

Strategies on Translation of English Puns

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Abstract—Pun is a rhetorical device widely used in English. It is a witticism involving the playful use of a word in different senses or of words, which differ in meanings but sound alike. Pun's translation into Chinese has long been considered a difficult problem. Many people regard it as untranslatable. In the author's opinion, a perfect pun's translation is impossible according to the three traditional principles of faithfulness, smoothness and elegance. However, it doesn't mean the pun is untranslatable. It's obvious that in pun's translation, something has to be dropped in order to well preserve the other more important parts. In this paper, the author will introduce two most widely used methods in pun's translation, namely, adding footnotes and rewriting. In spite of their respective disadvantages, the two methods do partly fulfill the purpose of conveying more and better the information from different angles.

Index Terms—pun, translation, strategy, functional equivalence

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Definition and Characteristics of English Puns

Pun is an active rhetorical figure widely used in English literature. A definition given by the Oxford English Dictionary is that "the use of a word in such a way as to suggest two or more meanings or different associations, or the use of two or more words of the same or nearly the same sound with different meanings so as to produce a humorous effect". The Webster's Third International Dictionary gives a definition to puns as "a humorous use of a word in such a way as to suggest different meaning or applications, or of words having the same or nearly the same sound but different meanings: a play on words." According to The Collins English Language Dictionary, a pun is defined as "a use of words that have more than one meaning, or words that have the same sound but different meanings, so that what you say have two different meanings and makes people laugh." To put it simply, a pun is rather a play on words depending upon a similarity of sound and a disparity of meanings. It is usually employed for producing an amusing, humorous and even satiric effect (Feng, 1996). Therefore it is widely used in stories, jokes, riddles etc. However, it is not always so easy to appreciate the point of a pun unless one is familiar with the different meanings of the word or phrase used in the pun.

The use of pun dates back to ancient days. It's one of the earliest figures of speech in English. Puns in English have experienced a long history. As early as 2,000 years ago, Aristotle declared that the use of puns was acceptable in certain styles in his famous works Rhetoric. As what William Shakespeare says that pun is "the noblest art", the pun has first become a new fashion in the field of literature. It is estimated that Shakespeare used more than 3,000 puns in his works. And since his time the use of puns in the literature works becomes superior and artistic. Later in the works of Dickens, Mark Twain, puns were also employed for many times. Since puns can make use of the polysemous words in English by which they are able to be used to create humor and irony, this is what any other language phenomenon can not achieve. Nowadays, puns are generally employed in both oral and written expressions and communications.

B. Categories of English Puns

The term "pun" originates from the Latin word "paronomazein", meaning "calling by a different name". Pun is a rather complicated rhetorical device in English. To make the later analysis easier, the author classified English puns into the following five categories, namely, the Homophonic pun (同音双关), the Paronomasia (近音双关), the Antaclasis (同词异义双关), the Sylleptic pun (一词多义双关) and the Asteismus (歧解双关).

1. Homophonic pun

It's a pun making use of words with the same pronunciation but with different spellings and meanings:

e.g. Bassanio: Why dost thou whet thy knife so earnestly?
Shylock: To cut the forfeiture from that bankrupt there.
Gratiano: Not on thy *sole*, but on thy *soul*, harsh Jew...

-----Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*

Here "sole" and "soul" are of the same sound, but of the totally different meanings. They make up a pair of homophones, and produce a satiric effect.

2. Paronomasia

It's a pun making use of two words, which are similar in pronunciation but different in meanings.

e.g. Oh, *Wellington!* (Or "*Villainton*"—for Fame
Sounds the heroic syllables both ways;
France could not even conquer your great name,
But punned it down to this facetious phrase—
Beating or beaten she will laugh the same,)...

-----*George Gordon Byron, Don Juan*

Here "Wellington" and "Villainton" are similar in pronunciation. Wellington was a famous English general who had beaten Napoleon in Waterloo in 1815. After that, he was called *Villainton* by French newspapers and magazines, because either "Villain" in English or "Vilain" in French is an abusive word that means rascal.

3. Antaclasis

It's a pun in which a word is used twice or more, but each time with a different meaning.

e.g. If we don't *hang* together, we shall assuredly *hang* separately.

-----*Peter Stone and Sherman Edwards*

Here, the authors make use of the two different meanings of the word "hang". The former means "unite", while the latter means "put or be put to death by hanging with a rope around the neck".

4. Sylleptic pun

It is similar to antaclasis, but the word used as a pun occurs only once. This is the most frequently employed device of pun.

e.g.: An ambassador is an honest man who *lies* abroad for the good of his country.

Here, "lies" can either be comprehended as "locates, stays" or "makes a statement that one knows to be untrue".

5. Asteismus

It's a pun usually used in dialogue, referring to one's casual or deliberate misunderstanding of the meaning of a word.

e.g.: The clerk: ... Can you *see a female*?

Augustus: Of course I can *see a female* as easily as a man. Do you suppose I'm blind?

-----*George Bernard Shaw, Augustus Does His Bit*

Here, "see" has two meanings as "interview somebody" or "have a look". Augustus misunderstands the meaning of the clerk in "interview a female" as "have a look of a female", that makes the ambiguity.

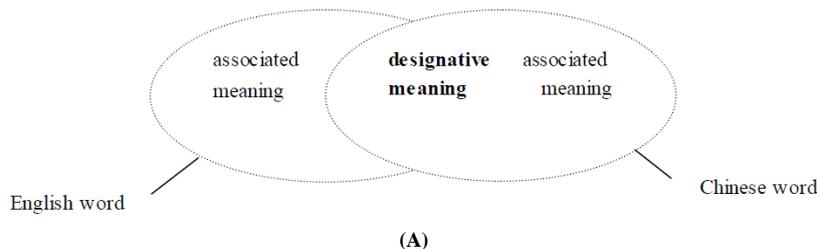
II. THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF A PERFECT TRANSLATION OF ENGLISH PUNS INTO CHINESE

From the above categorization, we can see that English puns are really very complex and intricate. Although the Chinese words are also complex and there is a similar figure called Shuangguan in Chinese language, a perfect translation of English pun into Chinese seems impossible owing to the different language, cultural backgrounds and the discrepancy between the two figures of speech.

A. Different Language Backgrounds

As we all know, English and Chinese are two totally different languages. The former belongs to the Indo-European language family. The basic elements of its word formation are the Latin alphabet. By contrast, the latter is a member of Sino-Tibetan language family. Its words are a system of hieroglyphic characters. Therefore, the English pun, as a play on the meanings and pronunciations of English words cannot be transferred directly into Chinese at all. Although in Chinese, most words also have various associated meanings in addition to their designative meanings, and the phenomenon of paronomasia even more widely exists than in English, the two languages follow different channels in this aspect. We can hardly find out an English word whose equivalent in Chinese has exactly the same designative meanings and the associated meanings as itself, or two English words similar in sound having the similar pronounced equivalents in Chinese.

Such kinds of relationships can be seen more clearly from the following graphs:



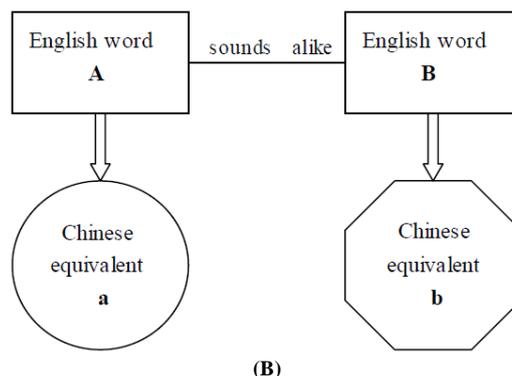


Figure 1: Different Language Backgrounds of English and Chinese Words

These two graphs demonstrate clearly two kinds of relationships between English and Chinese words in pun's translation. Graph (A) shows that an English pun that plays on a word's double or more meanings cannot be matched by a Chinese word, which has the exactly same double meanings; and Graph (B) shows that a pun plays on two words that sound alike cannot find their Chinese equivalents with the same sound. Therefore, a direct translation of English puns into Chinese will surely end in failure. A perfect translation that fulfills the three principles of faithfulness, smoothness and elegance at the same time is definitely impossible.

B. Different Cultural Backgrounds

Besides the language distinctions, the different cultural backgrounds are also big barriers to English pun's translation.

Culture is a big concept covering many aspects such as history, literature, art, and religion. Every country may have its own unique customs and traditions that may seem strange to others. Since China and the western countries have developed in a nearly isolated way from each other for about hundreds of years, their cultural estrangements seem greater and are harder to be removed. This makes pun's translation even more complicated. For example, Shakespeare has such a famous pun:

On Sunday they *pray* for you, and on Monday they *prey* on you.

A literal translation may be: “他们星期日为你们祈祷，星期一对你们敲诈”。Here, Shakespeare makes a penetrating satire to those seemingly pious and benevolent ladies and gentlemen through a pun on *pray* and *prey*. However, if a Chinese reader has no idea of the religious rites of the Christianity to pray on Sundays for the happiness and well-being of people, he will be puzzled by this sentence. He may be wondering what are the differences between Sunday and Monday, or why they pray on Sunday, and things like that. If he is told such an expression is similar to a Chinese idiom of “佛口蛇心” or “佛面蛇心”, maybe he can better grasp the real meaning. After all, Chinese people are more familiar with the Buddhism than the Christianity. But, can we say it is a perfect translation of the pun? Definitely not. Since we can hardly well convey the whole meanings of a pun owing to the cultural gap, how can we produce a perfect translation?

C. The Discrepancy between English Pun and Chinese Shuangguan

Now let's look at the characteristics of the figures of speech themselves, and make a comparison between them. English pun and Chinese *shuangguan* have long since been taken as the two equivalent figures of speech, however, they are in fact not always corresponding to each other (Chen, 1997).

As I've classified the English puns into five categories in the first part, I'd like to give their corresponding Chinese figures of speech in the following table:

TABLE 1:
ENGLISH PUNS AND CORRESPONDING CHINESE FIGURES

	English Pun	汉语辞格
1	Homophonic pun	同音双关
2	Paronomasia	谐音双关
3	Antalacsis	语义双关
4	Sylleptic pun	换义
5	Asteismus	歧义

From the table we can see clearly that the first three kinds of English puns may be equivalent to some kinds of *shuangguan*, but the other two puns correspond to Chinese 换义 and 歧义 respectively. In this case, if we tend to translate every English pun directly into Chinese *shuangguan*, we'll surely end in failure. In fact, even those listed above are not exactly equivalent to each other owing to some other reasons I don't intend to go into in detail in this essay. Therefore, an English pun can hardly find an exactly equivalent style in Chinese, let alone a perfect translation both in meanings and in style (Li, 2000).

III. TRANSLATION STRATEGIES ON PUNS

From the above analysis, we can make sure that a perfect translation of English pun, which fulfills faithfulness, smoothness and elegance at the same time, is definitely impossible. However, it doesn't necessarily mean English pun is not translatable or we can do nothing on pun's translation.

One obvious thing is that in pun's translation, we'll have to give up something in order to better retain some other things. For this purpose, we need to know what should be dropped and what should be reserved. Such a problem cannot be easily settled in one sentence or two. It largely depends on the specific situation, i.e. the context and some other factors. However, some principles are necessary to guide our action in this process. Nida's theory of "functional equivalence" is of practical value.

A. *Nida's Principle of Functional Equivalence*

Eugene A. Nida is a famous American linguist and theorist. His principle of functional equivalence on translation has become very popular in recent years. According to him, translating is a process of communicating depending on what is received by persons hearing or reading a translation. Judging the validity of a translation cannot stop with a comparison of corresponding lexical meanings, grammatical classes and rhetorical devices. What is important is the extent to which receptors correctly understand and appreciate the translated text. Therefore the functional equivalence is essentially a comparison of the way in which the original receptors understood and appreciated the text and the way in which the readers of the translated text understand and appreciate the translated text (Nida, 1998).

In this condition, we've actually set up a reader-oriented principle in pun's translation. Our purpose is to try to convey more and better the information from the original text into the translated text so as to stimulate a nearly same response in the readers of the translated text. The information here includes the content (the literal meaning), the style, the effect etc., of the original text. To convey more and better means we cannot convey the information completely and perfectly. How to make a selection in the information is up to their impact on the readers.

Now, let's look at the two principal methods widely used in pun's translation, namely adding footnotes and rewriting.

B. *One Way—Footnotes*

Strictly speaking, adding footnotes is an adjustment of translation rather than an independent method. It is used for compensating the ideas or meanings that owing to varied kinds of reasons cannot be expressed clearly in the translated text or otherwise will make the sentence clumsy and involved. It aims at faithfulness to the content, and tries to retain the exact designative and associated meanings of the puns. However, it fails to convey the form and spirit of a pun, i.e. after translation the original humor contained in the pun was lost.

e.g.

HERE	这里
LIES	埋葬的是
LESTER MOOR	赖斯特 莫尔
FOUR SLUGS	他死于
FROM A44	A44 枪弹
NO LES	不多不少
NO MORE	整四颗

From the above example, we can see clearly the advantages and disadvantages of adding footnotes. On the one hand, it faithfully conveys the three meanings of "No Les, No More" in the original text, which is especially helpful and beneficial to the readers who aim at language study and culture knowing during their readings. However, on the other hand, we cannot see any sense of a pun in the translated text. As for those reading for fun, such kind of a translation makes almost no sense to them since they can hardly catch any humor in it that exists in the original text until after a careful study of the footnotes.

Footnotes, because of its inherent defects in form, can only be used in written materials, like novels, stories etc. Once it comes to the films, TV series, lyrics or stage plays, footnotes will have no way to perform themselves. Obviously, it's ridiculous to have the footnotes printed on the screen or held by the players.

Therefore, we turn to another way in pun's translation, namely, rewriting.

C. *Another Way—Rewriting*

Rewriting is a method much more complicated and difficult than adding footnotes. It's a kind of recreating rather than literal translating. It is used to express the spirit of a pun in another way after partly or totally discarding the original literal meanings. Outwardly, it is not faithful to the original text in the content since great changes have been made in lexical meanings, grammatical classes or rhetorical devices, but inwardly, it is faithful to the spirit of the source text, i.e. it aims at producing the same effect as the source text.

Look at the following examples please:

e.g.: -- What flowers does everybody have?

-- Tulips.

(A) -- 人人都有的花是什么花?

-- 郁金香。

(B)-- 人人都有的花是什么花?

-- 泪花。

The original text is a pun playing on the paronomasias of *tulips* (郁金香) and *two lips* (双唇). Translation (A) is an example of adding footnotes, and (B) is a rewriting of the pun. After a comparison, we can see that translation (A) well conveys the designative and associated meanings of the original pun, but doesn't produce any humor of the pun. While in (B), the "tulips" and the "two lips" are totally discarded, and instead, the translator adopt the word "泪花" which shares the same character "花" with the question. Though the meaning is changed, the similar effect is produced. The readers can immediately catch the humor and appreciate the trick in the dialogue. To those who aim at language study in reading, the translation (A) may be better and more useful. As for the common readers, translation (B) may seem more effective.

Therefore, rewriting is widely used in pun's translation in films, TV series, lyrics etc., when the pun is only used to make a fun and the real meaning is not so important (Qian, 2000). For example, the lyric of the famous song Do, Re, Mi is from very beginning to the end a play on puns:

Doe--- a deer, a female deer; Ray--- a drop of golden sun; Me--- a name I call myself; Far--- a long long way to run; Sew--- a needle pulling thread; La--- a note to follow sew; Tea--- a drink with jam and bread; That will bring us back to doe.

Someone translate it literally as:

Doe——是鹿，是一头鹿；Ray——是金色阳光；Me——是我，是我自己；Far——是奔向远方；Sew——是引线穿针；La——跟在后面走；Tea——喝茶加点心，那就重又回到 Doe。

Though such a translation conveys the exact meaning of the lyrics, doesn't it sound a little bit incomprehensible?

The puns in the lyrics here are mainly composed for children to better memorize the music notes, but in the translated text such a function is totally lost. In this song, the contents of the puns are not so important. What's of value is the paronomasia interest produced by the puns. Therefore, we'd better have a rewriting of the lyric so as to retain the spirit of the puns.

There's another translation of the lyric and here it is for comparison:

朵，美丽的祖国花朵；来呀，大家都快来！密，你们来猜秘密；发，猜中我把奖发；索，大家用心思索；拉，快点猜莫拖拉；体，怎样练好身体，做茁壮成长的花朵！

This one is a typical rewriting. For the young children who are not capable enough of comprehending a foreign language, this one may be more meaningful.

D. A Comparison between Footnotes and Rewriting in Pun's Translation

As I have mentioned before, a perfect pun's translation is impossible. In pun's translation we have to drop something in order to well reserve some other things. Such an idea can be proved by the above discussion about footnotes and rewriting.

As the two main methods used in pun's translation, they both have some advantages and disadvantages. They, from different angles, partly fulfill the purpose of more and better conveying the original information. The method of adding footnotes lays emphasis on conveying all the meanings of the original text, but neglects the delivery of the spirit; by contrast, rewriting well conveys the spirit of the original text but sacrifices the meanings. Which one should be used in our practice is up to the function of the original text and the expectation of the readers. Someone may prefer rewriting to adding footnotes as the former can acquire the faithfulness on a higher level, i.e. the faithfulness to the spirit, and therefore can better stimulate the almost same response in the readers of the translated text as of the translated text. However, in some circumstances where the original meanings are of great importance to be conveyed, we cannot rewrite it freely but to adopt the footnotes. Of course, sometimes we can combine the two methods, i.e. rewrite the pun in the text and with the addition of the footnotes later, so as to better convey all the information in the original text.

Finally, I have some suggestions to make on the translation of English puns:

(a) Adding footnotes, though an easy method, cannot be used indiscriminately. After all, translating, unlike retelling, is somewhat an art of recreating. The translator should try to convey the information as much as possible in the text, not in the footnotes.

(b) Rewriting cannot be abused, either. Rewriting doesn't mean writing arbitrarily. It must comply with the purpose of conveying the spirit of the original text. In fact, it's a much more complicated and difficult task than adding footnotes that requires a stronger ability of a translator in comprehending and using the two languages as well as his experiences, skills and inspiration sometimes. Therefore, if a suitable rewriting cannot be obtained at the moment, adding footnotes is a wise alternative.

IV. CONCLUSION

Pun is a rhetorical device widely used in English. It is a witticism involving the playful use of a word in different senses or of words, which differ in meanings but sound alike. It is usually employed for jocular and humorous effects in English literature. English pun's translation has long been considered a difficult problem. Though it has been proved

that a perfect translation is impossible, some efforts still can be made to produce a relatively good one. In the author's opinion, a perfect pun's translation is impossible according to the three traditional principles of faithfulness, smoothness and elegance, i.e. a pun's translation that is equivalent to the original text in the content, style and effect at the same time. In this paper, the author proved this impossibility from the language, cultural backgrounds and the features of the rhetorical device itself.

However, it doesn't mean the pun is untranslatable. It's obvious that in pun's translation, something has to be dropped in order to well preserve the other more important parts. But what is to be dropped and what is to be kept still require a principle. Eugene A. Nida, in his theory of "functional equivalence", points out that translation should try to produce in the receptor of the translated text the capacity for a response as close as possible to what the original readers experienced. In this condition, the pun's translation is given a reader-oriented principle, i.e. to try to convey more and better the information in the source text into the target language.

According to this theory, the author introduced two most widely used methods in pun's translation, namely, adding footnotes and rewriting. In spite of their respective disadvantages, the two methods do partly fulfill the purpose of conveying more and better the information from different angles. In short, there're no set rules for translation. Bear in mind the reader-oriented principle, i.e. try to stimulate the same response in the readers' minds of the translated text as of the original text; the remaining thing is to deal with the specific problem in the specific situation.

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