蹦蹦跳跳!穿过果园，到林子里去游荡!你年纪小，会觉得世界真奇妙。"(Ibid., p.172)

The original text mainly uses short and simple sentences to present the excitement of the goose. She enthusiastically encourages Wilbur to go out and see the wonderful world. The source text is a Gestalt whole. The translated version reconstructs the Gestalt whole in the same style, using simple sentences, to make it easily accessible for children. Children prefer processing simple sentence structure first and later on learn to process the more difficult one. Therefore, the sentence pattern of "吃草!找玉米!找燕麦!到处跑!蹦蹦跳跳!" is in line with children's cognitive system as well as their active nature. With the consciousness of simplicity in mind, the translator can realize the vividness of the original texts.

#### Example 6

**ST:** It was arranged so that you could swing without being pushed. You climbed a ladder to the hayloft. (Ibid., p.61)

**TT:** 荡这秋千不用人推，你只要爬梯子上堆干草的阁楼就行。(Ibid., p.213)

In this example, although "it was arranged so that" is omitted in the translated version, the main meaning of the whole sentence "荡这秋千不用人推" has been carried out in translation. According to simplicity principle, diverse bits of information are supposed to be perceived in a way as simple as possible. The original sentences are a Gestalt, an integrated whole. Within the force field of his cognition, Ren recognizes the prominent information and cut off the unnecessary component. Therefore, "荡这秋千不用人推" is only a part of the whole sentence in form but enough to represent the whole in meaning. In other words, Ren presents the simple form of the original sentence in his translation to children and save young readers the trouble of selecting and identifying. Ren's deletion of unimportant information not only reflects his own application of simplicity principle, but also subject to children's cognitive system.

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## CONCLUSION

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Instead of considering what children ought to read, what children like to read should be the priority both in children's literary and children's literature translation. Children have a preference for using duplication words and simple and short sentences. Better translation of children's literature works fits to the language features of children. The application of Gestalt simplicity principle in children's literature translation is analyzed from the aspect of duplication words, simple and short sentences. Simplicity principle is only one of the most important principles in Gestalt Theory, and other principles such as continuity, proximity, and integrity can also be adopted to analyze certain phenomenon in children's literature translation, which needs further exploration.

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