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A Comparative Study on Translation in *The Joy Luck Club* from the Perspective of Communicative Translation and Semantic Translation

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Abstract

Peter Newmark's theory of semantic translation and communicative translation has been discussed since its publication and has been verified utility in translation studies. This paper aims to explore relations with components in the translation process on the basis of communication translation and semantic translation supplemented with a case study based on Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club.* Through illustration of relations of the texts, different participants in translation and cultures, conclusion is reached as follows: communicative translation focuses more on the function as well as readers' acceptability and translators are much freer in the translating process with attention paid to the target culture; semantic translation focuses more on the conveying of meaning and source text. In this respect, translators enjoy less freedom in translating and the foreignness of the source culture is largely retained. Although there are differences between semantic translation and communicative translation, these two methods are coexistent in the same text and both are of service to a better translation. The analysis of several cases also sheds light on translation practices, from which translators may gain some inspiration in the process of translation so as to produce a better version.

Keywords

Semantic translation; communicative translation; translation theory; *The Joy Luck Club*

1. Introduction

Peter Newmark (2001) firstly puts in his book *Approaches to Translation* that "The conflict of loyalties. The gap between emphasis on source and target language will always remain as the overriding problem in translation theory and practice." And based on this conflict, he puts forward his solution by proposing two novel terms: communicative translation and semantic translation. Newmark's division of translation method breaks away from traditional discussions of literal translation and liberal translation as well, and offers a new perspective for the development of translation study. Newmark's theory causes a sensation in the translation field. In China, Newmark's theory has been introduced to translators for more than 40 years, but still translators and scholars are applying communicative translation and semantic translation to solve translation problems, which also represents the validity of Newmark's theory.

It is widely acknowledged that the cultural conflict and integration between Chinese culture and American culture has always been a persistent topic among Chinese American writers. Their dual background and cultural identity enable them to open a door for readers to glimpse the differences and developments between the two countries. Hu (2008) insists that "Chinese American literature has opened the window of Chinese culture for American society and

deepened the understanding of Chinese culture in American mainstream society". *The Joy Luck Club* describes the ups and downs of four Chinese families spanning two generations in America, which arouses American readers' interest in Chinese culture. The following are cases which would be elaborated and pored over carefully from the perspective of communicative translation and semantic translation. Based on the comparison and analysis of three Chinese versions of *The Joy Luck Club*, the present paper tries to elucidate differences between communicative translation and semantic translation from a new perspective by analyzing their relations with the text, the participants in the translation process, and the cultures involved. Hence, some enlightenment for translation and suggestions for later translation studies may be obtained.

2. The Relation of Communicative Translation and Semantic Translation with the Texts

There are great differences between communicative translation and semantic translation, and "one basic difference between the two methods is that where there's a conflict, the communicative must emphasize the 'force' rather than the content of the message" (Newmark, 2001). Hence, it is notable that communicative translation emphasizes the function and spirit of the original rather than its semantic content only. Texts and expressions generated under the guidance of communicative translation conform to the norm of the target text. Thus, it is fluent, natural, and concise. While semantic translation tries to maintain the characteristics and special expressions of the original and aims to reproduce a detailed description in the target text.

Case 1:

Feathers from a Thousand Li Away

This is the title of the first chapter in *The Joy Luck Club*. The whole sentence is an excerpt from a traditional Chinese saying that "a swan feather sent from a thousand li away". "Feather" here refers to a swan brought from China to America by Suyuan Woo, and finally, only a piece of swan feather was kept at her first footstep on the American land. Therefore, the image of "feather" in the source text has a double meaning: it's an object that truly existed and was held by Suyuan Woo, and it also contains Woo's attachment towards her motherland.

Three translators adopt different methods in their translation. Tian and Li both translate "feather" into "é máo", translating on the basis of the source text. This translation not only conveys the practical image but also is applicable to target readers as Chinese readers know well what "é máo" means in the Chinese context. While Cheng alters the original image from "é máo" to "hóng máo", feather from anser cygnoides, and adds "yī piàn xīn" in her translation. "hóng máo" means something quite light in weight or unimportant as famous historian Sima Qian once told that "Though death befalls all men alike, it may be weightier than Mount Tai or lighter than a feather." "yī piàn xīn" here is used to strengthen the feeling and also implies Woo's nostalgia for the motherland.

Cheng's version is free from the original text and structures, offering a shortcut for readers to grasp the plot. Tian and Li's versions follow the source structure and image. In this sense, Cheng's version is inclined to communicative translation, and Tian and Li's are of semantic translation.

Case 2:

"Bite back your tongue," scolded my mother when I cried loudly, yanking her hand toward the store that sold bags of salted plums.

The focus of this case is on the phrase "Bite back your tongue". Cheng and Li's version conforms to the Chinese language habit and conveys the function of the original, translating the American authentic phrase into a Chinese oral phrase "bì zuǐ". Tian makes no adjustments to the source text and retains the foreignness of the original, translating it into "yǎo zhù nǐ dē shé tōu". Tian's version leans towards semantic translation. Tian tries to maintain the figurative and formal elements of the original, as Newmark (2001) once claims that "semantic translation will attempt to preserve its local flavor—dialect, slang and cultural terms will present their problems."

From the two examples, it is echoed that semantic translation pays more attention to the original flavor of the source text and tries less amendment of it. While communicative translation works for the final information and may be at cost of the format or style of the source text.

3. The Relation of Communicative Translation and Semantic Translation with the Participants

3.1 Relations with the Author

Semantic translation is confined to the linguistic features of the original; it respects the original author and seeks to demonstrate the thinking process and distinctive writing style of the author to the largest extent. Just as Newmark (2001) himself has said, "Semantic translation is basically addressed to one 'reader' only, namely, the writer of the SL text." However, communicative translation is not fully limited to the texts, and the author's writing is often transferred or even changed for different purposes.

Case 3:

> The play area was bordered by wood-slat benches where old-country people sat cracking roasted watermelon seeds with their golden teeth and scattering the husks to an impatient gathering of gurgling pigeons.

This is a typical English sentence, a long sentence with subordinate clauses and participles. And Chinese versions are short sentences cut by punctuation marks. It is noted that there are great differences between Chinese and English. It's stated that English is used to connect words and sentences by means of grammatical and linguistic forms, such as subordinate clauses, phrases, the number of nouns, the sex, number, and case of pronouns, the tense and state of verbs, etc. To achieve cohesion, Chinese coherence is achieved by means of logical connections contained in words or sentences. This difference is even more distinctive when a translation practice occurs.

Two methods are adopted in Case 3. Three translators follow the thinking mode of the author and start their translation with a spatial perspective, from blur to clarity of the environment description, as if leading readers with them to witness the whole picture of a corner in the play area. And it's communicative translation that turns a long English sentence to be several short Chinese sentences. Moreover, the source text is a novel with many dialogues happening between characters, so the language style is plain and straightforward. So does the Chinese version, which also contains simple sentences and small words. From thinking mode to language style, three translators are coherent with the author.

Case 4:

> "This is a game. These are the rules. I didn't make them up. See. Here. In the book." He jabbed a page with a pawn in his hand. "Pawn. P-A-W-N. Pawn. Read it yourself."

This case is an example of communicative translation and the focus is laid on the translation of the spelling of an English word. In the source text, the "pawn" is spelled with one alphabet after another and linked with hyphens for the purpose of stress. In Cheng and Li's version, they repeat the English spelling of the word "pawn" which presupposing that readers are knowledgeable of the word, "pawn". Tian thinks another way. Tian translates the Chinese meaning of the English word, pawn, connected with Chinese punctuation marks. In this point, Cheng and Li's version are close to the author, making no change of the stressed word. While Tian changed the source text in the translation, which may be more applicable to readers, making reader obtain the same effect as the source text readers do.

3.2 Relations with Readers

In semantic translation, the point is that readers should follow the author. In the meanwhile, communicative translation aims to provide conveniences for target readers, and the content and language of the original should be acceptable and comprehensible to readers. In communicative translation, wording or expressions sometimes are rearranged for the purpose of the targeted readers in the light of their status and language habit.

Case 5:

> "Embarrass you be my daughter?" Her voice was cracking with anger.
> "That's not what I meant. That's not what I said."

This is a querying dialogue between a mother and a daughter. The source text applies the phrase "voice cracking with anger" to vividly depict the mother's mood at this moment. Tian respects the author and believes that readers should follow the author and source text, so he abides by the source phrase and translates the image "crack" faithfully, which

makes the translated sentence a little foreign to target readers, as the collocation of "voice is cracking" is not so common in the Chinese context. In Li's version, the image of "crack" is partly retained, and some changes have been made to render the translation acceptable. Although the sentence is comprehensible in Chinese, it's still not a set structure. In Cheng's version, she replaces the source structure and the image with a more authentic Chinese literary expression, "yǔn nù", meaning extremely angry. This expression will be immediately accessible to readers. In this case, Tian is in line with the strategy of semantic translation and keeps the original image in the target text, while Cheng translates in accordance with communicative translation and pays no attention to the image as long as the meaning of the source text is transmitted. And Li's version is somewhere in between, leaving the image as well as making the translation close to Chinese habits.

3.3 Relations with the Translator

The purpose of semantic translation is to convey meaning while preserving the linguistic features and special form of expression of the author, so the translator is subject to more limitations. While in communicative translation, the translator feels responsible for the slight arrangement or improvement of the text in order to better convey information. Cao (2022) also reminds that "No real translator can forget the fundamental purpose of translation, which is to let the target reader understand the ideological content of the original text." Hence, the translator should be flexible but also firm with the text.

In accordance with Nida (2001), "Source texts also differ greatly in the excellence of the style. Generally, an excellent style also means greater problems for the translator in doing justice to the associative meanings." When it comes to the source text, it is a novel with strong Chinese cultural color and multi-fold implied meaning. In translating the same source text, three translators employ different methods, which are a symbol of their choice and attitudes to the original author and target readers.

Case 6:

Two Kinds

Case 7:

A Pair of Tickets

These are titles of two chapters. Cheng and Li's versions contain no resemblance to the original text, while Tian's version and the source text are much alike. Cheng and Li go beyond the literal meaning of the title. Although their versions are quite different in form, they are actually the same in essence; both versions are highly concise and show the readers the main theme of the two chapters. Readers can get a rough understanding of the text simply by reading the title. This is an example of communicative translation cause it values readers' acceptability and their responses. Tian exerts less freedom in translation, which is more inclined to semantic translation. Yet Tian's translation is conducive to arousing readers' interest. Just as Xu holds, "The translator should determine the translation strategy according to its dominant function, that is, which form of expression is the main and which form of expression is the auxiliary" (Xu, 2021).

4. The Relation of Communicative Translation and Semantic Translation with the Cultures

Semantic translation is rooted in the original culture and makes an attempt to preserve the foreignness of that culture. On the other hand, communicative translation is closely related to the target culture and would make efforts to change the contents of the original into linguistic and cultural elements more acceptable and applicable to target readers.

Case 8:

My auntie, who had a very bad temper with children, told him he had no shou, no respect of ancestors of family, just like our mother.

In this example, "shou" is a culturally loaded word, and three translators deal with it differently. Tian's version is much more biased towards semantic translation. Tian maintains the spelling of the original, followed by a Chinese character to manifest the distinctive culturally loaded information of this word. This translation is a symbol of the

translator's respect for the Chinese culture. Cheng's version omits the cultural feature and mingles "no shou" and "no respect" together. This version only conveys the communicative function of text regardless of the connoted culture in the original text. Li's version also inclines to communicative translation as he retains the meaning of "no shou".

Case 9:

The matchmaker bragged about me: "An earth horse for an earth sheep. This is the best marriage combination."
Tian
Cheng:
Li:

In the above two examples, the emphasis lies on the translation of the traditional Chinese zodiac. Zodiac culture is one of the most distinctive and representative elements of Chinese culture. In Case 9, "earth horse" and "earth sheep" are of vital importance among the older generation. Cheng aims to produce a natural and fluent translation, so she stresses the communicative functions and intentionally makes the intended cultural expression "invisible"; otherwise, she adopts another traditional saying in her translation. Tian and Li keep the cultural flavor, yet they differ in the degree of their maintenance of it. Tian brings the Chinese Zodiac to the spotlight but makes no explanation. Li not only clarifies that these two phrases are the combination of "the five elements" and the Chinese Zodiac in the translation but also adds an endnote to illustrate the reason why the matchmaker says so. At this point, Cheng's version is oriented to communicative translation, with its communicative function realized; Tian and Li's versions are oriented to semantic translation, respecting the source text, and the specific Chinese expression is made obvious.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, semantic translation is more objective and values the accuracy of the original as well as the reproduction of the content, form, style, and intention of the original. It is also free from the limitation of time and space as the content of the text is exact; communicative is closely related to the function of the original, emphasizing conveying the essence and gist of the original and its social value, it is much more subjective. However, one should also bear in mind that there's no clear demarcation between semantic translation and communicative translation, and that they are coexistent in the same text; the point is which one is more suitable under specific circumstances. The adoption of the two methods is determined by many factors, and one point in case is where the emphasis lies. Zhao (2021) also argues that "The semantic translation presents the original text without the personal feelings of the translator, and simply describes the text content of the original text. Communicative translation, on the other hand, is more flexible. In order to make readers better understand the text, translators may add their own subjective emotions, but may misinterpret the meaning of the original text. Therefore, when translating, translators should combine the two translation methods to present a better translation effect." Communicative translation and semantic translation can be presented in the same literary category, even in the same paragraph.

In a nutshell, with the conclusion reached and analysis of relations with semantic translation and communicative translation made, the present paper sheds some light on a new perspective on studying Newmark's theory. The paper also hopes to offer some insights for translation practices and further studies on semantic translation and communicative translation.

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Appendix (Source Text, Target Text, and Annotations)

Case number	Source text	Target text	Annotations
Case 1	FEATHERS FROM A THOUSAND LI AWAY	田青: 千里鹅毛 程乃珊: 千里鸿毛一片心 李军: 千里鹅毛	
Case 2	"Bite back your tongue," scolded my mother when I cried loudly, yanking her hand toward the store that sold bags of salted plums.	田青: 当我大声哭喊着，拽着她的手要买咸味糖时，妈妈就狠狠地责备我："咬住你的舌头" 程乃珊: 有次走过买蜜饯的店，我硬拉住妈的手不肯离开，哭着赖着要吃蜜饯。"闭嘴。" 李军: 一天，我们路过一家蜜饯店，我使劲扯着母亲的手，大声哭闹着要吃蜜饯，母亲便训斥叫我"闭嘴。"	
Case 3	The play area was bordered by wood-slat benches where old-country people sat cracking roasted watermelon seeds with their golden teeth and scattering the husks to an impatient gathering of gurgling pigeons.	田青: 空地周围有一圈木头长椅，老人们坐在那里晒太阳,用金牙嗑着炒西瓜子，一群等得不耐烦的鸽子咕咕叫着，捡他们吐出的瓜子皮。 程乃珊: 操场四周排列着石条凳，老人们常爱闲坐在这里晒太阳，嗑瓜子，用瓜子壳引着咕咕叫的鸽子。 李军: 操场外围是一圈木板长凳，常有年老的乡胞坐在这儿，用他们镶金大牙嗑炒熟的西瓜子，把瓜子壳撒给一群鸽子，它们急不可耐，咕咕直叫。	
Case 4	"This is a game. These are the rules. I didn't make them up. See. Here. In the book." He jabbed a page with a pawn in his hand. "Pawn. P-A-W-N. Pawn. Read it yourself."	田青: "这是游戏，游戏就有规则。又不是我瞎编的。你自己去看吧,在这，书里全写着呢。"他用手里的卒子猛戳着书页。"卒，小--卒，你自己看吧。" 程乃珊: "这是一种游戏规则，又不是我定出来的。喏，看这本说明。"他手里拿着那"兵"，将说明书翻到有关"兵"的那一页:"兵 P-A-W 一 N，兵，你自己去看。" 李军: "这是个游戏，要遵守游戏规则。规则又不是我定的，你看这里，书上都写着呢!"他手里拿着"兵"，翻开	

		解释兵的规则那页:“兵 P-A-W 一 N，兵，你自己看吧。”	
Case 5	“Embarrass you be my daughter?” Her voice was cracking with anger. “That's not what I meant. That's not what I said.”	田青:“做我的女儿你难为情了?”她的声音气愤得快要炸裂一般。 “那不是我的意思，我不是那么说的。” 程乃珊:“噢，做我的女儿令你很尴尬是吗?”她愠怒地发问。 “不是那个意思。 我不是那样说的。” 李军: “做我的女儿很难堪了?”母亲声音中爆出怒气。 “不是那个意思。 我不是那样说的。”	
Case 6	Two Kinds	田青: 两类人 程乃珊: 慈母心 李军: 望女成凤	
Case 7	A Pair of Tickets	田青: 两张机票 程乃珊: 共同的母亲 李军: 团圆	
Case 8	My auntie, who had a very bad temper with children, told him he had no shou, no respect of ancestors of family, just like our mother.	田青:我的舅妈向来对小孩子没有耐心, 她说弟弟不 shou (孝)，对于长辈和家人不尊敬, 就像妈妈一样。 程乃珊:舅母对待孩子, 向来粗暴得很。我弟弟不服地瞪了她一眼, 她马上训斥他目无尊长, 如此大逆不道的行为, 就像我们妈妈。 李军:舅母对待小孩，一向态度粗暴。她说我弟弟不孝，也就是对自己的祖宗和长辈不敬，跟我母亲一样。	
Case 9	The matchmaker bragged about me: “An earth horse for an earth sheep. This is the best marriage combination.” Tian Cheng: Li:	田青::媒婆在旁边夸我说，“一个属马，一个属羊，真是天生的一对呀。” 程乃珊:那媒婆不住地向洪太太夸耀着我：“看呀，就好比骏马配上金马鞍，多般配，真个应着门当户对这句话了。” 李军:那个媒婆替我吹嘘起来：“土马配土羊，这可是绝配啊！”	李军版脚注: 按照中国的传统习俗和五行学说（金木水火土），每个年份都有各自对应的属性，再配上十二生肖，就会出现“土马”“土羊”等说法。