

Research on Prose Translation from the Perspective of Relevance Theory

-- Taking 108 Excellent Prose Works as an example

Yan Zhang

School of Foreign Languages, Sichuan Normal University, Chengdu, 610000, China

Abstract: In today's globalized communication, international communication has become commonplace, and translation between languages is inevitable. Translation is one of the oldest activities in human history and society, and plays an inestimable role in promoting the exchange of world literature, philosophy and art as well as maintaining the peace and stability of the world. Prose translation has a long history and has always been an important research object of translation studies, as well as one of the sources of earliest theoretical understanding of translation. Translation of prose plays an important role in cultural exchange. However, due to the differences in cultural customs and language habits, Chinese and English prose texts have their own characteristics. Many scholars have tried their best to bridge the differences between English and Chinese prose texts, studying different characteristics and translation strategies of Chinese and English prose texts from different perspectives. Despite that, there is limitation in the dissemination of prose translation and the global cultural communication and dissemination because of the limited level of translators and the obvious lack of research in prose texts. In order to better promote the development of translation and facilitate the communication and dissemination between different cultures, this paper explores the prose translation strategies and translation techniques by taking 108 Excellent Prose Works as an example. It clarifies the definition and development of relevance theory and the relationship between relevance theory and translation. This paper also discusses the characteristics, functions and principles of prose texts. Under the guidance of relevance theory and its analysis, this paper analyzes example sentences selected from 108 Excellent Prose Works, studying two translation methods, literal translation and free translation as well as translation techniques such as amplification, omission and substitution, so as to promote the translation of prose and even the communication and dissemination of global culture.

Keywords: Relevance Theory, Prose, Prose Translation Techniques, 108 Excellent Prose Works.

1. Introduction

International communication has become commonplace in today's globalized communication, and translation between languages is unavoidable. Prose translation has a long history and has always been a significant research object in translation studies, as well as one of the sources of earliest theoretical understanding of translation. In the past 30 years, research on prose translation has achieved fruitful results. Functional theory and Skopos theory have been introduced into prose translation. Scholars in translation field use functional theory to reproduce information from the source language in the most appropriate, natural and reciprocal language, adopt Skopos theory to shift the research focus from the relationship between the translation and the original text to the expected effect of the translation, adding new research perspectives to the multidisciplinary exploration of translation. But there are still relatively few studies on prose using relevance theory to build relations between the author, translator and the target reader [1]. So to solve this problem, this paper explores translation strategies of prose texts under the guidance of relevance theory, which requires translators to understand the message and communication intention of the original text, create the cognitive environment for target language readers, thus finding the relations between the author, translator and the target reader. Therefore, the development of prose translation and even the communication and dissemination among cultures can be promoted.

This paper is divided into three main parts. The first part

discusses studies on relevance theory. The second part talks about the research on prose. The third section discusses prose translation methods and translation techniques using 108 Excellent Prose Works as an example.

2. Studies on Relevance Theory

Prose texts have been discussed by many famous scholars in translation field. Li Yiqian believes that the study of prose texts under the theory of functional equivalence can reproduce information from the source language in the most appropriate, natural and reciprocal language [2]. Meng Huanhuan uses Skopos theory to study translation, highlighting that translation has the advantages of valuing the purpose of the translation and highlighting the subjectivity of the translator [3]. But these theories find no way to search for the best correlation between discourse and context through mutual information and to infer the implied meaning and communicative intention of the interlocutors in prose texts, so there is need to take further study on relevance theory.

2.1. The Definition of Relevance Theory

The concept of relevance theory was first put forward by D. Sperber and D. Wilson in 1986 in their book *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* on the basis of Grice's Relevance Maxim [4].

As for the research on relevance theory, some representatives include Grice, Sperber and Wilson proposed that relevance theory is a theory of correlation in cognitive pragmatics: communicative interaction and cognition as well

as a communicative theory derived from pragmatic theory. This theory suggests that verbal communication is an explicit-reasoning process that is closely related to the brain's cognitive reasoning mechanisms. Interlocutors search for the best correlation between discourse and context through mutual information to infer the implied meaning and communicative intention of the interlocutors. Therefore, in the communicative process, in order to determine the real intention of the communicator, the listener needs to find the best correlation between the discourse and the context [5]. The assumption of the best correlation in communicative behavior makes listeners tend to obtain the maximum contextual effect with the least cognitive effort, thus deducting the speaker's communicative intention [5].

Relevance theory also refers to a communicative theory used to explain the communicative process of explicit reasoning, which must rely on relevance for successful communication, and this explanation is closer to the nature of the human cognitive subject, that is, it is consistent with the universal cognitive psychology and the basic facts of human cognition [5]. Relevance theory explains discourse comprehension according to the general cognitive theory of information processing, in which language is only one factor, not the only factor, in the success of communication, and its role is not to convey information, but to constrain the various contexts needed for information processing [5].

2.2. The Development of Relevance Theory

Relevance theory is a cognitive-usage-based theory that has had a great impact on the linguistic community and the linguistics community at home and abroad. At abroad, there are three stages in the development of the theory of relevance: the formative stage, the mature stage, and the revision stage. The formative stage is the stage of theoretical development before the publication of the book *Relevance*, including the prototype of the idea of relevance, the subsume under the principle of relevance, and the deepening thought of relevance. This is reflected in four articles published by Sperber and Wilson from 1979 to 1983. These books include *Modern Linguistics: The Results of the Chomsky Revolution* in 1979, *On Gricean Conversational Meaning Theory* in 1981, *Mutual Knowledge and Relatedness in Comprehension Theory* in 1982, and *How to Define "Relatedness"* in 1983. In 1986, Sperber and Wilson jointly published *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, a detailed study of discourse comprehension from the perspective of relevance, marking the maturation of relevance theory [6]. In 1995, Spober and Wilson published the second edition of *Relevance*, which made a series of corrections to relevance theory, distinguishing between the principles of communicative correlation and cognitive correlation. Since that, some western scholars have also discussed relevance theory a lot [6].

In China, the relevance theory can be divided into introduction stage, research stage and application stage. In 1988, Shen Jiakuan first introduced the relevance theory to readers, introducing it in his book "Associativity: Communication and Cognition" and also comparing the differences between relevance theory and Grice's theory [7]. 1991, Gui Shichun also cited relevance theory in explaining the psychological problems of language learning [7]. Since the 1990s, more domestic scholars have become interested in the theory, and a group of young scholars, such as Zhang Yafei and Qu Weiguo, have further discussed the relevance theory

and have published related papers in foreign language journals.

2.3. Relevance Theory and Translation

Based on the relevance theory, Ernst August Gutt conducted five years of research on translation. In 1991, he published *Translation and Relevance: Cognition and Context*, in which he formally proposed the theory of associative translation and systematically explained it, and thus the theory of relevance gradually began to be applied to the field of translation [8]. From the perspective of relevance theory, in order to ensure the success of translation communication activities, translators need to clearly understand the author's intention and take care of the reader's cognitive context, while flexibly using various translation strategies based on the former two [9].

Firstly, the translator needs to accurately understand and convey the intention of the source language communicator, i.e., from the perspective of relevance. In order to ensure the success of the translation communication activity, the translator must convey not only the message intention of the original text, but also the communicative intention of the original text. The grasp of the communicative intent of the source language first requires the translator to have a solid linguistic knowledge of the source language. Then, he or she should understand the communicative background, contextual relationship, and socio-cultural background knowledge of the original language [9].

Secondly, the translator needs to take care of the cognitive environment of the target language readers, that is, after fully understanding the original text, the translator also needs to select an appropriate code to reproduce the communicative intention of the source language author to the target language author according to the cognitive environment of the target language reader. Translation is a cross-cultural and cross-linguistic communication activity, and differences in cognitive environment affect the understanding of the translated text by the receiver of the translated language, so the translator should take care of the cognitive context of the reader [9].

Lastly, translators need to make comprehensive and flexible use of various translation strategies on the basis of the former two. It has been proved that no translation strategy is directly related to the acquisition of optimal relevance, so translators need to distinguish the type of source language text and thus use various translation strategies flexibly [9].

3. Research on Prose

The English and Chinese prose texts have their own features. In the process of translating prose texts, analyzing the features of prose texts in both Chinese and English is helpful to understand and use the characteristics of the two different languages in the translation. Therefore, only by deeply understanding the characteristics of prose texts in the translation process can translators help find the message and communication intention guided by relevance theory.

3.1. Features of Prose Translation

The English and Chinese prose texts have their own characteristics. In the process of translating prose texts, analyzing the characteristics of prose texts in both Chinese and English is helpful to understand the source text and to apply the features in the target text. What's more, it is beneficial to the appreciation, comprehension and translation

of prose texts, so it is necessary to learn that Chinese favors the use of four-character structures, abundant parallelism structures and subjective words, while the English language often uses prepositions and subordinate sentences.

3.1.1. Features of Prose in Chinese

Generally speaking, prose has the characteristics of being scattered in form but not in spirit; focusing on the expression of inner feelings; and being beautiful and natural [10]. On the linguistic level, Chinese prose texts also present the characteristics of preferring four-character structures, parallelism structures and subjective words, and these characteristics also have a great impact on the translation of prose, so there is a need to study these three features.

1) Abundant four-character structures

In prose texts, a large number of four-character structures are employed to express the aesthetic value, the spirit and emotion of prose texts. Balanced in form and sounding with emphasis on meaning, they are generally regarded as the refined expressions. They conform to the aesthetic inclination of Chinese readers, since many of them are derived from the rich literary tradition, so in Chinese prose texts, abundant four-characters are employed as additional factor that makes the text more vivid and easier for the reader to understand, thus adding to the charm to the texts.

2) Abundant parallelism structures

What is commonly referred to as parallelism is the arrangement of three or more words or sentences that are identical or similar in structure, related in meaning and consistent in tone to form a whole. This figurative use can enhance the momentum and rhyme, and help to improve the readers' memory, thus achieving a better effect for prose texts. In Chinese prose texts, parallelism structure is often adopted because using parallelism to reason can receive a clear effect of organization; using parallelism to express emotions, the rhythm is harmonious and seems emotional; using parallelism to narrate and write scenes can bring about the clear logic, delicate descriptions, and vivid images.

3) Subjective words

Chinese is a language that favors the use of subjective words and first-person perspective. Prose generally portrays real people and real scenes, so first-person narration and subjective words are often used to express the author's unique emotional experience and true feelings in Chinese prose texts. The use of subjective words in Chinese prose texts also creates an intimate relationship between the reader and the character, making it easier for the reader to delve into the character's thoughts and emotions.

3.1.2. Features of Prose in English

English is a hypotaxis language, which means that it demands a strong logic and distinct level in its writing. English prose texts have the features of beautiful image, profound meaning, and strong logic. Furthermore, English prose, like English, favors the use of still words, like nouns, so in terms of its vocabulary, English prose texts often adopt many prepositions to serve as an element to connect these still words. At the level of syntactic structure, the distinctive feature of the texts is the use of subordinate sentences to show the distinct level between sentences.

1) Lexical feature

English is a hypotaxis language that focuses on coherence and logic. Logical relations are mainly connected by grammar or vocabulary in English writing. This is the same as prose texts. English prose texts have the characteristics of beautiful image, profound meaning and clear logic. What's more,

English prose, like English, favors the use of still words, like nouns, prepositions and articles, so in English prose texts, abundant prepositions are employed to connect still words to strengthen the logic.

Example 1:

I lost my sight when I was four years old by falling off a box car in a freight yard in Atlantic City and landing on my head. (A Ball to Roll Around)

Analysis: In this example, "by, off, in, on" are four prepositions placed before the nouns and articles, indicating the relations between the specific time and location and the condition of the author's loss of eyes. At the same time, the use of these four prepositions enhances the logic of the text and conforms to the expressions and reading habits of English readers.

Example 2:

I spent most of the day in a mental fog, wandering through crowds of laughing, happy people. (A Gift of Dreams)

Analysis: In this example, "of, in, through" are prepositions placed before "the, a, crowds" respectively. These prepositions put before the nouns and articles indicate the time and position that the character spent his whole day and show the status of movement of the character. At the same time, the adoption of these prepositions strengthens the logic of the text and keeps in line with the reading and aesthetic habits of the English readers.

2) Syntactic feature

The adoption of subordination is always preferred in English, especially when striving for logic. To show the strong logic and distinct level between sentences, the English text is organized in long sentences with strong logic. In English prose texts, it is also very common to use long and complicated sentences with subordinate sentences to maintain its logic because long and logically clear sentences are generally regarded as the refined expressions. Such use conforms to the logic inclination of English readers.

Example 3:

My hands began shaking so much that he asked me what was matter. I told him it was just that my hands were cold. I knew he didn't believe me. (A Boy and His Father)

Analysis: In this example, "that he asked me what was matter" and "it was just that my hands were cold" were subordinate sentences used to provide reason for the character's hands shaking, to further explain his father's asking and to show the character's excuse after being found out by his father respectively. They are used to serve as an element to maintain and strengthen the logic between sentences as well as avoid redundancy in long and complicated sentences. These subordinate sentences are generally regarded as the refined expressions, which keep in line with the reading habits of the English readers.

Example 4:

Early in life, too, we become seized with the bizarre idea that we are constantly assaulted by invisible monsters called germs, and that we have to be on constant alert to protect ourselves against their fury. (A Nation of Hypochondriacs)

Analysis: In this example, two subordinate sentences guided by "that" are adopted to give specific explanation for "the bizarre idea." Rather than using simple and short sentences, the translator employs two subordinate sentences to strengthen the logic of the content, showing the relationship and distinct level between sentences put before "that" and after "that." The use of subordinate sentences here also conformed to the reading and aesthetic habits of English

readers.

3.2. Functions of Prose

Most prose texts are written from the first perspective, describing what the author sees and hears, and at the same time expressing the author's inner feelings, emotions, attitudes, or the creation of a mood. The descriptions of these feelings and emotions are vivid, which generates expectation in readers and stimulates their desire to read them. Therefore, the main function of prose texts is expressive. In prose texts, rhetorical devices are frequently used to increase the elegance and beauty of the text, so the prose text fulfills an aesthetic function at the same time.

3.2.1. Expressive Function

Prose texts have the expressive function. It means that the author narrates or shows his inner feelings, emotions, attitudes and mood from the first point of view. In the process of translation of prose texts, using the first point of view to express the author's inner feelings and attitudes can bridge the distance between the author and the target reader, and at the same time can arouse the reader's emotional resonance [11].

3.2.2. Aesthetic Function

In addition to show the inner feelings and attitudes of the author, prose texts also have an aesthetic function because Chinese prose has formed its own unique aesthetic psychology and ways of expression during its development. Chinese prose is very artistic, using different rhetorical devices that enhance the beauty and glamour of prose, reflecting the profound meaning and beautiful image, as well as showing the connotation and aesthetics of the prose texts. As a result, the content and vivid first-perspective description in the prose texts can give target readers much better reading experience.

3.3. Translation Principles of Prose

From the entire passage, it is clear that prose has a variety of characteristics, including the use of four-character structures, parallelism structures, and subjective words. Additionally, prose serves a variety of purposes, including expressing the author's mean, providing a rationale, expressing the author's feelings, and describing objects. To a large extent, these factors collectively determine the translation principles of prose, which include the following three principles:

3.3.1. Lyricism

Prose is characterized by the use of four-character structures, parallelism structures and subjective words, and the most important feature of prose is that it is "scattered in form but not in spirit." The lyrical principle of prose is that the author often expresses his own emotions and feelings by using subjective vocabulary and describing scenery and things. At the same time, the author will use many rhetorical techniques, such as parallelism to enhance the momentum of the essay, thus closing the distance between the reader and the author, letting the reader delve into the characters, experiencing the author's emotions, so as to achieve the purpose of lyricism.

3.3.2. Elegance

The elegance in the translation is to accurately show the cultural information and artistic style of the original by modifying words that have been translated. Prose is known as "beautiful text," which is characterized by beautiful and concise language, and it is scattered in its form, not in spirit.

At the same time, the purpose of prose texts is to convey aesthetic value and the transformation of spirit and emotion. Therefore, prose often uses four-character words or other rhetorical techniques such as parallelism to make the text more elegant, thus optimizing the sentences and making the text flow beautifully.

3.3.3. Expressiveness

The basic function of prose texts is expressive, so translators should follow the principle of expressiveness to show the inner feelings, subjective attitudes, the emotions and the mood of the author in prose texts to the target reader [11]. The main purpose of translation in prose texts is to show the aesthetic value, the transformation of spirit and emotion to the target readers, so on the basis of a thorough understanding and analysis of the source text, the translators should use some subjective words to show their feelings, narrowing the distance with their readers, thus letting readers experience those individual emotions.

4. Conclusion

This paper focuses on the study of prose translation strategies from the perspective of relevance theory, helping promote the exchanges among cultures. The first part of the paper shows the definition of relevance theory, the development of relevance theory, and the relationship between relevance theory and translation. The second part explores the characteristics of prose in Chinese and English, the functions and principles of prose. Among them, Chinese is characterized by its preference for four-character structures, parallelism structures and subjective vocabulary, while English is characterized by its preference for prepositions in lexis and subordinate clauses in syntax. At the same time, prose has an expressive and aesthetic function as well as the principles of expressiveness, elegance and lyricism. The third part of the paper discusses the specific translation methods and translation techniques for prose translation under the guidance of relevance theory, and explores two translation methods, literal translation and free translation, and further analyzes them with examples in 108 Great Prose Works.

The influence of prose translation in China is far-reaching, but the dissemination of prose translation is thus limited due to the neglect of English translation of prose, the limited level of translators, and the obvious lack of research in prose. But under the guidance of the relevance theory, this paper discusses the prose translation strategy with the example of 108 Great Prose Works, making up for the shortage and improving the research on English translation of prose, and promoting the dissemination of Chinese and other countries' culture. However, there are still shortcomings in this paper, such as the lack of time that leads to limited examples of prose translation strategies to be explored and thus cannot be explored and discussed in detail. Therefore, in the future research, the author of this paper will collect more cases and examples from other prose texts and conduct further detailed research on the translation of prose.

References

- [1] Padilla Cruz, Manuel, and Agnieszka Piskorska. "New Developments in Relevance Theory." *Pragmatics & Cognition* 28 (2021): 28-30.
- [2] Li, Yiqian. *A Study on Prose Translation from the Perspective of Functional Equivalence Theory*. Jinan: University of Jinan, 2021.

- [3] Meng, Huanhuan, and Dong Jun. "A Review of Research on Skopos Theory in Translation." *Overseas English* 5 (2023): 28-30.
- [4] Sperber, Dan, and Deirdre Wilson. *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1986.
- [5] Xia, Demin, and Zhang Ping. "On the Perspective of Relevance Theory in Translation." *Northern Literature* 12 (2018): 160-162.
- [6] Xue, Yaoqin, and Wang Rongbin. "A Decade of Relevance Theory in the New Century: Development and Application at Home and Abroad." *Journal of University of Electronic Science and Technology of China (Social Sciences Edition)* 14 (2012): 45-46.
- [7] Ran, Yongping. "The Development and Application of Relevance Theory in China: A Summary of the Second Relevance Theory Symposium." *Journal of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies* 1 (2002): 12-17.
- [8] Zhang, Yan. "A Brief View on Relevance Theory in Translation." *The Guide of Science & Education* 20 (2010): 45-46.
- [9] Xiao, Feng. "Relevance Theory and Translation." *Exam Weekly* 35 (2010): 29-30.
- [10] Xu, Li. "Characteristics and Creation of Prose." *Industrial & Science Tribune* 23 (2011): 189-190.
- [11] Liu, Yuwan. "A Comparative Analysis of Two English Versions of Moonlight over the Lotus Pond from the Perspective of Translation Aesthetics." *Northern Literature* 30 (2019): 246-248.