

An Analysis of the Level Shifts in Dialect Translation—In Three Versions of *The Sing-Song Girls in Shanghai*

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The Sing-Song Girls of Shanghai is a typical Chinese dialectal literary work. It has been translated into Mandarin (contemporary standard Chinese) and English versions by Eileen Chang, a famous Chinese writer. Dialect translation is a process involving both intralingual and interlingual translation, in which the strategy of Catford's Translation Shifts is analyzed with examples in three versions of the novel. His theory is grounded on the sacrifice of "formal correspondence", which, as a kind of translation strategy, attaches more importance to "semantic equivalence". This article mainly discusses the application of Catford's translation level shifts in translating in dialectal literary works.

Keywords: dialect translation, level shifts, interlingual translation, intralingual translation, *The Sing-Song Girls of Shanghai*

Introduction

It is generally acknowledged that the dialect is a special variety of language that is spoken in a particular area. In literary works, dialects, with its unique artistic effect, convey a special literal meaning as well as comparatively important stylistic functions, such as increasing the sense of reality, better portraying characters, or highlighting the sense of humor and irony, etc. (Han, 2002). Many famous writers have seen the special characteristic of dialects and have written their books in dialects. *The Sing-Song Girls of Shanghai*, written by Han Bangqing was praised by Hu Shi as the first masterpiece in Wu dialectal literature (Hu, 1996). The book talks about stories revolving around a group of prostitutes in Shanghai. Since the varieties of characters in this book are good epitomes of people living in that time, it was regarded as a good unofficial reference of the unique culture and customs in Shanghai of that time. Besides, many scholars have studied and analyzed the book because of its special value as having both the Mandarin version and the English version by Eileen Chang. The author chose three versions of *The Sing-Song Girls of Shanghai*—original dialectal version, Mandarin version, and English version as the case to study how the level shifts are used in the intralingual and interlingual translations of this dialectal novel.

Catford's Theory of Translation Shifts

Dialect translation has played a vital role since the beginning of *Bible* translation in the period of Middle Ages and Renaissance. To spread those wonderful literary works written by dialects and idea of Local Colorism, many experts and scholars have studied the translation theories since the 19th century. Berezowski, a Polish

pioneer on dialect translation theories, has come up with 10 strategies to translate the dialect literatures, stressing on translating a source language dialect with an “equivalent” one in the target language (Berezowski, 1997).

J. C. Catford firstly and formally put forward the Theory of Translation Shifts in 1965 in his book *Linguistic Theory of Translation*. He defined “shifts” as “departures from formal correspondence in the process of going from the SL (Source Language) to the TL (Target Language)” (Catford, 1965). Translation is in nature a language shift to reproduce the real meaning of the SL to the maximum. Based on M. A. K. Halliday’s three levels of language, Catford classified the translation shifts into four levels: level of grammar, level of lexis, level of graphology, and level of phonology. According to Catford, level shifts are shifts that literally happen between two different levels, i.e., the level of the SL is distinguished from the level of the TL. Catford has also analyzed the types of possible level shifts and finally concluded that there is only one possible level-shift, the shift from grammar to lexis level, on condition of his understanding of translation equivalence.

Level Shifts in Three Versions of *The Sing-Song Girls of Shanghai*

Based on Jakobson’s three categories of translations—intralingual translation (an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language), interlingual translation (in interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language), and intersemiotic translation (an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems) (Jakobson, 1959), Eileen Zhang’s method in translating Han’s original version of *The Sing-Song Girls of Shanghai* into Mandarin could be classified as an intralingual translation process as she interpreted the dialect into the official language. In this interpretation, the “verbal signs” are the original dialect signs while “the other signs” come to be the Mandarin signs. The Shanghai dialect is commonly thought to be a brunch of the Mandarin, thus they can be treated as “the same language”. However, when it comes to the English version of this book, its interpretation from Chinese to English is evidently not an intralingual translation as English and Chinese are generally classified as two different languages. Then this interpretation falls into the interlingual translation.

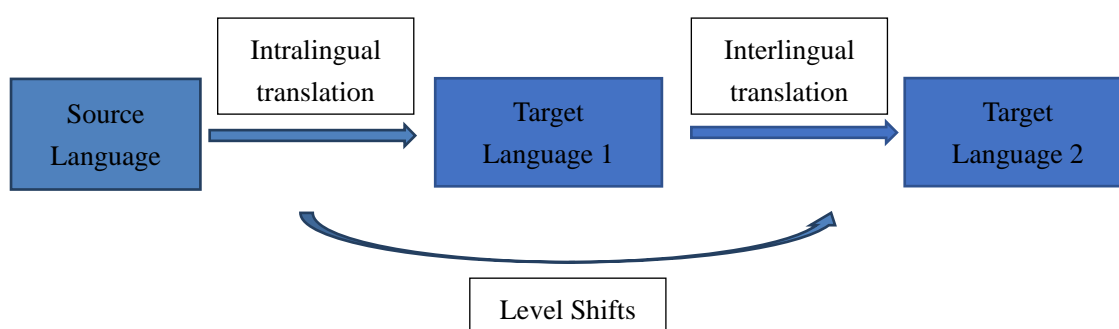


Figure 1. Level shifts in intralingual translation and interlingual translation.

Level Shifts of Tenses

Having mentioned above, there are many level shifts between Chinese and English when it comes to the translation of tenses. The following example from the book shows it as well:

SL (Han’s dialectal version): “阿姐，要去哉。”

TL 1 (Eileen Chang’s Mandarin version): “姐姐，要走了。”

TL 2 (Eileen Chang's English version): "Elder sister, they're leaving."

In this example, there is no level shift between the dialectal version and Mandarin version as “要……哉” and “要……了” share the same grammatical and lexical meaning. The *adv.+v.* structure is expressed in present tense, showing a sense of reluctance of leaving semantically. While in the English version, “be doing” structure indicates a future action or intension of doing something. Therefore, the level shift from the present tense to the future tense happens in the interlingual translation between Mandarin version and English version.

Level Shifts From Grammar to Lexis

Although it's easier to see those level shifts in the interlingual translation, there are level shifts in intralingual translation in this book as well. Taking the following sentences as an example:

SL (Han's dialectal version): “好个，再有啥人？”

TL 1 (Eileen Chang's Mandarin version): “好的，还有谁？”

TL 2 (Eileen Chang's English version): “All right, who else is there?”

Comparing the Mandarin version with the English version of this sentence, there is no level shift because “谁” is grammatically and lexically equivalent to “who”. But if the Mandarin or English version is taken as SL, and the dialectal version as TL, then there is a level shift between SL and TL. Because either “谁” or “who” is responsible for leading a Wh-question grammatically, while the TL equivalence “啥人”, a term consisting of an interrogative word and a lexical noun, is apparently a level shift. Therefore, it can be seen that some unique expressions in dialects are also good sources to study the level shift in addition to study on the shifts between Mandarin and English.

Level Shifts From Graphology to Lexis

What's more, although Catford says Grammar-lexis shift is the only possible level shift in translation, the author holds the opinion that there is another possible level shift when it comes to the intralingual translation especially between the Shanghai dialect and Mandarin. Catford's Translation Shift Theory mainly focuses on phonograms and interlingual translations. However, Chinese characters are different from those of English and many other European countries as being ideograms instead of phonograms. Therefore, many Chinese dialect characters are able to create compound words based on standard Chinese characters to fill the gap in their written forms. For example, the special word “覓” in *The Sing-Song Girls of Shanghai* is a very classical compound word in Shanghai dialect. It is translated into Mandarin as “勿要” or “不要”. In this process, there is a shift between graphology and lexis. “覓” is the combination of “要” and “勿” in standard Chinese characters. It keeps the shape of these two words and the meaning of them. Then when “覓” is translated intralingually, the graphology of it is split into lexis that it originally comes from. This progress is a mutual level shift.

Conclusion

After a series of analysis together with examples from the three versions of *The Sing-Song Girls of Shanghai*, two conclusions can be reached. The first is that the level shifts which are common to be seen in interlingual translation can be applied in intralingual translation as well. But in the intralingual translation, the two languages, such as Shanghai dialect and Mandarin, have the same origin. Therefore, the frequency of those shifts is lower in the intralingual translation compared with the interlingual translation. The second conclusion

is that in Catford's Translation Shift theory, which mainly focuses on phonograms and interlingual, there is only one possible shift in level shift. But by analyzing the special case “要” in the book, there is actually a shift between graphology and lexis. The strategy of level shifts helps the translators to approach semantic equivalence in dialect translations.

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