

# A Translator's Feed-Back About the Practice of Pun-Translation—From the Chinese Version of *The Life of Napoleon Bonaparte*

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It has been acknowledged by Chinese translators that in translating English puns the center should be put on the thorough comprehension of the original expression that more often than not has more than one meanings and the flexible handling of conversion from the native language to the target one. Literal translation will often be impossible, annotation redundant, and the restructuring and remaking of new ways that create and maintain balance or similarity in function and value will be more preferred as a possible way-out for pun-translation. Examples attached are from the writer of this article who is also the translator of a published historical book where punning can be found.

*Keywords:* pun, translation, *The Life of Napoleon Bonaparte*

## Introduction of Puns

“A witticism, involving the use of a word with more than one meaning, or words having the same, or nearly the same sound but different meanings”—as so defined in the noted *Longman Dictionary of English Language*, pun, since the day of its first being introduced to the world in 1662 as a rhetorical usage by John Dryden from its Latin origin paronomasia, has become mystery and excitement for the scholars who are interested in the thorough explorations of English lexicology as well as the second-language English-Chinese translators.

Chinese professors Li Xinhua and Feng Cuihua provide a brief classification of two categories of puns, namely, paronomasia, which means two expressions that are pronounced nearly the same way, and antaqlaclasis, which means two expressions that are pronounced and spelt the same way but that are different in meaning. Yet, some other professors hold a more complicated view by dividing the puns into five types with three additional branches of homophonic pun, sylletic pun, and asteismus which call for translation no less brain-wracking than the former two.

## Theoretical Basis for Pun-Translation

For a long time, pun-translation is considered challenging. However, people do find effective translation methods to conduct the conversion, trying to make the impossible possible.

Other than the helpless deletion that makes the pun a zero, the faithful copying of the original part where the relative pun is used, and the responsible and editorial annotation wherever a pun shows up, some more hard-working ways can be as follows: literal translation of puns; translation of puns by meaning; flexible translation

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of puns—using the existent pun in the second language is good, and creating a new pun can achieve the equivalent effect as in semantic, aesthetic, or humorous sense.

The flexible manner goes not without a solid foundation in Eugene A. Nida's (1914-2011) translation theory named functional equivalence that guarantees the creators and revisers a subtle right to translator's exertion during the course of finding "the closest natural equivalent of the source-language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style". By viewing translation as a skill, an art, and a science, functional equivalence highlights the effect of translation on the target reader being the same or similar to the effect of the source text on the source reader.

### About the Chinese Version of *The Life of Napoleon Bonaparte*

In 2020, the writer of this article has published the book of translation authorized by Sino-culture Press. The dedication is conveyed to the late British writer Sabine Baring-Gould (1834-1924), i.e., the author of *The Life of Napoleon Bonaparte* that has firstly been advocated to the market in 1908 (see Figure 1).

As a versatile and very accomplished priest, hagiographer, antiquarian, novelist, and folk song collector, S. Baring-Gould has shown many talents in skillful application of writing techniques and the manifestation of sense of humor on more than one occasion and by more than one means.

Punning is a feature unavoidably noticed since the writer of this article has completed the translation of the book with the identity of the first and sole translator. This article is but a summary of exploring possible way-outs and a feed-back of personal practice that has something to do with a phenomenon arousing many interests. When punning becomes the core of a theme, controversial ideas are not faraway to see. So, here with all the sincerity on the side of the writer of this article, new angles of comprehension and fresh perfusion of thoughts are welcome. Any form of criticism will be mulled with conscientiousness and gratitude.

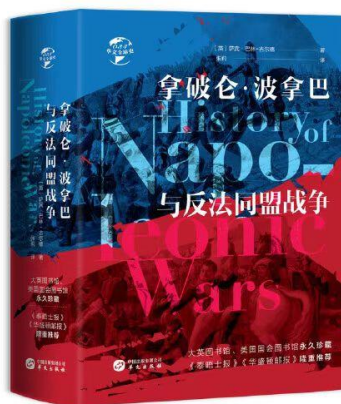


Figure 1. The Chinese version of *The Life of Napoleon Bonaparte*.

### Examples of Pun-Translation

The writer for this article combines pun-translation with thorough reading comprehension in order to build a reasonable, if not word-to-word, correlation between the redundant paraphrasing of the source pun and a novel statement in the target language as a substitution which demonstrates the same humorous effect in context. Hardly can the writer for this article assure that the amount of value is identical; however, the fact that readers on both sides can be amused with attention caught is anyway a step ahead.

The following are the methods used and examples shown:

### A Sylletic Pun Case: The Translation of the Word “Princess”

S. Baring-Gould mobilizes the readers' focus and curiosity in the sophisticated application of the word “princess”, knowing too well that it means double ways generally—“the daughter of the king or queen”, and for another thing, “the wife of a prince” not to trick the reader with the following narration of an anecdote that means to intertwine the translator's thoughts.

Napoleon now married his sister, Pauline, widow of General Leclerc, to Prince Borghese, whereby, as she exultingly said, she became “a real princess,” and received the Duchy of Guastalla. (Baring-Gould, 1908, p. 310)

Through analysis of the source text message, the translator feels awed by the sylletic usage of the word “princess”, that is, here the translation process might be blocked by the word which has more than one meanings (see Figure 2). The punning effect is desirable in a re-constructure, which is also a step in Nida's functional equivalence translation approach. So, the translator delicately puts two ways in Chinese through a bridge of “humour” newly created in the target translation, not only pointing out the fact Pauline became elite as Napoleon's sister, but also designating the noble title of the appointed husband. Both the native and the target readers feel amused, and in that sense, a subtle balance of achieving the same or similar functional effect is made.

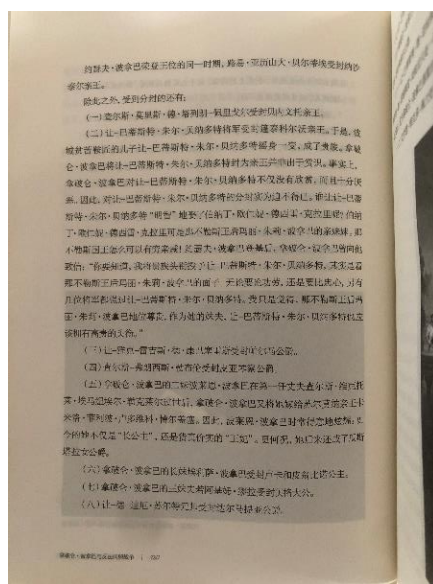


Figure 2. P. 71 of the Chinese book where “princess” is designated into “zhanggongzhu” and “wangfei”.

### A Pun Case That Needs Twice Thought

Where the pun causes two ways in understanding, discretion is needed when handling translation of this part in case that no necessary meaning is left out. A translator should read the original statement again and again, do the proper analysis of the context, make a feasible guess about the English author's intention, and try the very best of his or her effort to make up the gap between the self-incurring ambiguity from the punning technique and the maneuver of explanation being both explicit and idiomatic. Another example is as follows:

At Brienne, Napoleon had been a diligent student of English history. He was ready to play the part of a Cromwell, but not of a Monk. One day his uncle, Fesch, found him reading the life of the great Protector, and asked him what he thought of the usurper.

"Cromwell," he replied, "is fine—but incomplete."

"How so?" asked Fesch, and looked at the volume.

"It is not of the book I speak," answered he hastily, "but of the man." (Baring-Gould, 1908, p. 169)

By applying a variant of functional equivalence theory, the translator does firstly the profound comprehension of capturing the punning trap of the word "incomplete" (see Figure 3). Then, finding the direct translation futile, the translator starts to do a possible re-statement of the two ways of the pun referring either to the book and to the man. Next, the restructuring work seems to be necessary to produce a natural Chinese version without leaving an affected touch in it so as to offend the target readers.

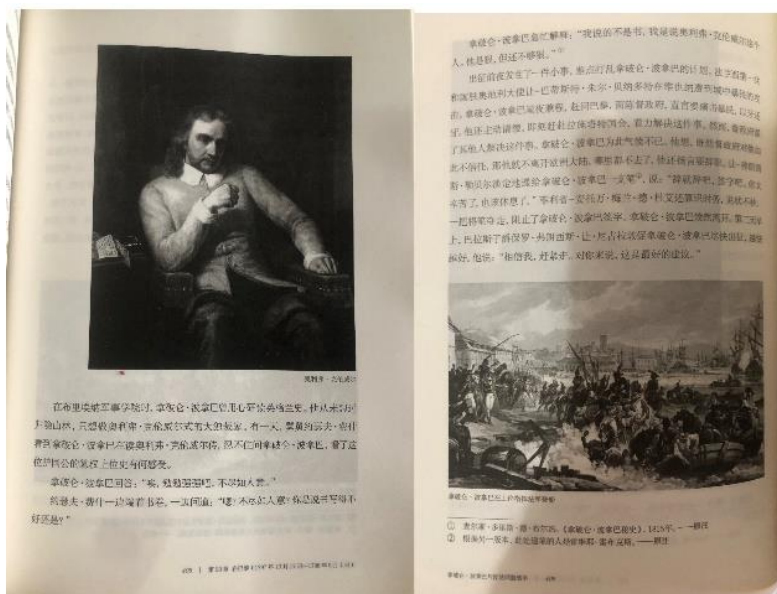


Figure 3. Pp. 405 & 406 of the Chinese book where the two ways of understanding "incomplete" are shown clearly in Chinese.

### Case of Asteismus—Ambiguity Caused by Polysemy

The translation of relatives has always been a hard nut to crack as the relation and only the relation is given in the original language, forming the phenomenon of polysemy. Having more than one relationships to the person mentioned, words such as "nephew", "niece", "aunt", "uncle", and "cousin" cannot have their proper output unless special attention is given to the context, the culture, and sometimes even the background of the era.

Take the word "nephew" as an example. It can never be expressed clear out and out whether it refers to "the son of one's brother or sister" or "the son of your husband's or wife's brother or sister". If the crafty author particularly makes an artificial usage of aiming it as a pun, the translation calls for ways none other than revising and remaking because annotation means imbalance that destroys conciseness and jeopardizes reading experience. The details are as follows:

One day, when Bonaparte had his little nephew Napoleon, the son of Louis, on his knees, he said, "Do you know, little fellow, that you may be a king someday?" "And Achille?" hastily inquired Murat, anxious about his own son, also a nephew. "Oh, Achille," answered Bonaparte, "he will be a great soldier." Then to the little Napoleon, "Mind, my poor child, if you value your life, do not accept invitations to dinner with your cousins." (Baring-Gould, 1908, p. 289)

Repetition is a translating skill used by the translator for trial to explicitly guide the Chinese readers to a function that has similarity to the original effect of the pun "also a nephew" (see Figure 4).

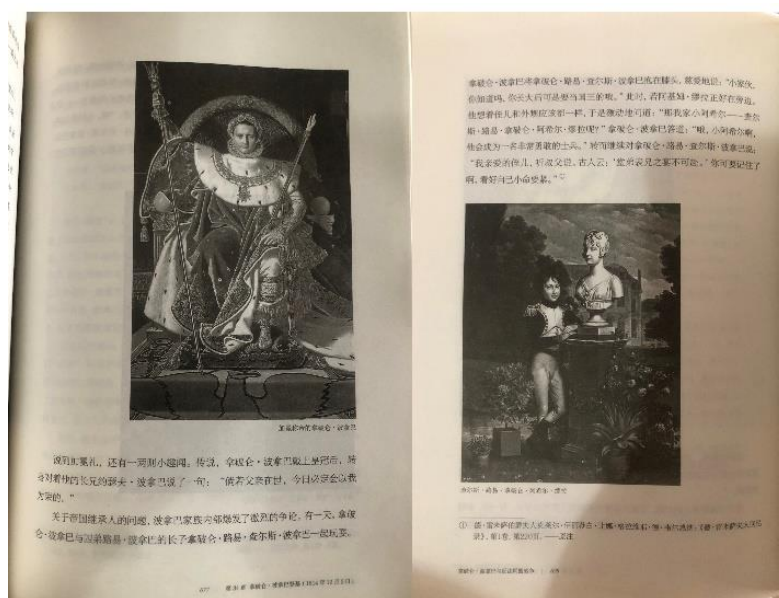


Figure 4. Pp. 677 & 678 of the Chinese book where the “also a nephew” is translated in a flexible way of creation based on the original text.

## Conclusion

Based on Nida's functional equivalence theory for translation, this article presents the writer and translator's individual practice of understanding and translating of puns used in a historical biography whose Chinese version has already been published. In conclusion, confronted with the difficulty of untranslatability, the translator had better apply multiple approach of handling the situation with the purpose of creating a balance between the literal translated version and the final reconstruction. With all the effort on the side of the writer, the analysis may not be covering every semantic hyponym, and for all the translator's revolutionary moves, the target result cannot please everyone. The only purpose of listing the punning cases is to advocate advice and bring on more concern and interest about classic books and their translation.

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