



Basis and Practice of Chinese-English Translation

嵇德全 编著

汉英翻译研究与实践



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I am greatly indebted to Mr. Li Zhurun , a long — time friend of mine , who not only offered valuable suggestions on the writing of this book , but also polished its texts . Mr. Li has worked at Xinhua , China ' s state news agency , as a writer and translator since 1965 . He is concurrently a guest professor at the School of the English Language and International Studies of Beijing Foreign Studies University .

Notes of the Author

This small book of mine is meant for use by university teachers as a reference, by graduate students who are interested in translation, and by undergraduate students who major in English. I hope that other learners of the English language, notably professional translators, may also find the book useful.

I followed the time-honored guideline of “combining theory with practice” in writing this book. The book, as the reader may find, discusses the basic theories of translation while providing ample examples to illustrate how to put some of the most essential translation techniques into practical use. As the proverb goes, “practice makes perfect,” a good translator should be well-versed in translation theories and at the same time, be good at putting these into practice.

The book consists of eight chapters. The First Chapter discusses the importance of translation from both theoretical and practical perspectives, followed by chapters devoted to the basic approaches of translation such

as conversion, amplification, negation, generalization, particularization, comparison, etc. Ways of rendering numbers are discussed in Chapter Five. The Sixth and Seventh Chapters are on translation of Chinese idioms and classical Chinese. These, I believe, epitomize the so-called "cultural interference" in translation, a "headache," so to speak, translators invariably "suffer" in doing their job. Chapter Eight, the last chapter, in a way is a summary of what has been discussed in the previous chapters. Also in this chapter there are examples taken from papers of Grade—8 language proficiency tests for majors of the English language. This part is designed to serve the needs of students seeking advanced study in translation.

I wrote the book on the basis of my own research of translation, which I have taken pains to undertake. As the book was written in haste, I'd be grateful for any comment or suggestions from readers.

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Chapter 1

General Considerations



Prerequisites for Translation

Translation, as commonly understood, is a process of turning a message in one language, either written or verbal, into another. However, as proved by practice, translation cannot be viewed as merely a linguistic undertaking, but should be regarded as belonging to a much larger domain, the domain of communication. Translating something complicated calls for not only “linguistic proficiency”, but also “encyclopedic knowledge”.



Qualifications of the Translator

To be a good translator, one must have the following qualifications:

1. Language Competence/Proficiency

Languages, as we all know, are the most important tools of communication and the most important carriers of cultures, which have resulted from human progress and have developed in steps with it. Translation involves at least two languages — the “first language” — which, in our case, is Chinese, and the “second language” — which, in our case, is English. Therefore, to know both languages well is the most important prerequisite for translation. In this connection, we have to always bear in mind that Chinese and English are two different languages, in that each has its own cultural and social background. The Chinese language belongs to the Sino — Tibetan linguistic family, while English belongs to the Indo — European linguistic family. Moreover, we know that to have a good command of either Chinese or English requires painstaking effort.

2. Sufficient Knowledge

A sufficient knowledge of the respective cultures and the subject matter is indispensable. That is to say, one must have an intimate knowledge of the cultures in question. One must be able to recognize subtle ironies and literary allusions. Dictionaries and encyclopedias can be very helpful in dealing with lexical problems, but they rarely go far enough in

providing the kind of information which is necessary to understand cultural differences. Furthermore, there is always the problems of the subject matter involved in translation. In this case, one particular aspect is especially significant, that is, the willingness of one to recognize one's ignorance. In other words, recognizing the limitation of one's knowledge is the very ingredient for success in translating. Unless one recognizes one's limitations, and therefore is willing to consult reference books and persons who may know more about the subject matter in question, the results of a translator's work are likely to fall far below standard. Lu Xun (1881 ~ 1936), a most prominent contemporary Chinese writer, thinker and translator, had the following to say of his own experiences in translation: "When translating, I can't tear myself away from dictionaries while wet through with cold sweat(字典不离手,冷汗不离身)."

3. Verbal Imagination

Verbal imagination, a creative capacity to deal with various kinds of imagery is an often overlooked prerequisite. Without a capacity to produce new and interesting ways of referring to objects and events, a translator is almost destined to be a "hack translator", that is to say, one who routinely cranks out translations which are not really wrong but which, at the same time, are far from being on target.

One of the best ways to evaluate the potentiality for this kind of verbal imagination in translation is to analyze the way in which a person writes creatively in his mother tongue. Does he write in a fresh and vivid way? Does he come up with attractive

similes and metaphors? Is he able to make a striking point by a subtle shift in the meaning of a term? Is he sensitive enough to the connotations of words? Are his extended figurative expressions congruent, or does he tastelessly mix his figures of speech? If one is not adept in expressing ideas in his own mother tongue, he is certainly not likely to do an effective job in translating.

4. Understanding the Nature of Translation

A proper understanding of the nature of translation is as important as any other prerequisites. One must be sensitive to certain basic principles of interlingual communication, and on the basis of these principles, one can acquire the necessary skills through extensive, persistent practice. Quite clearly, a theory of translation is not enough; one must put it into practice.

5. Integrity

Intellectual integrity in combination with devotion to the task is the most important prerequisite. The translator must be willing to reflect honestly the intent of the original he or she is to turn into another language. An author must be permitted to speak for himself. To put words into the author's mouth or to alter the author's intent, to suit the translator's own values or ideas, is simply cheating.

6. Basic Training in "Three Essential Aspects"

In a nutshell, in order to achieve genuine competence in translation, we must bear in mind that translation calls for honesty and knowledge while allowing no falsehood, and that genuine knowledge comes from practice.



Orientations in Translation

Traditionally, the two major orientations with regard to translation summarized as “literal” translation and “free” translation. This contrast has been primarily a matter of focus. Some translators are quite willing to sacrifice the formal elements of the target language text for the sake of preserving what they regard as the integrity of the source text. Such an orientation has been particularly popular among translators of classical literature, for they value greatly the form of such texts. Translators of religious documents tend to sacrifice the target language for the sake of keeping the form of the source text.

In the West, the early Greco — Roman period saw Greek classics generally translated more or less literally into Latin. Such a practice, however, was condemned by Horace and Cicero and later by Jerome.

Monk Xuan Zhuang of China’s Tang Dynasty (618~907) has always been regarded as the greatest Chinese translator of Buddhist scriptures. On imperial order, he organized the translation of Buddhist texts he had brought back from India, the birthplace of Buddhism. According to the eminent monk translator, translations “must be both truthful and understandable to the populace”. In a sense he tried by such a formula to have the best of two worlds.

In the Middle Ages there was the tendency for more or less word — for — word translation under the heavy hand of

medieval Latin. At the time of the Renaissance, however, the discovery of classical literature and the need for translating into the various vernaculars of Western Europe led to what translations called “the beautiful unfaithful ones”. In that period, some persons likened translation to women: those who were beautiful were condemned as being unfaithful and those who were faithful were generally regarded as not being beautiful.

In the sixteenth century, Martin Luther published a highly influential document on translation, but primary credit for the first formulation of a theory of translation in the West goes to Etienne Dolet (1500~1546), a French printer and philologist, who summarized the fundamental principles of translation under five headings:

1. The translator must understand perfectly the content and intention of the author whose text he is translating.

2. The translator should have a perfect knowledge of the language from which he is translating, an equally excellent knowledge of the language into which he is translating.

3. The translator should avoid word — for — word renderings, for to resort to these would be to destroy the meaning of the original and to ruin the beauty of expression.

4. The translator should employ the forms of speech in common usage.

5. For his choice and order of words, a translator should produce a total overall effect with appropriate “tone.”

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Yen Fu (1853 ~1921), one of the first enlightened Chinese who introduced

Western thoughts to China to inspire political and social reforms, put forth the triple — criteria (or three — character guide) for translation — “faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance.” As a writer, translator and advocate of constitutional monarchy before the 1911 Revolution, he made notable contributions in spreading European bourgeois thoughts. But as a translator, he seemed to have violated the fundamental principle of placing “faithfulness” (or “fidelity”) above everything else and to have, in practice, reduced his own triple criteria to “elegance first.” In other words, in doing translation, he seemed to seek what he called “elegance” at the expense of faithfulness.

In the last decade of the eighteenth century, Alexander Fraser Tytler (1747~1814), professor of history at Edinburgh University, U. K., laid down three fundamentals by which a translation should be made or judged. They are:

1. That the translation should give a complete transcript of the ideas of the original work.

2. That the style and manner of writing should be of the same character with that of the original.

3. That the translation should have all the ease of original composition. In his book *Essay on the Principles of Translation*, Tytler illustrated those fundamentals with a wealth of examples.

People say that faithfulness and smoothness are qualities contradictory to each other. It seems that a translation which is faithful to the original work is usually not smooth reading in the target language, while a translation which is smooth reading in

the target language may be unfaithful to the original work. Even if that were the case, it would indubitably indicate the importance of combining faithfulness with smoothness in translation. For example:

In a free country there will always be conflicting ideas, and this is a source of strength. It is conflict and not unquestioning agreement that keeps freedom alive.

The first translation goes like this:

在一个自由的国家里总会有各种互相冲突的思想,而这正是力量的源泉。冲突,而不是绝对的一致,使得自由保持活力。

The second version reads:

在自由的国家里,不同的思想总是会冲突的,这正是力量的聚积。使自由保持活力的是冲突,而不是妥协。

From the above, we can see that the first translation seems faithful, but it is not quite in conformity with the Chinese tradition. And the second version is neither faithful, nor conforms to the Chinese way of expression.

We now improve the translation as follows:

在自由的国家里各种矛盾的思想总会存在,而这正是力量的源泉。使自由保持活力的是矛盾,而不是无原则的随声附和。

Those who favor for what is normally called “free translation” have usually opted to sacrifice the form of the source language for the sake of elegance and intelligibility in the target language.

Problems caused by the conflicting orientations for translation become even more acute because of the differences in language structure, cultural diversities, and the distinct division of literary forms. When two languages are very similar