

## Linguistic Contributions to the Development of Translation Studies in China

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Article abstract

This paper tries to draw a clear picture of linguistic contributions to the development of translation in China. It does so by means of a bilateral study focusing on the development of the unit of language and translation. Works of Chinese translation theorists are cited to illustrate different efforts in applying linguistic theory to translation studies, among which the textual approach is cardinal.

# Linguistic Contributions to the Development of Translation Studies in China

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## RÉSUMÉ

Cet article étudie la contribution de la linguistique au développement de la traduction en Chine. On présente une étude bilatérale mettant l'accent sur le développement des unités de langue et de traduction. On cite les travaux de théoriciens chinois de la traduction pour mettre en relief les tentatives d'application de la théorie linguistique à la traductologie, où l'approche textuelle est fondamentale.

## ABSTRACT

This paper tries to draw a clear picture of linguistic contributions to the development of translation in China. It does so by means of a bilateral study focusing on the development of the unit of language and translation. Works of Chinese translation theorists are cited to illustrate different efforts in applying linguistic theory to translation studies, among which the textual approach is cardinal.

More and more scholars are now showing an interest in adopting linguistic approaches to translation studies. Between 1949 and 1989, an incomplete survey by the author revealed that there were only about 30 textbook passages discussing the relationship between linguistics and translation, including aspects of general linguistics, pragmatics, stylistics, text linguistics, rhetoric and machine translation. From 1990 to 1994, there was an incredible increase in the number of passages looking at translation from a linguistic point of view. Almost 160 articles published over these five years concerned translation and general linguistics, stylistics, comparative linguistics, semantics, pragmatics, sociolinguistics, text linguistics, rhetoric, etc. New terms such as discourse analysis, hermeneutics, dynamic equivalence, deep structure and surface structure, context, theme and rheme, cooperative principles, to mention just a few, appeared in the field of translation studies. We can definitely identify a trend of applying linguistics theories to translation studies in these years.

Today, we are at the point of questioning whether linguistics is a necessary part of translation. In recent years, some scholars who are in favour of free translation, have repeatedly raised this question to the public and appealed for an end to the linguistic approach to translation. Some firmly believe that translation is an art and that therefore linguistics is neither useful nor helpful. Such a claim is wrong if we look at translation as a whole, including scientific translation where meanings are rigid and restricted and the degree of freedom is limited. Flexibility, in this case, is neither required nor appreciated.

But even in literary translation, linguistics is hardly a burden. Wang Zongyan pointed out that "If one sees linguistics as a body of rules regulating language, trans-

lators most probably will yawn with boredom. If it signifies the use of words and locutions to fit an occasion, there is nothing to stop translators from embracing linguistics" (Wang 1991: 38). The controversy over "literal" versus "free" translation has a long history, with convincing supporters on each side. For example, ancient Western scholars like Erasmus, Augustine, and others were in favour of literal translation. Among early Chinese translators, Kumarajiva is considered to be of the free school, while Xuan Zuang appears as literal and inflexible. In modern China, Yan Fu advocated hermeneutic translation, while Lu Xun preferred a clumsy version to one that was free but inexact. There is nothing wrong in any of these stances. When these translators emphasized free translation they never denied the possibility of literal translation, and vice versa. Problems only arise when the discussion turns to equivalent translations.

The problem of equivalence has caused much controversy. Some people believed that there could be an equivalence of language elements independent of the setting in which they occurred. Based on this assumption, some "literal" translators tried to decompose a text into single elements in hopes of finding equivalents in the target language. This is a naive idea. Jakobson (1971: 262) notes that "Equivalence in difference is the cardinal problem of language and the pivotal concern of linguistics." He does not refer to "equivalence" but to "equivalence in difference" as the cardinal problem. Nida was also misunderstood by many for his notion of "equivalence," which he took to mean that "Translating consists in reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source-language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style" (1969: 12). He further concluded that "Absolute equivalence in translating is never possible" (1984: 14). De Beaugrande and Dressler believed that the success or failure of either free or literal approaches was uncertain: an unduly "literal" translation might be awkward or even unintelligible, while an unduly "free" one might make the original text disintegrate and disappear altogether. To them, equivalence between a translation and an original can only be realized in the experience of the participants (cf. de Beaugrande and Dressler 1981: 216-217). Catford (1965: 27) expressed the same concern that equivalent translation is only "an empirical phenomenon, discovered by comparing SL and TL texts." In citing the above examples, I have absolutely no intention of insisting on untranslatability. What I mean is that a translator should incorporate his or her own experience and processing activities into the text: solving the problems, reducing polyvalence, explaining away any discrepancies or discontinuities. Linguistic knowledge can help us treat different genres in different ways, always with an awareness that there are never exact equivalences but only approximations. Therefore, amplification and simplification become acceptable.

If we agree that texts can be translated, then, in what way does linguistics contribute to translation? To answer this question, we must look at the acceptance of western linguistics in China and its influence on translation. Systematic and scientific study of the Chinese language came into being only at the end of the last century, when Ma Jianzhong published a grammar book *Mashi Wentong* « 马氏文通 » in 1898, which was the first in China and took the grammar of Indo-European languages as its model. The study of language was, in turn, influenced by translation studies in China. In *Mashi Wenton*, the main emphasis is on the use of morphology, which takes up six-sevenths of the book. Influenced by the dominant trend of morphological studies, a

word was regarded as the minimum meaningful unit, and a sentence was therefore the logical combination of words of various specific types. Translation was, then, principally based on the unit of the word. In the West, Biblical translation provided a very good example, just as the translation of Buddhist scriptures did in China.

Not until the end of the 19th century did some linguists come to realize that sentences were not just the summary of the sequenced words they contained. The Prague School, founded in the 1920s, made a considerable contribution to the study of syntax. According to the analytic approach of the Functional Perspective of the Prague School, a sentence can be broken down into two parts: theme and rheme. Theme is opposed to rheme in a manner similar to the distinction between topic and comment, and is defined as the part of a sentence which contributes least to advancing the process of communication. Rheme, on the other hand, is the part of a sentence which adds most to advancing the process of communication and has the highest degree of communicative dynamism. These two terms help enlighten the process of translating Chinese into English.

In the mid-1950s, the study of syntax peaked with the Chomsky's establishment of transformational-generative grammar. This theory of the deep structure and surface structure of language influenced translation tremendously. Nida relied heavily on this theory in developing his "analyzing-transferring-reconstructing" pattern for translation. Some Chinese linguists, in the meantime, tried to raise language studies to a higher plane. Li Jinxi (1982) enlarged the role of sentence studies in his book *A New Chinese Grammar*, two thirds of which was devoted to discussing sentence formation or syntax. He writes that "No words can be identified except in the context of a sentence." The study was then improved by other grammarians, including Lu Shuxiang, Wang Li.

With the development of linguistic studies, translation based on the unit of the sentence was put forward by some scholars. It was Lin Yu-Tang who first applied the theory to translation in his article "On Translation." He claimed that "translation should be done on the basis of the sentence [...] What a translator should be faithful to is not the individual words but the meaning conveyed by them" (Lin 1984: 263). The importance of context in the understanding of a sentence was therefore emphasized. Chao Yuanren, a Chinese scholar and professor at Harvard University, criticized scholars and translators who tended to forget this point and take language for something independent and self-sufficient. In fact, it is obvious that when we translate a sentence, we depend on its context; when we interpret an utterance we rely on the context of the speech (cf. Chao 1967). When a sentence is removed from the text, it usually becomes ambiguous due to the lack of context. Therefore, translation becomes difficult.

In the 1960s, people began to realize that the study of language based on sentences was not even sufficient. A complete study should be made of the whole text. A simple sentence like "George passed" may have different interpretations in different contexts. If the context is that of an examination, it means George did well on a test; in a card game it would indicate that George declined his chance to bid; in sports it would mean the ball reached another player. Without a context, how could we decide on a translation? Linguists therefore shifted their attention to the study of texts and to discourse analysis. Text linguistics have become increasingly popular since that time. Van Dijk was a pioneer in this field, and his four-volume edition of the *Handbook of*

*Discourse Analysis* is of great value. Halliday's *Cohesion in English* and *Introduction to Functional Grammar* help us to better understand the English language on a textual level. It is worth noting that de Beaugrande and Dressler (1981) provided an overall and systematic study of text, which is useful to translation studies. De Beaugrande actually wrote a book called *Factors in a Theory of Poetic Translating* in 1978. The book did not become very popular as it confined the discussion to translating poetry. At the same time, books on a linguistic approach to translation were introduced into China, such as the works of Eugene Nida, Peter Newmarks, J.C. Catford, Georges Mounin, and others. These books gave a great push to the application of linguistic theories to translation studies in China.

Textual or discursive approaches to the study of translation could not keep pace with the development of text linguistics. Some studies remained on the syntactic or semantic level, though even there textual devices were employed. In talking about the translation units of word and text, Nida wrote:

... average person naively thinks that language is words, the common tacit assumption results that translation involves replacing a word in language A with a word in language B. And the more "conscientious" this sort of translation is, the more acute. In other words, the traditional focus of attention in translation was on the word. It was recognized that that was not a sufficiently large unit, and therefore the focus shifted to the sentence. But again, expert translators and linguists have been able to demonstrate that individual sentences, in turn, are not enough. The focus should be on the paragraph, and to some extent on the total discourse. (Nida and Tabber 1969: 152)

From that statement we can see that Nida regards a discourse as something larger than a paragraph, as an article with a beginning and an ending. Nida himself never applied text linguistics to translation, and there might be some confusion if we use his term in our interpretation of discourse, because discourse analysis is not merely a study based on a larger language structure.

Some Chinese scholars did make the effort to apply text linguistics to the theory and practice of translation. Wang Bingqin's article (1987) was the first academic paper of this sort. He stated his aim to study and discover the rules governing the internal structure of a text in light of text linguistics. He analyzed numerous examples using textual analysis, but unfortunately, all the samples he collected were descriptions of scenery or quotations from the books of great scholars—no dialogue, no illocutionary or perlocutionary forces in the language. He failed to provide a variety of examples. For this reason, his research findings are largely restricted to rhetorical texts in ancient China (cf. Wang 1981; Luo 1994).

Scholars like He Ziran applied pragmatics to translation. He's article (1992) put forth two new terms, "pragmalinguistics" and "socio-pragmatics" which, in translation, refer respectively to "the study of pragmatic force or language use from the viewpoint of linguistic sources" and to "the pragmatic studies which examine the conditions on language use that derive from the social and cultural situation." He discusses the possibility of applying the pragmatic approach to translation in order to achieve a pragmatic equivalent effect between source and target texts; that is, to reproduce the message carried by the source language itself, as well as the meaning carried by the source language within its context and culture. In this article he tries to distinguish "pragma-linguistics" from "socio-pragmatics" but finally admits that "Actually, a clear line between pragma-linguistics and socio-pragmatics may sometimes

be difficult to draw." Still he insists that the application of the pragmatic approach to translation is helpful and even necessary. Ke Wenli (1992) argued that semantics, which in a broad sense combines semantics and pragmatics, should be studied to help understand, explain and solve some of the problems encountered in translation. In this article, he examines four semantic terms—"sense and reference," "hyponymy," "changes of meaning" and "context"—giving many examples to illustrate the importance of having some general knowledge of semantics and of understanding the relationship between semantics and translation. This article is clearly written and readers can easily draw inspiration from it.

These linguistics approaches shed new lights on the criteria of "faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance" defined by Yan Fu. Chinese scholars began to criticize the vagueness of these three criteria and endeavored to give them concrete significance through the theories of western linguistics. The result is that the content of these three traditional criteria has been greatly enriched, especially by the effect equivalence theory, which in a broad sense means that the target language should be equivalent to the source language from a semantic, pragmatic, and stylistic point of view. But we are still unable to evaluate translations in a very scientific way. Therefore, Chinese scholars like Fan Shouyi, Xu Shenghuan and Mu Lei embarked on quantitative analyses of translations and used the fuzzy set theory of mathematics in accomplishing their analysis. Fan published several articles on this field of study. His 1987 and 1990 articles evaluate translations according to a numerical quantity of faithfulness. Xu's article "A Mathematical Model for Evaluating a Translation's Quality" presents a normal mathematical model. He states that it is difficult to produce an absolutely accurate evaluation of translations with this model because of the uncertainty and randomness of man's thought process. Making such analysis more accurate and objective would require further research.

The unit in translation is a hard nut to crack. Without solving this problem, no research in translation studies will ever be sufficient. To date, very few people have focused their research on this area. Nida holds that the unit should be the sentence, and in a certain sense, the discourse. Barkhudarov (1993: 40), Soviet linguist and translation theorist, suggests that:

translation is the process of transforming a speech product (or text) produced in one language into a speech product (or text) in another language. [...] It follows that the most important task of the translator who carries out the process of transformation, and of the theorist who describes or creates a model for that process, is to establish the minimal unit of translation, as it is generally called, the unit of translation in the source text.

Though he notes the importance of the unit of translation in a text and considers that this unit can be a unit on any level of language, he fails to point out what a text is and how it might be measured in translation. Halliday's notion of the clause might be significant in this case. To him, a clause is a basic unit. He distinguishes three functions of a clause: textual, interpersonal and ideational. According to Halliday, these functions are not possessed by word or phrase. But he is not quite successful in analyzing the relationship between clause and text (cf. Halliday 1985). In China, some people have tried to solve this problem. Wang Dechun (1987: 10) more or less shares Barkhudarov's view that the translation unit cannot be confined just to sentences. In

some ways, the phoneme, word, phrase, sentence, paragraph, or even text can all serve as a unit. At this point, we cannot find anything special in treating text translation except for having text as the highest level among translation units. This is not the aim of text linguistics or discourse analysis. If we want to apply these to the theory and practice of translation, we will require a textual approach.

What is text then? A text can be formally defined as a sequence or utterance larger than a sentence. Semantically, it is endocentric and forms a relatively whole topic; functionally it performs a distinctive communication act. It can be studied internally and externally. Internal study involves the study of pragmatics, communication and culture; external study involves the study of form and meaning. Only by combining the two can the text of discourse be fully described and interpreted and the practice of translation be fundamentally ensured (cf. Luo 1993).

As far as the unit is concerned, Luo (1993) thinks that people have been naive in attempting to find an ideal unit which works well for both analysis and transference. When the unit of language is small, it works well for transfer but not for analysis, while a larger unit is good for analysis but not for transfer. It is impossible to reconcile the two. He therefore advocates establishing two kinds of translation unit: one for transfer, and another for analysis. The unit of analysis is a relatively complete piece of linguistic material which can help us look at linguistic and nonlinguistic factors within and beyond the text. The unit of transfer in translation is one that has a corresponding identity in the source language but components that do not necessarily exist in the target language. The unit for transfer is the clause, and the unit for analysis the text. They are chosen because they are dynamic, while other units, like the word, phrase, or sentence, are static. According to the psychological process of translating, dynamic units are primary and static units secondary. The former is in use, while the latter is in storage. This treatment distinguishes the textual approach to translation from other approaches. According to its context and use, a text can be constructed in several ways, ranging from one word such as DANGER! to a whole discourse. Luo's analysis considers three types of clause for analysis in translation: the finite clause, the nonfinite clause and the verbless clause. These can be further classified into seven kinds:

1. finite clause (Ca)
  - 1) Do you know *that John is going to China in five days?* (Ca)
2. nonfinite clause (Cb)
  - 2) She telephoned *to ask for an interview.* (Cb1)
  - 3) *Her aunt having left the room,* I declared my passionate love for Celia. (Cb2)
  - 4) We left the room and went home, *the job finished.* (Cb3)
  - 5) I don't like *your interrupting us.* (Cb4)
3. verbless clause (Cc)
  - 6) I am surprised to find *you here.* (Cc1)
  - 7) *Whether right or wrong,* he always comes off worst in argument. (Cc2)

It is likely that a clause in the source language will be rendered as a sentence in the target language, as in the following example:

## The original:

他这时的视线已移到海面上了，<sup>^//</sup> 海面上飞驰着两只黄色的渡轮，<sup>^/</sup> 一只由大陆到海岛去，<sup>^/</sup> 一只由海岛到大陆去，<sup>^/</sup> 都是楼上楼下满载乘客的。<sup>^//</sup>

艾芜《海岛上》

## English version:

He was now gazing at the sea, <sup>^/</sup> on which two brown steamers are crossing, <sup>^/</sup> one going from the mainland to the island, <sup>^/</sup> and one the other way. <sup>^//</sup> They were both packed with passengers on upper and lower decks. (trans. by W.J. E. Jenner and Gladys Yang)

The mark <sup>^/</sup> indicates a clause, <sup>^//</sup> a sentence. The Chinese text consists of two sentences, the first of which is also a clause, while the second sentence has four clauses. When the text was rendered into English, a dramatic change in clause formation appeared. The first sentence plus the other three clauses in the second were put together to form an English sentence. The last clause in the text was rendered into a separate sentence. We can use a formula to analyze it.

$$\begin{array}{l} T^C = S^1 \rightarrow C + S^2 \rightarrow C^1 C^2 C^3 C^4 \\ \downarrow \\ T^E = S^1 \rightarrow C^a C^a C^b C^c + S^2 \rightarrow C^a \end{array}$$

By analyzing samples of clauses translated from English into Chinese and vice versa, we can sometimes identify exceptions. For example, an English prepositional phrase may have to be rendered into Chinese as in the following example:

## The original:

Looking out to ascertain for what I saw, *to my surprise*, Peggotty burst from a hedge and climb into the cart. (C. Dickens: *David Copperfield*)

## The Chinese version:

我向外张望，想弄清怎么一回事，只见派洛蒂从篱笆那边出现，登上马车，真叫我大为惊异。

(trans. Shi Guo)

We have no other means of translating the English prepositional phrase into a Chinese clause for the phrase has an implied meaning that makes it equivalent to a clause. Jespersen (1924) mentions this in his discussion of “nexus,” a term Luo has borrowed and used as a device to complement his clause-transfer theory. This theory can be used to analyze any text, including poetic ones, and is significant not only to translation theory but also to contrastive studies of discourse analysis. In his 1992 article, Lu Jun argued that the sentence group should be the unit of translation for three reasons. Semantically, a sentence group can render the multiple meanings of a word less ambiguous and can set up the main idea of the group. Morphologically, sentences in a group are similar in form but different in meaning, and can easily create a particular effect on the reader. Communicatively, a sentence group can convey information, as each sentence has a theme and rheme which develop in the sentence group according to a pattern that reflects the author’s pattern of thought (cf. Lu 1992). Here Lu adopted Xu Shenghuan’s thematic progression model which is,

in fact, a modified version of Danes' model. Other translation theorists also applied these models to the analysis of the thematic progression in translation, studying how clauses are arranged and progress. Recent research on thematic progression was accomplished by Luo and his colleagues, and after in-depth analysis of the texts translated from Chinese into English, they concluded that such analysis is more significant in Chinese, especially in classic Chinese. The following are the thematic progression models they employed:

1) Parallel thematic progression

$$\begin{array}{l} T1 \rightarrow R1 \\ T2 \rightarrow R2 \\ T3 \rightarrow R3 \end{array}$$

2) Continuative thematic progression model

$$\begin{array}{l} T1 \rightarrow R1 \\ \quad \downarrow \\ \quad T2 (=R1) \rightarrow R2 \\ \quad \quad \downarrow \\ \quad \quad T3 (=R2) \rightarrow R3 \end{array}$$

3) Focused thematic progression model

$$\begin{array}{l} T1 \quad \downarrow \\ T2 \rightarrow R \\ T3 \quad \uparrow \end{array}$$

4) Cross-thematic progression model

$$\begin{array}{l} T1 \rightarrow R1 \\ \quad \searrow \\ T2 \rightarrow R2 \\ \quad \searrow \\ T3 \rightarrow R3 \end{array}$$

In this progression model, sentences in a group can develop according to any one of these patterns. This characterization establishes that a sentence is not only a communicative unit, but also a translation unit, for it follows the logical thinking of mankind. If the sentence group does not develop according to these patterns, the communicative function of the group will necessarily be affected. The result will be the same if the sentence group is not translated according to these patterns.

Certain linguistic approaches have also been introduced into the study of translation. Fan Shouyi and Xu Shenghuang applied a statistical analysis to the evaluation of translated texts and tried to develop a model for the analysis. Luo introduced the seven standards for constituting a text into translation theory: intentionality, informativity, cohesion, coherence, situationality, intertextuality and acceptability (Luo 1995). These are used to establish criteria for translation. They can embody the Chinese aesthetic criteria of "faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance." The seven standards are used to construct a text in translation, while the three-character Chinese criteria are used to evaluate and appreciate a text in translation.

Needless to say, many people not mentioned in this article have also contributed to the application of linguistics to translation theory and practice. This piece simply tries to sketch the broad trends in the linguistic contribution to translation.

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