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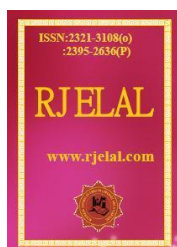
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**A Study of English-Chinese Translation of Humors in
The Importance of Being Earnest from the Relevance Theory**

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Abstract

As the founding work of modern British drama, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a work rich in humors by Oscar Wilde. Relevance Theory emphasizes the translator's subjectivity and treats translation as a communicative behavior that pursues the optimal relevance. This paper focuses on three types of humor in this book, including verbal humor, universal humor and cultural humor. From the Relevance Theory, Yu Guangzhong's English-Chinese translation of humors successfully puts this theory into practice and enables Chinese readers to understand and appreciate the essence of Wilde's humors with maximum contextual effects and minimum cognitive efforts, highlighting a case of success for cross-cultural humorous communication.

Key Words: *The Importance of Being Earnest*; Humor Translation; Relevance Theory; Drama.

1. Introduction

The Importance of Being Earnest is a work by Oscar Wilde (1854-1900). As the representative of the Aestheticism movement in the late 19th century, Oscar Wilde is renowned worldwide for his poetry, prose, novels and especially his plays. He authored seven plays, among which *The Importance of Being Earnest* is the most highly regarded as the founding work of modern British drama. In terms of content, it sharply satirizes all kinds of hypocrisy in religion, love, marriage, education and politics. In terms of language, it is filled with humors in characters' dialogues.

There are translated versions of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, among which are three Chinese versions by Qian Zhide, Yu Guangzhong and Zhang Nanfeng. Many scholars have studied the individual version, and also conducted contrastive analysis between them (Wang Yun, 2008). especially the Yu's version which has been successfully applied to the drama stage Drama translation, as a special kind of literary translation, pays more attention to the stage effect, i.e. the communication between actors, and between actors and audiences for conveying cultural values. Yu's version is successful for its taking into account

both cultural transmission and performability (Chen Feifei, 2011).

As for the study of Yu's version, most scholars have studied its stylistic style and performability (Wang Lu, 2008; Yin Yanru, Liu Bing, 2013). Scholars have also used various theories, such as Image Blending Theory (Lin Yingsui, 2013) and Schema Theory (Li Lin, 2017), to analyze the humor translation strategies and methods adopted by the translator. Relevance Theory attaches importance to the cognitive load and contextual clues and has been applied to drama translation (Chen Xiaoli, Zhang Yuanyuan, 2012), but is rarely used to conduct a comprehensive and systematic analysis of Yu Guangzhong's version. Therefore, this paper analyzes the humor translation in Yu Guangzhong's version of *The Importance of Being Earnest* and explores the use of Relevance Theory in humor translation, so as to better serve drama translation and drama performances.

2. Humor and Relevance Theory

2.1 Humor and Its Translation

The research on humor first started in the West and can be traced back to the ancient Greece, whose representative figures are Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and so on. But there is no definition of humor. Humor is a kind of wisdom in life, which plays an important role in people's daily life. As a unique communicative ability of human beings, humor also plays an indispensable role in harmonizing interpersonal relations and enhancing feelings. In China, Lin Yutang semi-transliterated the English word "humor" into "You Mo", which is similar to the pronunciation of "humor", and argued that humor is the behavior or language that makes people feel funny, happy, and funny, which is equivalent to wit (Ge Lingling, 2014).

However, the research on humor translation has a short history. The translatability of humor has long been a hot topic in the translation field. For this reason, the development of humor translation study is

relatively slow compared with translation studies in other fields. Raphaelson-West (1989) argued that humor is translatable and summarizes humor into three major categories, namely verbal humor, universal humor, and cultural humor. When translating humor, the translator must first analyze the humor types of the source text and achieve the same humorous effect as much as possible.

2.2 Relevance Theory

2.2.1 Relevance and Its Principles

Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1993, 1995) defined relevance from the perspective of cognitive effects and processing effort. Cognitive effects are achieved when new information interacts with an existing assumption context. In terms of processing, the greater the cognitive effects the new information achieved, the greater its relevance. However, the processing of the new information and obtaining of these cognitive effects require some cognitive efforts, and the greater the effort involved to derive them, the lower the relevance will be. In conclusion, the greater the cognitive effects, the greater the relevance, and the smaller the cognitive efforts, the greater the relevance.

There are two principles of relevance, the cognitive principle and the communicative principle. Human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance. The cognitive principle is pertinent to the maximum of relevance, which promotes to yield the greatest possible effects without painstaking processing in the interpretation process. Human cognition is supposed to have maximum relevance, but in most occasions, language communication tends to pursue for the optimal relevance. The Communicative Principle contains the foundation of this idea. Every ostensive stimulus conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance. According to the communicative principle, human communication creates an expectation that the speaker's utterances are supposed to provide the most relevant information. In other words,

in every act of ostensive communication, the speaker's utterances are assumed to be optimally relevant, and the hearer can expect to obtain enough contextual effect without bothering to invest unnecessary effort in the interpretation process.

Furthermore, Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1993, 1995) put forward that the content of utterance, context, and all implication make the hearer differ in understanding the utterance, but not all the meanings of utterance could be completely understood in any situation. The hearer understands the utterance only through a single and common standard; it is sufficient to identify a unique and feasible understanding; the criterion of which is relevance. Therefore, every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance. Communication, in conclusion, is a course of searching for its optimal relevance.

2.2.2 Ostensive-inferential Communication and Translation

In the communicating process, the speaker makes an intention to provide something, while the hearer interpret the speaker's intention from the provided ostension. Ostension and inference are the two aspects of a communication process, so in this sense, communication is an ostensive-inferential behavior. The speaker produces a stimulus which makes it mutually manifest to both speaker and hearer what the speaker intends. By means of this stimulus, the hearer manifests a series of assumptions.

Translation is a typical and particular ostensive-inferential communication form, which involves two ostensive-inferential processes and includes three participants. Ostensive-inferential communication largely depends on making manifest to the language receptor one's intention, thus making manifest a fundamental ground of information. It can be concluded an informative and a communicative intention: informative intention—to make it mutually manifest to audience and

communicator that the communicator has this informative intention. For translators, it is generally supportive that communicative intention should be superior to informative one in translation when these two cannot be conveyed at the same time.

2.2.3 Relevance Theory and Translation

In 1991, Sperber and Wilson's student, Ernst August Gutt (1991) proposed a systematic insight of relevance theory into translation. Translation is considered as a special communication, and its general principle of communication is the principle of relevance. Gutt's relevance-based clarification of translation theory has a further influence on translation, providing a powerful theoretic framework for the ontological and methodological studies of translation.

Gutt (1991) presents the Relevance Translation Theory. He put forward that the nature of translation is an interpretive use of language and, the aims of achieving optimal relevance, like other communicative activities. The relevance allows readers to obtain maximal contextual effect by making minimal processing effort. According to relevance theory, translation as a special form of communication, should follow the common principle of communication, i.e. the principle of relevance. In this aspect, it is also an ostensive-inferential process, an interlingual and intercultural ostensive-inferential process, which is more complex than intralingual communication with single ostensive-inferential process.

Actually, translation consists of three communicators—the source author, the translator and the target reader (Gutt, 2000; Gutt, 2004). On the one hand, the translator should make inference in accordance with the original author's ostension for obtaining the contextual effects of the source language text; on the other hand, the translator has to make manifest the attentive ostensive in source text to target readers so that they can conclude from the translation and get contextual effects. Three

communicators, the source text writer, the translator and target text readers involved in the total process of translation. In the first process, the source text writer displays his intention to the translator. Then, the translator receives and infers intentions and obtains an interpretation of utterances in accordance with the contextual information of the source text and the principle of relevance. In this process, the translator is a recipient. The main aim is to involve in inferential communication. After finishing the first round of communication, the translator steps into the second ostensive-inferential communication. He has to go ahead to transmit what he has gained in the first round to the target readers ostensively. At this time, the translator as a speaker presents translated utterances. In turn, the target readers as recipients infer and interpret the translation. So the two ostensive-inferential processes have been finished. It is concluded that the translator is both a communicator and a recipient.

Therefore, as the bridge between the source language writer and the target language reader, translators should coordinate the communication process. In order to make it a successful one, translators can apply some proper translation methods to help target readers to find the optimal relevance between the context of source text and that of target text. In this process, it is reasonable for translator to select the proper way in the favor of target readers to make ostensive source text writer's communicative intension, based on his assessment of the target readers' receptive context. In same process, the role of target readers is noticeable. The target text should be considered as a result of cooperation and communication between source text writer, the translator and the target text reader.

3. Humor Translation in *The Importance of Being Earnest*

Humor includes the language and culture characteristics of a nation, which undoubtedly poses challenges to translators.

Humor translation often involves context, inferring and cognition. Relevance theory can help translators solve some difficulties encountered in humor translation, thereby achieving relevance, and the target readers can obtain contextual effects and understandings from it. According to the classification of humor (Raphaelson-West, 1989), this study analyzes three types of humor's degree of relevance and translation effect achieved by the translator, Yu Guangzhong.

3.1 Verbal Humor

The humorous effect mainly results from the changes in the words, which is very prominent in Yu's version of "Bu Ke Ren Xi" (which means being serious), especially the translation of puns, which can be seen from the title of the play and the names of the characters, and also reflected in the phrases. This part selects the translation of puns as examples.

Example 1 :

ST : *The Importance of Being Earnst*

TT : 不可儿戏.

On The one hand, regarding the translation of the title of the play, "The Importance of Being Earnst" is translated as "不可儿戏" ("Bu Ke Ren Xi"). This translation does not achieve the pun effect of the original text, but it can convey the theme of the play and has a certain humorous effect. On the other hand, as for the translation of names, the translator did not choose transliteration but made a free translation of the names, adding a pun effect and making it more humorous.

Example 2 :

ST : Ernest

TT : 任真

As a translator, when reading the source text, the name "Ernest" serves as an explicit stimulus, sounding the same as "earnest", meaning "serious". The context of the source text is that the pronunciations of the two words are similar,

and "earnest" means "serious", a quality highly regarded in the Victorian era. Therefore, it can be inferred that a pun technique is used here, which is highly humorous and satirical. During the translation process, the translator evaluated that Chinese readers would not be familiar with the English pronunciation and the meaning of "earnest", thus transliteration fails to create a pun and satirical contextual effect. Moreover, it would require the target language readers to make much more efforts to understand the translation here, but the result would not achieve the optimal relevance. Therefore, Yu exerted his creativity and adopted a naturalized translation method, translating it as "认真" ("Ren Zhen", the pronunciation is similar to "认真" which means being serious) and changing it to a pun in the target language. For Chinese readers, "认真" is easily associated with the word "认真", which has the same humorous effect as the source text, indicating that "认真" is not equal to the "认真" and the identity of the character "认真" is fake. It is a way for target language readers to achieve the best connection with less effort. Similarly, the translation of another person's name also has the effect of achieving the optimal relevance.

Example 3 :

ST : Bunbury

TT : 梁勉仁

The name "Bunbury" of the character in the play was coined by Oscar Wilde to satirize the noble youth in the upper class who are willing to enjoy themselves. Yu translated it as "梁勉仁" ("Liang Mian Ren", which sounds like "两面人" and means "two-faced person"), also a pun that conveys the satirical meaning of the source text. So, humor can persist in the target text and achieve the optimal relevance for audiences in China.

Therefore, in the face of huge cultural and language barriers (for example, puns are untranslatable), Yu adopted domestication. The "original sound" of the name was sacrificed, but

by endowing the name with the ability to independently produce humorous and satirical effects in the target language, and through reasonable processing efforts to understand the name, the same satirical and humorous contextual effect as the source text is achieved, which fully conforms to the optimal relevance required by Relevance Theory.

3.2 Universal Humor

Universal humor is the humor which depends neither on the language nor on the culture, and which can transfer from one language or culture to another. The key point of translating this kind of humor is to put the original humor in the most effective way so as to decrease the processing effort of the audience.

Example 4 :

ST : Algernon: How can you sit there, calmly eating muffins when we are in this horrible trouble?

Jack: Well, I can't eat muffins in an agitated manner. The butter would probably get on my cuffs.

TT : 阿尔杰：我们大祸临头了，你还能坐在那儿，若无其事地吃松饼？

杰克：这个嘛，心里一慌就吃不成松饼了。奶油会沾到袖口上去的。

The humor here stems from the fact that when they were in trouble, Jack used the insignificant little thing of getting cream on his cuffs to evade his responsibility. The translation uses the exaggerated contrast of "大祸临头 vs 袖口沾奶油" ("disaster on the head vs. cream on the sleeve") to restore the context of the source text. There is no cultural difference involved here, so target readers can infer from daily experience that Jack uses unexpected and absurd excuses to cover up his guilt, thus highlighting the sentimentality of the noble class. It has the same satirical and the humorous effect as the original text, achieving the optimal Relevance.

Example 5 :

ST : Lady Bracknell: "To lose one parent, Mr. Worthing, may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness."

TT : 巴夫人：华先生，失去父亲或母亲，还可以说是时运不济；双亲都失去了就未免太大意了。

For both source language readers and target language readers, losing one's parents is extremely unfortunate, and the upper class is cold and heartless. This does not involve cultural differences either. In the source text, on the contrary, Lady Bracknell attributes the loss of both parents to personal negligence, which contrasts with the misfortune of losing parents. This further portrays the Lady Bracknell's rigidity, selfishness and ruthlessness. Target language readers do not need to make much effort to understand the satire and humor expressed by the author. The translator successfully understood the ironic humor expressed in the source text, retained the formal and concise sentence form of the source text, and added the use of words such as "时运不济" ("bad luck") and "太大意了" ("too careless"), which weakened the tragic aspect and precisely conveyed the core absurdity of the source text—attributing the tragedy to personal fault, and using "未免" to intensify the tone to be more arbitrary and inhumane. This structural correspondence and semantic correspondence achieved the optimal relevance, restoring the humorous effect of the source text.

In conclusion, when translating universal humor, Yu strived to restore the content and form of the source text as much as possible, achieving a balance between contextual effect and cognitive effort for target readers, which is the key to achieving the optimal relevance.

3.3 Cultural Humor

Cultural humor is the humor which requires culture-related knowledge to understand and appreciate. This drama presents

a lot of humor whose appreciation depends on background knowledge and awareness of how it has been used to achieve the humorous effect. To translate cultural humor is a difficult task. The difficulties lie in that it requires not only bilingual skills, but also bicultural knowledge of a translator. As most of the Chinese audience are not so familiar with the western culture, the distance between the source language and the target language makes translation rather a tough thing. It is the result of the use of cultural-specific terms that are humorous to the source text audience. In drama, popular people's names or classic books are often mentioned to achieve humorous effect, but for the target audience, due to the difference in their cognitive environment, the semantic translation will definitely fail the humorous intention. Therefore, the translator should take into consideration the cognitive environment of the target audience and enable target readers lacking the cultural context of the source language to strive for a humorous cognitive effect through reasonable processing.

Example 6 :

ST : Algernon: (The sound of an electric bell is heard). Ah! That must be Aunt Augusta. Only relatives, or creditors, ever ring in that Wagnerian manner.

TT : 亚吉能：啊！这一定是欧姨妈。只有亲戚或者债主上门，才会把电铃摁得这么惊天动地。

Wagner is a German composer and opera master, "especially known for his verve". The European audience's understanding of "ring the electric bell with Wagner's style" is roughly equivalent to the Chinese readers' idea of "a ring gate like '李逵' ('Li Kui')". If these two cultural images are exchanged, it will certainly cause difficulties in understanding. Therefore, Yu uses plain language to directly replace this allusion with the word "earth-shaking". Although the cultural image of the original work has been lost, the target language readers can easily understand the cultural imagery of their own country and achieve the best

connection without having to make particularly great cognitive efforts. If the literal translation method is adopted, annotations need to be added. However, this cannot be achieved in theatrical performances. Therefore, for theatrical translation, Yu 's translation, on the premise of emphasizing the performability of the drama, conveys the source language humor as much as possible.

Example 7 :

ST : Lady Bracknell: I do not approve of mercenary marriages. When I married Lord Bracknell, I had no fortune of any kind.

TT : 巴夫人：我本人不赞成唯利是图的婚姻。当初我嫁给巴老爷，自己一文不名——不过我是个例外，女人很少例外的！

The cultural background of the source text is that during the Victorian Era, the upper class enhanced their social position through marriage, but had to pretend not to be profit-driven to maintain dignity. Therefore, the contradiction between Lady Bracknell's words and deeds can be understood, and her hypocritical image has been depicted in the minds of readers. Here, Yu intensifies Lady Bracknell's hypocrisy and arrogance, enabling readers to focus more on the “例外” (“Li Wai”, which means an exception), spend less cognitive effort to understand the context, and identify "contradiction between words and deeds" without having to understand the cultural background of the source text, thus conveying the humorous effect and achieving the optimal relevance.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, when dealing with the translation of the three types of humor, Yu Guangzhong is well-acquainted with the cognitive environment of Chinese readers, such as language habits, cultural background, and humor triggers, successfully conveys the humors of the author, while also taking into account the performability of the drama. The choose of all translation strategies is based on

one criterion: whether the optimal humorous context effect can be achieved through reasonable efforts in the cognitive environment of the target readers.

In the translation of verbal humors such as puns in names, creative domestication has eliminated comprehension barriers. For universal humors, the effect can be faithfully reproduced through choosing corresponding structures and words. For culture humors, the effect is achieved by seeking expressions with equivalent humorous effects in the target language. Moreover, on the premise of faithfully conveying the core information, reinforcing expressions that conform to the habits of the target language are added to make the humorous effect more distinct and easier to perceive.

Relevance Theory emphasizes the translator's subjectivity, and Yu Guangzhong's translations are excellent examples of its positive application. With his solid bilingual foundation, cultural literacy and literary sensitivity, Yu makes precise judgments the source language's intent, the cognitive environment of the target language readers and the path to achieve the optimal relevance. His translation of humor successfully put into practice the core proposition of the Relevance Theory: translation is a communicative behavior that pursues the optimal relevance. Through ingenious strategies, he enabled Chinese readers to understand with minimal cognitive efforts while appreciating the essence of Wilde's humor with maximum contextual effects, perfectly building a bridge for cross-cultural humorous communication.

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