

# ON PROBLEMS OF TRANSLATION

— A Series of Talks Given at the  
Institute of Journalism

Cheng Zhenqiu

## 论汉译英的几个问题

外语教学与研究出版社

41.68  
688  
2.21

# ON PROBLEMS OF TRANSLATION

— A Series of Talks Given at the Institute of  
Journalism, Beijing  
(论汉译英的几个问题)

by Cheng Zhenqiu

外语教学与研究出版社  
1981 • 北京

---

# 前 言

这本小册子是作者于1979年冬在社会科学院新闻研究所对该所英语写作专业的研究生所作的五次讲话的英文讲稿，就汉英翻译中准确传达原文政治含义的重要性、局部和全局的关系以及汉英两种语文不同特点所引起的一些问题等三个方面，举例加以说明和探讨。现经作者整理后交由外语教学与研究出版社出版，希望对翻译工作者、外语院系英语专业高年级学生和自学英语有一定基础的同志研究和学习汉英翻译能有所帮助。

## ON PROBLEMS OF TRANSLATION

(论汉译英的几个问题)

by Cheng Zhenqiu (程镇球)

---

外语教学与研究出版社出版

北京外国语学院23号信箱

新华书店北京发行所发行 全国各地新华书店经售

外文印刷厂排版

外文印刷厂印刷

开本：787×1092 1/32

3印张 61千字

1981年6月第1版

1981年6月第一次印刷

印数1——17,000册

---

书号9215·31

定价 0.30 元

## ON PROBLEMS OF TRANSLATION

I must confess that I was a bit hesitant at first to accept your invitation to come here and speak to you on the subject of translation. As you all know, translation is an art, not a science. In science theories or general principles play a very important role. Not so in art. I'm not saying that they don't count in art. But I'm sure you will agree with me when I say that translation is largely a matter of practice. Therefore, it cannot be taught, or at least cannot be learned just by listening to a few lectures. Only constant practice will make a good translator. Then what is the good of my coming here to speak on the principles or generalities of translation? Well, frankly I don't think I can give any satisfactory answer. But I console myself with the thought that it probably won't do any harm to call your attention to some of the pitfalls in translation. And perhaps through the specific examples I'm going to cite you may become more conscious of the challenges to a translator and sharpen your sense of discrimination in the use of language, which may stand you in good stead in your future work. So I finally decided to accept your invitation and give it a try.

Translation is a tough and sometimes thankless job. You have probably heard of the old Italian saying, "Traduttori, traditori" (meaning "Translators — traitors"). Cervantes once remarked, "Translation from one language into another . . . is like gazing at a Flemish tapestry

with the wrong side out." Grant Showerman was even more vehement in his condemnation. To him, "translation is sin". Antagonists of translation mostly refer to the difficulties of rendering literary works of one language into another. Fortunately, what I'm going to speak on is different and perhaps less controversial. My subject is written translation of articles of a political nature—political in the wide sense of the term, of course. Even in this limited sphere, I cannot pretend to be exhaustive. Only a few topics can be dealt with here. I group them under three general headings, namely,

- (I) The importance of political considerations;
- (II) The question of the part and the whole; and
- (III) Some problems arising from the differences between the Chinese and English languages.

9402/34

## CONTENTS

I.	The Importance of Political Considerations . . . . .	1
II.	The Question of the Part and the Whole	18
III.	Some Problems Arising from the Differences Between the Chinese and English Languages . . . . .	35
	A. Words . . . . .	35
	B. Arrangement of Words . . . . .	54
	C. Figures of Speech . . . . .	82

---

## (I)

### The Importance of Political Considerations

1. A translation must be faithful to the original. "Fidelity," says W. Cowper, "indeed is of the very essence of translation and the term itself implies it." And it only stands to reason that in political translation fidelity means above all faithfulness to the full political implication of the original. This is particularly so in cases where philosophical concepts, political theory, Party policies, strategical and tactical principles, etc. are concerned. Let's consider some examples.

1)\* I 272.9 客观过程的发展是充满着矛盾和斗争的发展，  
人的认识运动的发展也是充满着矛盾和斗争的发展。

LW (I) 296.16 The development of the objective process is one full of contradictions and struggles. The development of the process of man's knowledge is also one of contradictions and struggles.

RA The development *both* of the objective process and of the process of knowing is full of contradictions and struggles.

---

\*I 272.9: Line 9, page 272, Volume I of the *Selected Works of Mao Zedong* in Chinese.

LW (I) 296.16: Line 16, page 296, Volume I of Mao's *Selected Works* in English published by Lawrence & Wishart Ltd., London.

RA: Revised English version of 1959, unpublished.

IE 307.-14: Line 14 from the bottom of page 307, Volume I of the English Translation of the *Selected Works* published by the Foreign Languages Press, Beijing.

1109847

IE 307.-14 The development of an objective process is full of contradictions and struggles, and so is the development of the movement of human knowledge.

At first sight it seems that the meaning of the Chinese sentence is clear and straightforward and that there is nothing hard to comprehend. Actually, there is more in it than meets the eye. The words “也是” must be weighed carefully, for they signify one of the fundamentals of dialectical materialism, namely, the tenet that matter is primary and consciousness or mind is secondary. The LW version overlooks this primacy of matter over mind and puts “the process of man’s knowledge” and “the objective process” more or less on the same plane. The simplified RA version is even worse in this respect. The use of the inverted “so is” construction in the newer translation has set things right, for it implies that the second part of the sentence is consequent upon the first. It is essential to give careful thought to the rendering of a sentence where major philosophical concepts are involved.

- 2) II 567.-4 这一特点，这一半殖民地的中国的特点，也是各个资本主义国家的共产党领导的革命史中所没有的，或是同那些国家不相同的。

LW (III) 55.11 This peculiarity, a peculiarity of semi-colonial China, is not found in the history of revolution, led by the Communist Parties in capitalist countries; *in other words, it makes the difference between China and those countries.*

IIE 287.18 The specific feature peculiar to semi-colonial China is not present, or is not present in the same way, in the history of the revolutions led by Communist Parties in the capitalist countries.



Between the two versions there is a difference in meaning. So much is clear. The difference is not a minor one. It concerns the role of armed struggle in capitalist countries, which was a major issue in the polemics between the Marxists and the revisionists in the international communist movement in the early sixties. The LW interpretation clearly departs from the text and excludes the possibility of armed struggle as the principal form of struggle in any phase of the revolution in capitalist countries.

3) II 703. III.5 \* 以斗争求团结则团结存,以退让求团结则团结亡, .....

LW (III) 194.III.9 Solidarity is realized through struggles and destroyed through *concessions*. RA Unity is achieved by struggle and destroyed by *compromise*.

IIE 422.-9 If unity is sought through struggle, it will live; if unity is sought through *yielding*, it will perish.

Here, the word that needs careful handling is “退让”. To translate it into “concessions” or “compromise” is theoretically unsound. For as long as the fundamental interests of the people are not impaired, the proletariat and its party may in principle make whatever concessions or compromises that are necessary. The correct rendering of the word “退让” is key to the proper understanding of the whole sentence, which gives expression to a strategic principle in maintaining and developing the united front with the bourgeoisie. “Yielding” is a much better translation than either “concession” or “compromise”, which mean “让步” and “妥协” respectively in Chinese. Although the newer version may seem a bit wordy, in fact it comes much closer to the original not only in meaning but also in style.

---

\* III.5: Line 5 of paragraph III.

4) II 740.-2, IV 1024.-6 作针锋相对的斗争

LW (III) 238 wage a *tit-for-tat* struggle

IV E 14. III.3 give him *tit for tat*

“针锋相对” as a principle in waging struggles against the enemy is not easy to translate. Some comrades think “tit-for-tat” a bit trivial and therefore not good enough. The objection is not entirely groundless. But for lack of a better version this has been used as the best possible one so far. In Volume IV of the *Selected Works of Mao Zedong* the use of “tit-for-tat” is quite apt in the following sentences, “How to give tit-for-tat depends on the situation. Sometimes, not going to negotiations is tit-for-tat; and sometimes, going to negotiations is also tit-for-tat.” (IV E 56.6) In the sixties we found “a blow-for-blow struggle” in *Beijing Review* and “head-on struggle” in a *Xinhua News Release*. The latter, I must say, was not wholly free from a taint of adventurism. Politically, I think “tit-for-tat” has stood the test over the years.

5) II 741.1, IV 1052.II.-3 有理有利有节

LW (III) 238 struggle be marked by *justifiability*, *expediency* and *restraint*

IVE 49.-3 to wage struggles *with good reason, with advantage and with restraint* (1969 edition) *on just grounds, to our advantage, and with restraint* (latest edition)

This is a very important tactical principle, and we should try to do it justice in translation. I'm afraid the LW version is pretty bad. “Justifiability” simply isn't the right word. You can find all sorts of reasons to justify your action, but that doesn't mean that justice is on your side. “Expediency” is even worse, for it is often used in a derogatory sense, as in the sentence, “He

acts from expediency, not from principle". To change "justifiability" into "good reason" by no means solves the problem, for the phrase is purely subjective. A school boy who plays truant may have a very good reason for doing so. The latest version, "on just grounds, to our advantage, and with restraint" is faithful to the original. To compare the merits or demerits of the various versions, we must first of all grasp the meaning of this tactical principle. To this end I'm going to quote at some length from the article, "*Current Problems of Tactics in the Anti-Japanese United Front*":

First, the principle of self-defence. We will not attack unless we are attacked; if we are attacked, we will certainly counter-attack. That is to say, we must never attack others without provocation, but once attacked we must never fail to return the blow. Herein lies the defensive nature of our struggle. . . . Second, the principle of victory. We will not fight unless we are sure of victory; we must never fight without a plan, without preparation, and without certainty of success. We must know how to exploit the contradictions among the die-hards and must not take on too many of them at a single time, but must direct our blows at the most reactionary of them first. Herein lies the limited nature of the struggle. Third, the principle of a truce. After repulsing one die-hard attack, we should know when to stop and bring that particular fight to a close before another attack is made on us. . . . On no account should we fight on day after day without cease, or be carried away by success. Herein lies the temporary nature of each struggle. Only when the die-hards launch a new attack should we counter with a new struggle. In other words, the three

principles are to fight "on just grounds", "to our advantage" and "with restraint". (II E 426.-7)

2. Political considerations are not confined to important words and expressions. Faithfulness in translation demands that we give consideration to the connotations and political implications of ordinary words and expressions as well. According to Stalin, language serves all classes alike. There is no such thing as class language, for the basic word stock and grammar are common to the whole nation. But the words we use are often affected by the attitude we take. For instance, a person may be careful with his money. If you approve of this, you call him *thrifty*; if you don't, you brand him as *stingy*. There are similar pairs of words like eloquent, garrulous; childlike, childish; liberty, licence; etc. Some words are used in a good sense. Others are always pejorative. Many more are neutral. These are what some scholars call "bias words", or to quote Matthew Arnold, words "touched by emotion". Samuel Taylor Coleridge once said, "there are three classes into which all the women past seventy that ever I knew were to be divided: (1) That dear old soul; (2) That old woman; (3) That old witch."\* We have to keep our eyes wide open in the choice of words if political errors are to be avoided. Here are some examples.

6) I 22.4 .....贫农领袖百人中八十五人都变得很好，很能干，很努力。

LW (I) 33.II.8 85 per cent of the poor peasant leaders have now turned out to be quite *reformed*, etc.

IE 3.42 ... have *made great progress* and have proved themselves capable and hard-working.

---

\* Quoted in *Introductory Readings on Language*, 1963, p. 191.

The word “reform” used in connection with people always has an unpleasant flavour. The definition given in ALD (1974) is: “make or become better by removing or putting right what is bad or wrong”. And the illustrative examples cited in the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (1978) are: ‘We should try to reform criminals rather than punish them.’ “Harry has completely reformed / is a completely reformed character now — he’s stopped taking drugs and got a regular job.” It is therefore not felicitous to say that “the poor peasant leaders have now turned out to be quite reformed”.

7) I 214.1 打得贏就打，打不贏就走。

LW (I) 244.23 Fight when we can win and *run away* when we cannot.

IE 241.-17 Fight when you can win, *move away* when you can’t win.

The inadequacy of the phrase “run away” is obvious and needs no further comment.

8) II 442.9 ……几千年来人类的生活中充满了战争，……

LW (II) 197.-9 For several thousands of years. . . , man’s life has been *filled with* wars

RA . . . man’s life has been *cursed by* war

IE 148.-1 For several thousand years. . . , the life of mankind has been *full of* wars

It’s difficult to see why the translator (or probably the polisher) should use the word “cursed”, which is definitely not in the Chinese, except that he may have been obsessed by bourgeois pacificism. The Marxists make a point of distinguishing between just and unjust wars. A translation should not be a commentary. This is one thing a translator shouldn’t do.

- 9) II 714.-4 对于地方保甲团体、教育团体、经济团体、军事团体，应广泛地打入之；……

LW (III) 208 Our members should *infiltrate* extensively into the Pao and Chia organizations, . . .

“Infiltrate” means going into or among (people or things) quietly and with an unfriendly purpose. The pejorative sense is a bit too strong in the context.

- 10) III 777.-8 除了……糊涂观念而外，还有天天念的一句“理论和实际联系”，……

LW (IV) 36.II.4 a phrase to which they are *paying daily lip service*

IIIE 42.-16 . . . there is a muddled idea among many comrades about “linking theory and practice”, a phrase they have *on their lips every day*.

“Paying lip service” to something means supporting something in words, but not in fact, or expressing loyalty, interest, etc. verbally, while thinking quite the opposite. This is surely not the meaning of the Chinese text. We are not referring to hypocrites, but to those comrades who still have got some muddled ideas about “linking theory and practice”.

- 11) V 47.2 我们的作者们不去研究过去历史中压迫中国人民的敌人是些什么人，……

'67 pamphlet Our writers *have not* studied history to ascertain who were the enemies. . . .

VE 57.-1 Our writers *do not bother to* study history and learn who were the enemies. . . .

The '67 version is just a simple statement of fact. But the implication of the Chinese sentence is that our writers have not done what they ought to have done long ago. There is a shade of reproach in the tone. This is

brought out in the later version by the use of "do not bother to". A faithful translator should always be on the lookout for such nuances in meaning.

- 12) V 239.-3 那些社会主义觉悟程度高，公道能干，为全社大多数人所佩服的个别的富裕中农，也可以充当干部。

SR\* Those individuals among them whose level of socialist consciousness is high and who are fair-minded and competent and *respected* by . . .

VE 256.19 A few well-to-do middle peasants, who are *well thought of* by the majority of cooperative members for their higher level of socialist consciousness, fair-mindedness and competence, may serve as cadres.

In the first version "respected" is used, which is out of place in the context. The main thing is to establish the dominant position of the poor peasants in the agricultural producers' cooperatives. The well-to-do middle peasants are the upper-middle peasants in the villages, whose class status cannot possibly earn them much respect. But those among them who are "well thought of" by their fellow villagers should not be barred from serving as cadres. Incidentally, the juxtaposition of the *who* and *whose* clauses in the first version is also a bit clumsy. The changed construction in the second version is quite compact and much neater.

3. To be faithful to the original the translation must not add or subtract. It should not be stronger or weaker than the original. We should strive to find *le mot juste*, although we cannot expect the attempt will always succeed. There are plenty of cases where not enough effort has been spent on comprehending the text

---

\* English Translation of *Selected Readings From the Works of Mao Zedong*, Beijing, 1971.

to be translated or choosing the right word, with the result that the idea conveyed is not right politically. Let's take up some specific examples.

- 13) II 569.-4 又由于中国资产阶级在经济上、政治上的软弱性,在另一种历史环境下,就会动摇变节。

LW (III) 57.-11 Owing to its economic and political flabbiness, the Chinese national bourgeoisie is *likely* to vacillate and become a turncoat under certain historical circumstances.

IIE 289.4 In other historical circumstances, the Chinese national bourgeoisie *will* vacillate and defect because of its economic and political flabbiness.

Modal words in Chinese such as 应该, 必须, 能够, etc. should be handled with care. "Is likely to" is weaker than "就会" in the original. The question here is not one of possibility or probability, but one of certainty. The author was summing up the experience of eighteen years of revolutionary struggles since the founding of the Party, and the vacillation and defection of the national bourgeoisie after the failure in the First Great Revolution of 1927 was already a fact. The choice of word is important in this case, because what is involved is a proper evaluation of the character of the national bourgeoisie and the Party's policy towards it in the united front.

- 14) II 606.13 中农不但能够参加反帝国主义革命和土地革命,并且能够接受社会主义。

RA They can not only join the anti-imperialist revolution and the agrarian revolution, but also *embrace* socialism.

IIE 323.-6 Not only can the middle peasants join the anti-imperialist revolution and the Agrarian Revolution, but they can also *accept* socialism.



Like the preceding example, the RA version is much stronger than what the Chinese warrants. The word “embrace” means “accept eagerly”, which does not sound right in the case of the middle peasants. The section in which this sentence appears deals with the different attitudes taken by the various strata of the peasantry towards the new-democratic revolution. It points out that while the middle peasantry is a reliable ally of the proletariat, the poor peasantry is its natural and most reliable ally and forms the semi-proletariat of the countryside. If the middle peasants accept socialism so eagerly, what word are we going to use in the case of the poor peasants?

- 15) II 719.11 由帝国主义战争所造成的极端严重的政治危机和经济危机，将必然引起许多国家革命的爆发。

LW (III) 213.-15 The extremely grave political and economic crises brought about by the imperialist war will inevitably lead to *revolutionary outbreaks* in many countries.

IIE 439.1 will inevitably cause *revolutions to break out* in many countries.

Which expression is the right one — revolutionary outbreaks or revolutions? The Chinese is open to either of the two interpretations. Its exact meaning has to be decided by historical context and according to Marxist theory. A world-wide imperialist war signifies the grave crisis confronting world capitalism. Later developments have shown that revolutions did follow in the wake of the Second World War and led to the birth of the socialist camp in the late forties. “Revolutionary outbreaks” is definitely too weak.

- 16) V 179.-3 贫农和非富裕的农民中间也有许多人，因为觉悟不高，暂时还是观望的，他们也有摇摆，……