

Studies on e-C Translation of Euphemisms from the Perspective of Skopostheorie

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Abstract: As a significant way of adjusting interpersonal relationship, euphemism is widely used in daily social communication and it is greatly influenced by languages and cultures in terms of its usage and form. Amid the flourishing cross-cultural communication, euphemisms used in different cultures and occasions usually have distinct meanings and functions. Skopostheorie holds that translation is a purposeful action, the three rules of which are extremely conducive in guiding euphemism translation. This paper explores euphemism translation from the perspective of culture connotation, linguistic features and demands of target readers. Taking these factors into consideration, translators can choose specific translation strategies according to specific purposes to achieve the communicative functions of euphemisms.

1. Introduction

Language serves as an indispensable tool for people to share information, and express feelings. However, in the process of communication, it is inevitable that people will encounter some topics that require them to express indirectly. To achieve a desirable communication characterized by pleasantness, smoothness and effectiveness, people are expected to express these things in an indirect, euphemistical fashion. As a result, euphemism comes into our sights. Euphemism is a common phenomenon resulting from the process of language using. It varies from speech community to speech community because different nations and groups have distinct expressions of euphemisms. With the cross-cultural communication increasingly getting momentum, it is all the more imperative to direct our attention on euphemism translation.

2. Literary Review

Up to now, numerous scholars both home and abroad have devoted considerable time and energy in euphemism. Their valuable researches have offered great insight into euphemism translation.

2.1 Review of the Study of Euphemism Home and Abroad

2.1.1 Review of the Study of Euphemism At Home

In China, domestic scholars mainly study euphemism from five aspects, which are rhetoric, social linguistics, pragmatics, semantics and psychology.

2.1.2 Review of the Study of Euphemism Abroad

In the western world, the study of euphemism has a rather long history.

Among the early researchers who are interested in euphemisms, James George Fraser, an English scholar, conducted systematic research on euphemisms. In his book *A Golden Bough---A Study in Magic and Religion*, he devoted four chapters to the study of the tabooed words, behaviors, things and person's names.

In 1981, British linguist Hugh Rawson published *A Dictionary of Euphemism and Other Double-talk*. He broadly discussed the features, classification and definition of euphemism.

Later in 1983, American scholars Newman and Sliver published *Kind Words-A Treasure of Euphemisms*, which gave a detailed account of the origin, history, evolution of euphemisms.

In 1985, D. J .Enright published a book *Fairs of Speech, the Use of Euphemism*.

In 1991, Allen and Burridge published *Euphemism and Dysphemism*. It is one of the most frequently referenced books by domestic scholars devoted to euphemism study.

2.2 Previous Research on Euphemism Translation Home and Abroad

2.2.1 Previous Research on Euphemism Translation At Home

Hong Tao has an article called *Problems Arising from Taboos and Euphemisms as Seen in the English Translations of Hongloumeng*. In this article, he endeavors to answer the following questions: in euphemism translation, whether the euphemistic expressions of the original should be transplanted or not? When there are no corresponding euphemistic expressions in the target language, what should the translators do?

Tian Jiusheng insists that both the inference of the implied meaning of a euphemism and the choice of specific translation technique relies heavily on the context.

Xu Lina studies euphemism translation from five aspects, including structure and form, cooperative principle, discourse construction, communicative background and reader's response of target text. She thinks that the last one plays a vital role.

2.2.2 Previous Research on Euphemism Translation Abroad

Peter Newmark held that "Euphemisms are invariably metaphors and the images often have to be replaced by a cultural equivalent, unless the translator is trying to inform the reader rather than affect him in a way similar to the SL reader." (Peter Newmark: 1981)

Mildred L. Larson shared the same opinion. In his *Meaning-based Translation--A Guide to Cross-language Equivalence* published in 1984, he held that euphemism is a figurative expression. 3. General View of English Euphemism

2.3 Definition of English Euphemism

Since euphemism has existed for a rather long time, many scholars have offered their definitions about it.

The definition of euphemism in *The Encyclopedia Britain* is "Figure of speech in which something of unpleasant, distressing or indelicate nature is described in less offensive term".

In the opinion of Newman and Silver, euphemism is generally defined as "substituting an inoffensive or pleasant term for a more explicit and offensive ones, thereby veneering the truth by using kind words." (Newnan & Silver, 1983)

Wilkes has put it in this way: "euphemism is the substitution of a mild, indirect or vague expression for an offensive or unpleasant one." (Wilkes, 1979)

In conclusion, euphemism is characterized by avoidance language and evasive expression.

2.4 Classification of Euphemisms

According to different standards, euphemisms can be divided differently. The followings are two main classifications of euphemism,

2.4.1 Conscious and Unconscious Euphemism

Conscious euphemisms are widely employed. When people communicate with each other, speakers are conscious to say tactfully, and the listeners understand their implied meaning. For example, when a lady says that she wants to "powder her nose" or "make a phone call" at a party, others present know the implied meaning of the euphemism is "going to the ladies' room".

Unconscious euphemisms were developed so long time ago that few can remember their original meanings. As people forget their original meanings and only remember their euphemistic meanings, they are used unconsciously. For example, "Indisposition" has been a substitute for "disease" for so long period that people seldom realize that its original meaning is "incapacity for dealing with something".

2.4.2 Positive and Negative Euphemism

The positive euphemisms are also known as stylistic or exaggerating euphemisms. As Rawson

once put it, “The positive ones inflate and magnify, making the euphemized items seem altogether grander and more important than they really are.”(Rawson, 1981) Professor Liu thinks that people use positive euphemisms to show politeness and avoid conflicts and hostility in the process of communication. For example, in economic recession, government tends to define the severe unemployment problem as “underutilization” or “human resources underdevelopment” to conceal the social mess.

The negative euphemisms are fairly ancient and share close connection with taboos. Contrary to positive euphemisms, they tend to diminish and deflate. Professor Liu holds that negative euphemism and a taboo it refers to like the two aspects of a coin in that they cover the same thing or same idea while presented in different manners. However, euphemisms have a much more pleasant nature than taboos. For examples, there are many euphemistic expressions about diseases. Cancer is called “long illness” and mental problem is called “mad” in English while “under the weather” or “off color” indicates “being ill”.

2.5 Functions of English Euphemisms

Euphemism plays an important part in lubricating our communication and maintaining good interpersonal relationship, which is frequently employed either to show politeness, avoid taboos or to disguise the truth.

2.5.1 The Function of Politeness

The politeness function of euphemism means that we consciously use euphemism in order not to offend others or hurt other’s feelings. So, in the process of communication, people will take many sensitive factors into consideration, such as social status, disabilities, old age, race, poverty, occupation, and appearance, etc. When communication is related to these topics, people will try to protect others’ dignity and respect others’ feelings by avoiding using harsh or sharp words.

2.5.2 The Function of Avoidance

Euphemism can be used to replace tabooed words to talk about a tabooed subject, which are usually considered unpropitious, nasty or unpleasant. So, when encountering these topics, it is common that people resort to euphemisms to get rid of these negative impacts. In English, people always describe death with expressions like “go to heaven” or “the last voyage” to repel the misgivings and scare caused by death. When it comes to pregnancy, people tend to use words like “anticipating” or “expecting”.

2.5.3 The Function of Disguising

To disguise means to veil the truth or to beautify things which are not beautiful in reality or sometimes evil by using complimentary or neutral words. There are many cosmetic euphemisms in English. For example, during the Vietnam War, “bombing”, “burning” and “imprisonment” were disguised as “pacification”; the war was called “conflict” while “aggression” became “police action”.

The above are three basic communicative functions of euphemism. However, euphemism still has other functions. For example, euphemism may create a humorous effect or aesthetic effect.

3. Euphemism Translation from the Perspective of Skopostheorie

3.1 General Introduction of Skopostheorie

Skopostheorie is the landmark of functional approaches to translation, which was developed in Germany in the late 1970s. Skopostheorie reflects a general shift from predominantly linguistic and rather formal translation theories to a more functionally and socioculturally oriented concept of translation. It is Hans J. Vermeer who made this shift.

The Skopostheorie holds that all human actions have their intended purposes and translation is with no exception as it is a purposeful cross-cultural communication. Therefore, translator should adopt appropriate translation strategies according to the purposes of translation.

The skopos, the addressee and the intended receivers are three key factors of skopostheorie. The skopos, namely, the purpose of translation, determines the translation methods and strategies that a translator may adopt in order to produce a functionally adequate translation. The addressee is the intended receiver of the target text. However, the functions expected by the addressee are greatly subject to the recipients of the target text. So, skopostheorie is also called a “prospective approach” as it stresses the position of the intended receivers.

3.2 Three Rules of Skopostheorie

There are three rules guiding the translator’s decision, which are known as skopos rule, coherence rule and fidelity rule.

3.2.1 Skopos Rule

Skopostheorie holds that skopos rule is the prime principle that any translation should observe.

As translation activities have several purposes, which are further divided into three categories: the basic aim of translator, like making a living; the communicative purpose of target text, like enlightening readers; the purpose expected to attain by using some special translation methods or strategy. However, in most cases, skopos refers to the communicative function of target text. Vermeer also uses several other words in his theory. They are known as aim, function, intention and purpose.

As Vermeer has put it “what the skopos states is that one must translate, consciously and consistently, in accordance with some principle respecting the target text. The theory does not state what the principle is: this must be decided separately in each specific case.” (qtd. in Nord, 2001)

Therefore, translator is supposed to make clear the intended purposes of the translation in a given context and determines what methods to employ according to the intended purpose, whether it is a free or a literal translation, or anything between these two extremes.

3.2.2 Coherence Rule

For Vermeer’s part, all texts are carrier of information and receivers select the information that they find significant, intriguing and useful in the target text. To make an ideal communication, the translator is expected to offer a coherent target text for the benefits of receivers in the translation process. Therefore, coherence rule requires that the target text must achieve intra-textual coherence. In conclusion, just as coherence rule of Skopostheorie specifies, a translation should be acceptable in a sense that it is coherent with the receiver’s situation.

3.2.3 Fidelity Rule

There are two defects with Skopostheorie. On the one hand, due to the cultural differences, people with different cultural background hold different opinions towards the translated text. On the other hand, in the Skopostheorie, skopos rule takes precedence over fidelity rule. For one thing, translator is highly responsible for the recipients of target text, so he should explain what he has done in the translation process and the reasons behind his translation actions to the receivers. For the other thing, translator are required to be faithful to the author of source text,. In essence, fidelity rule means that there is some inter-textual coherence between source text and target text. However, the degree and forms of the faithfulness to the source text is determined by the translation skopos and translator’s interpretation of the source text.

3.3 Influencing Factors in the Process of Euphemism Translation

Generally speaking, the author of the source culture is largely addressee-oriented as he lacks some necessary knowledge of the target culture. Besides, the readers of source text and those of target text are virtually different in terms of their cultural background, social practice and linguistic features that they appear to have different understandings even about the same thing. As a result, translators are constantly making choices in the translation process and try to narrowing the gaps between the source text and the target text to attain a satisfactory and ideal translation. In conclusion, the followings are some factors that play a vital part in making choices.

4. Conclusion

Nowadays, with the irresistible momentum of euphemisms, translators engaged in euphemism translation are increasingly exposed to more euphemisms. Consequently, translators are constantly making choices and frequently meet challenges. According to Skopostheorie, the prime task for translators in euphemism translation is to take the target recipients' demands and expectations into consideration. If it is unnecessary to transplant the euphemistic expressions, free translation is enough to make sense. If there are needs to reproduce the euphemistic expressions, the translators are required to take all the factors that influence euphemism translation into consideration. These factors are the expectation of target readers, linguistic features, cultural gaps, etc.

In conclusion, when comes to euphemism translation, there are no cast-iron rules. What the translators are expected to do is to take all related factors like culture, language, psychology into consideration in translation process. No matter what kind of translation strategy the translators adopt, the common aim is to meet the demands of the addresses and the target recipients with the guidance of Skopostheorie.

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