

Translation Methods about Taboo Words in Red Sorghum from Translator's Subjectivity

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Abstract –The existence of taboo words is a special linguistic phenomenon in Chinese, which is derived from ancient language taboos. Using taboo words when necessary can show the charm of language. Taboo words are words that use taboo techniques. It is difficult to understand completely. In Chinese literary works, taboo words have been used frequently. Translating taboo words into target language is undoubtedly a test for translator's ability. It's not easy to make the target readers understand and retain the charm of the original text. Any inappropriate handling of the taboo words in the translation process will lead to misunderstanding of the target language readers easily. When translating the Red Sorghum, translator Howard Goldblatt based on the translator's subjectivity and his understanding of the two countries' culture. He used literal translation, free translation, transliteration, omitted translation and other translation methods to properly interpret some taboos words in the original text, which not only helps the translation to retain its meaning, but also greatly increases the range and acceptability of the translation version.

Keywords Taboo Words; Translator's Subjectivity; The English Version of Red Sorghum; Translation Methods

INTRODUCTION

Mo Yan, who won the Nobel prize in literature in 2012 by combining folk tales, history and contemporary society through magic realism, is the first Chinese prize winner. In 1987, Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum* won the fourth national novella award. The movie *Red Sorghum* adapted from the novel and won the Golden Bear award of the thirty-eighth Berlin Film Festival. In 1993, Howard Goldblatt, a famous American translator and sinologist, took "Let Chinese literature put on the color of contemporary British and American Literature" as the translation principle. He translated *Red Sorghum* into English, which was published in Europe and America, aroused a warm response and was selected as "the best novel in the world in 1993" by World Literature Today. *Red Sorghum* is a literary work tinged with Chinese characteristics. Howard Goldblatt's translation has been recognized by the world. Before that, the scholars mainly focused on the study of the English version of the Red Sorghum, which mainly focus on the creative treason, interpretative translation and the translation of dialect and slang. For example, Lin Wenyun's *Translation Practice of Howard Goldblatt from the Perspective of Creative Treason*[1], published in 2019, makes a bilingual parallel comparison between the

target language and the source language to observe the translator's creative treason; Zhang Shengxiang and Zhang Hanxu's *Exploration of the Translator's Discourse Construction Strategy in the English Version of Red Sorghum*[2], published in 2019, carries out the translator's construction strategy. This paper puts forward that the translation process is a process of the translator's speech construction; Zhang Xiaoni's *Analysis of the Translation Methods of the Common Sayings in the English Translation of the Novel Red Sorghum*[3], published in 2017, analyzes the translation methods of the common sayings; Yang Lan's *Research on the English Translation of the Howard Goldblatt Frog English Translation*[4], published in 2019, discusses the role of translation norms in the translation process. Although scholars have different research directions, all of them have mentioned the translator and the category of translator's subjectivity. Based on the translator's subjectivity, this paper will analyze the translation methods of taboo words in the text, to improve our comprehension about translation.

1 TRANSLATOR'S SUBJECTIVITY

1.1 The Definition of Translator's Subjectivity

The essence of the subject lies in its dynamic, passive and egoistic features, all of which constitute the

translator's subjectivity, or we can call it the subjective initiative. The translator is one of the important subjects of translation activities (some scholars believe that the subject of translation includes the reader, the original text, the translator, etc., which has not been accurately concluded yet)[5]. The importance of the translator in translation activities is obvious. In the process of translation, the appreciation, understanding and absorption of the original text by the translator directly affect the final translation. At the same time, the translator is also an important participant in the construction of national culture. He regards himself as medium of two languages and two cultures to communicate[6]. A real translator should not only master the target language and the source language, but also master the cultures of the two countries. According to scholars Cha Jianming and Tian Yu, "translator's subjectivity refers to the translator's subjective initiative in the whole process of translation in order to achieve the purpose of translation on the premise of respecting the target of translation. The translator has the status of subject, the characteristics of passivity and autonomy."(Cha Jianming, 2003) That is to say, in the process of translation, the translator should mobilize his own emotions, aesthetics and so on to make the "blank points" in his works concrete.

1.2 The Role of Translator's Subjectivity

Until the end of the 70s, with the "cultural turn" of translation studies carried out by foreign scholar Susan Bassnett, the subject of translation has been covered in the multicultural system for a long time and the cultural status of the translator has been marginalized. Venuti's "the translator's invisibility" critically examines the translation activities from the 17th century to the present. Theo Hermans's operation theory and Lefevere's rewriting theory have greatly improved the translator's position. When the translator changes from subordinate position to dominant position, people begin to pay more attention to the study of translator's subjectivity, and gradually go deeper. Before the cultural turn, the translator is limited to the original text and becomes the slave of the original text. The translation must obey the original text. After the cultural turn, scholars put forward that the translation should "betray" the original text and the translator should become the creator. The translation theories put forward by Lu Xun, Fu Lei and Lin Shu all emphasize the irreplaceable role of translators in translation activities. Yang Wuneng, the first theorist who explicitly put forward the subjectivity of translation, pointed out that the translator has the subjectivity, and

the translator is the core of the creative process and information transmission.

1.3 The Characteristics of Translator's Subjectivity

Li Deshun said that the first prerequisite for the implementation of subjectivity is to respect the laws of translation, and then to play its subjective initiative, which constitutes the basic characteristics of subjectivity, so as to highlight the translator's cultural awareness and character, as well as aesthetic creativity (Li Deshun, 1987). Just as a thousand readers have a thousand Hamlets, each translator creates a unique translation. Moreover, the translator's subjective initiative is limited by many other factors, such as humanities, geography, history and so on. Everyone laughs that "The translator is a dancer in chains". The translator can't rewrite the original text at will. If the translator changes the meaning of the original text completely, it will lose the meaning of translation. Translation has become a creative activity. On the premise of respecting the original text, the translator should show relative subjective initiative in order to achieve specific purposes[7].

2 TABOO AND TABOO WORDS IN RED SORGHUM

2.1 The Origin of Taboo Words

Taboo word originated from Xia and Shang Dynasties, which was used to maintain the feudal rule, generally linked with the system[8]. According to Chinese Dictionary, taboo words generally include two aspects: to avoid speak something directly or show respect to the honorable man. [9]On one hand, it is related to reproduction and excretion; on the other hand, it is related to aging, disease and death. Therefore, our ancestors often need to use taboos. They summed up several kinds of taboo methods carefully. There are three main methods, namely, the method of changing words, the method of missing strokes and the method of empty words. There are mainly two kinds of taboo methods include of avoiding words and changing address. Today, taboo has become a way of euphemism. According to this concept, some of our common sayings, such as allegorical sayings and euphemisms, can be classified as taboos. Previous studies on taboo mainly focused on: the history of taboo, the function of taboo, the use of taboo in specific chapters, the impact of taboo on the system. Few people discuss the translation skills of taboo.

2.2 The Classification of Taboo Words

Generally speaking, taboos can be divided into three categories. One is used to avoid evil. It is human instinct to seek auspicious aspects and avoid ominous ones. People will choose to avoid evil when they encounter things that can bring disaster to themselves. The most obvious is the word "death". From ancient

times to the present, people are afraid of death, so whenever they encounter the word “death”, people will use taboos, such as “he has gone” and “he has left”, which are derived from people’s thoughts of avoiding death. Secondly, to show respect for seniors, that is to say, to avoid the name of the noble person. The most typical is avoiding the emperor’s name. In ancient times, the emperor was the supreme ruler, and ordinary people could not have similar name with him. To this day, many families still maintain the custom that the younger generation cannot have the same or similar name as the elder generation. Thirdly, words used to avoid vulgarity. people often say vulgar words, which are difficult to be elegant. In order to pursue language elegance, people often avoid vulgar words, which are mainly related to reproductive organs and physiological phenomena, such as “pee” is said to be “defecation”. In addition, some indecent words in life should also be avoided. a smart little pole-shinnying monkey.

2.3 TABOO WORDS IN *RED SORGHUM*

There are a lot of common sayings, proverbs and local dialects in the *Red Sorghum*. Mo Yan once said, “Proverbs, allegorical sayings are the most familiar language he heard in his childhood, the spiritual atmosphere with which he grew up, and the first key to open his perception of the world.” The skillful use of these languages makes him more adept at using taboos, which cannot be fully understood by Chinese native readers, and of course it is more difficult to translate them into English. Facing the *Red Sorghum*, a book full of Chinese local culture, Howard Goldblatt dealt with the taboo words differently according to his own understanding and the receptive ability of foreign readers, which made the *Red Sorghum* sell well overseas. Mo Yan once said at the meeting held by the Chinese Embassy in Sweden, “Translation is very important. I can’t get the Nobel prize without the creative work of translators from all countries.” It means that Mo Yan fully recognizes the importance of translation and affirms that translators should give full play to their subjectivity.

3 The Embodiment of Howard Goldblatt’s Subjectivity in the *Red Sorghum*

3.1 Howard Goldblatt and *Red Sorghum*

In the process of translation, the translators’ choice of text and translation strategy is the embodiment of the translators’ subjective initiative. The translator’s subjective initiative will inevitably be

influenced by the times and psychology. Different translators will translate different works. Howard Goldblatt is known as “the chief translator of Chinese literature in the west”. He is the literary translator who translates the most Chinese novels in the West. First of all, in terms of text selection, Howard Goldblatt, out of his preference for Chinese literary novels, translated works are basically novels, especially the majority of Mo Yan’s works. Howard Goldblatt began to cooperate with Mo Yan since 1988. After his matched with the *Red Sorghum*, he translated Mo Yan’s works for many times, such as the *Wine Country*, *Big Breast and Wide Hips*, *The Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, etc., what built a bridge for Mo Yan to win the Nobel Prize in literature. Howard Goldblatt was surprised when he first read the *Red Sorghum*, and determined to translate the book into English as Mo Yan’s first work to meet foreign readers. Only out of own interests, and in their areas of expertise, can translators show their greatest enthusiasm and show their subjective initiative as much as possible. Secondly, Howard Goldblatt’s translation strategy is also unique. Howard Goldblatt once said, “The author writes for the Chinese, and I translate for the foreigners. Translation is a process of rewriting.” This point of view also fully reflects Howard Goldblatt’s regard himself as the main body in the translation activities, so as to output Chinese novels and rewrite the original text to a certain extent. As for the fixed translation methods, he said, “I am different from many translators. I always rely on inspiration. The more I think about those theories, the more uncertain and flustered I am about the specific problems. I almost read a sentence, figure out what is the meaning of a paragraph, and then turn it directly, and finally look it back. If it’s too far-fetched, it needs to be corrected. If it’s too rigid, I will revise it a little.” That is to say, in the process of translation, Howard Goldblatt thinks that feeling comfortable is the most important, and he won’t stick to the tactics, which fully highlights the subjective initiative of Howard Goldblatt in the process of translation. However, through the study of the translation of the *Red Sorghum*, I think that Howard Goldblatt pursues literal translation as much as possible and presents the original text in front of the target readers at the greatest extent. In addition, Howard Goldblatt affirms Yan Fu’s maxim of “faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance”, and strictly selects the appropriate translation method according to these three words. In translation activities, we should translate the original text while being readers and translators.

3.2 Translation Methods in *Red Sorghum*

In the *Red Sorghum*, there are a lot of taboos, including the taboo of sexy words, the taboo relating to death words, the taboo that shows family and country's feud, and the taboo against bloody scenes. First of all, the most common way to deal with it is literal translation and free translation. Zhang Peiji, the great master of literary translation, said in the early 1980s that the so-called literal translation is to keep the content of the original text and the form of the original text in the translation when the language conditions of the translation permit, especially to keep the metaphor, image, national and local color of the original text. (Zhang Peiji, 1980) Every national language has its own vocabulary, syntactic structure and expression methods. When there is a contradiction between the ideological content of the original text and the expression form of the translation, free translation should be used. Free translation requires that the target text can express the content of the original text correctly, but it can not stick to the form of the original text.

3.2.1 Literal Translation

(7) 从此爷爷奶奶鸳鸯凤凰，相亲相爱。 [10]143

From that day on, Granddad and Grandma share their love like mandarin ducks or Chinese phoenix. [11]156

"Mandarin duck" is a kind of anatidae animal, which is famous for the good relationship between male and female partners. Mandarin duck is often used to describe the good relationship between husband and wife in Chinese. "Phoenix" is the king of birds in ancient Chinese legends, a symbol of auspiciousness and harmony, and a kind of spirit representing happiness. The author here uses "Mandarin duck" and "Phoenix" to describe the love of grandparents, and to show their happy life, which is actually a kind of taboo and is used to avoid vulgarity. Howard Goldblatt's literal translation here introduces concepts that are not available in English, so that Chinese culture can get the opportunity to accepted by foreigners.

(2) 爷爷说：“打开天窗说亮话，要我干什么？” [10]184

"let's open the skylight and let the sunshine in." Granddad said, "Just what you have in mind. [11]208

"Open the skylight and let the sunshine in" is a Chinese saying, which means to say it directly without concealing it. According to the definition of taboo, the proverb which is not directly explained but replaced by other words, can be regarded as taboo. In view of this saying, the translator here chooses to use literal translation to translate directly according to the literal

meaning. It is not easy for the readers to know its meaning in the first reading, associating this scene in his mind after reading this proverb is not difficult. Then, through the supplement of the next paragraph, the target language reader can not only understand the connotation and meaning, but also understand the Chinese saying, which can be said to achieve two things with one stone (3) 他知道我奶奶虽然年纪虽小，但是肚里长牙，工于心计，绝不是一盏省油的灯。今天这样对待自己，也许正是为了掩人耳目。 [10]132

She might be young, but she has teeth in her belly and could scheme with the best of us, no economy lantern. Maybe she was treating him like this today just in case there were prying eyes and ears. [11]146

"she has teeth in her belly" is an allegory, which is often used to describe people's ruthlessness and cruelty; "工于心计" is an idiom, which means good at planning with heart; "no economy lantern" is also a word with Chinese characteristics, which is often used to refer to people who are elusive and cannot be controlled. With the challenge of a whole sentence with Chinese characteristics, based on the translator's subjectivity, Howard Goldblatt chooses literal translation as his translation strategy, rather than expressing the author's original intention directly, showing the blank points in the target language readers. When I first read this translation, I thought that Howard Goldblatt didn't know much about the inner meaning of these words, leading to that he chose literal translation. After understanding Howard Goldblatt's translation views, I have some new ideas about this translation version. Howard Goldblatt has studied Chinese for several decades, of course, he understood its meaning, but if he use free translation, then Mo Yan's wonderful writing here will be abandoned. Although the target language readers are somewhat obscure, they retain the charm of Chinese, so that they have a better understanding of Chinese slang and taboo. In a word, the advantages of literal translation are greater than the disadvantages.

(4) “豆官，我想你娘。”

“豆官，我想吃你娘那两个插枣饽饽。” [10]28

“Douguan, I miss your mom.”

“I feel like nibbling those date-topped buns of Hers.” [11]31

"date-topped buns" here is Mo Yan's metaphor for women's breasts. It vividly describes women's breasts and avoids using explicit language. As mentioned

earlier, this kind of words are used to avoid vulgarity. Howard Goldblatt translated directly according to the original text. Some translators can translate it directly as “breast”, but Howard Goldblatt has been learning Chinese in China for many years, and he has also infected some oriental characters. He tends to express implicitly, so he doesn't choose direct and explicit words. Although foreign readers don't know what they mean at first sight, according to the context and the description of the author's image, they will soon understand the real meaning of the original text. At the same time, they will feel the originality of the author and the charm of Chinese. If “我想你娘” in the previous sentence can be translated into “I want to sleep with your mom” by free translation, it is more beneficial for the reader to understand the following translation, and it can also correspond to “he wants to sleep with my mom” in the following. Or after the translation of “date topped buns”, it is added that this generation refers to “breast” to help readers understand it quickly.

(5) 我奶奶是否爱过他，他是否上过我奶奶的炕，都与伦理无关。[10]12

Whether my grandma ever loved him or whether he ever lay down beside her on the kang has nothing to do with morality. [11]15

“上奶奶的炕” mentioned here is not simply climbing on the Kang, but refers to the unclear relationship between men and women, which is also a kind of taboo. Howard Goldblatt points out the inner meaning and replaces it with whether he sleeps beside his grandmother. It's still a bit obscure, but it's clearer than the original text and highlights its meaning. Kang is a direct transliteration, because there is no Kang in foreign countries, and there is no similar one, so free translation cannot be carried out. Howard Goldblatt once again concretized the blank point of Kang and transliterated it directly. Just like the word “tofu”, because there is no such food as tofu in foreign countries, the translation is directly translated into tofu. With the cultural exchanges, the concept of tofu has been in the minds of foreigners. The direct transliteration of “Kang” to foreign readers can also increase foreign readers' understanding of Chinese tradition.

3.2.2 Free Translation

(6) 罗汉，你家那个老长工他…和你的奶奶不太清白。[10]11

Arhat, your family's foreman...something fishy between him and your grandma.[11]14

“不太清白” originally refers to improper conduct and blemish. Later, it was extended to describe the ambiguous relationship between men and women. This is what the old lady said to me, implying the relationship between Liu Luohan and my grandma. In fact, the old lady thinks that Liu Luohan's relationship with my grandma is not proper, but I'm still young. What she said in front of me is more obscure, which is also a reflection of taboo. According to his own aesthetics, Howard Goldblatt gives full play to his subjective initiative, chooses free translation method, and directly points out that the original “is not clear” as “fishy” (suspicious). This word is similar to the meaning of suspicious, but more used in informal occasions, which is consistent with the original situation—the old lady and “I” are gossiping. Howard Goldblatt's translation of this part is very accurate, not only considering the acceptability of the target language readers, but also restoring the verve of the original.3.5 Translation of Linguistic Culture-loaded Words in *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*

(7) 我爷爷说：“老爹，你这是在给我吃宽气顺心丸。” [10]127

“Old uncle, you're just saying that to make me feel good.” [11]140

Mo Yan used the phrase “宽气顺心丸” here, which is a common saying in Chinese, and it means to make people feel relieved. Chinese always use vivid words, which is both funny and humorous, as if a real picture unfolded before readers. Comparatively speaking, English words have less room for readers to conceive association. Considering the cultural differences between the two sides, he chose free translation, which is simpler, clearer and more acceptable. Although he lost the Chinese charm, the free translation here is the best way for the target readers.

(8) 杀了和尚，他逃离山庄，三教九流都沾过边，后来迷上了赌钱，赌技日新月异，精益求精，铜板上的锈迹把双手都染绿了。[10]110

Granddad fled the village after the incident, taking odd jobs and finally getting hooked on gambling. Over time his skills improved, until the copper coins that passed through his hands strained his green finger.[11]125

“三教九流” used to refer to various religious or academic schools. It also refers to people who engage all kinds of jobs in society. He killed people and set fire in zhan' ao. Yu Zhanao did everything he could to earn money. So the author used “三教九流” here to

describe that Yu Zhanao did many miscellaneous things. There are no three religions and nine schools in the culture of the target language readers. So this kind of words with both cultural characteristics and historical and cultural characteristics, literal translation will only backfire and increase the difficulty of the target language readers. Howard Goldblatt himself is an American, familiar with American culture and readers' acceptance level, so he chose the word "odd jobs" that readers are familiar with. This phrase is translated into scattered work, chores, similar to "三教九流" and is a common word used by Westerners. However, something missing is that the word "三教九流" has a derogatory meaning, while "odd jobs" has no emotional color, which does not include crimes or other immoral behaviors. For example, if Howard Goldblatt changed "taking odd jobs" to "involving various jobs even crimes", it might be better.

3.2.3 Ellipsis

In addition to the common literal translation and free translation, Howard Goldblatt also omitted some words and sentences according to the specific situation. In other words, the original text does not use taboo, but the translator uses taboo. Because the original text has an obvious attitude of family feud, or some jargon, dialect, the translator is concerned about the preferences of the target language readers, omitting some offensive words and sentences, and using the method of missing words in taboo, which is to take the overall situation into consideration and take measures according to local conditions.

(9) 东洋鬼子魂儿散, 纷纷落在地平川。 [10]156
Jap souls scattered across the plain, ne'er to rise again. [11]170

Through the narration of "I", the Red Sorghum family describes the heroic and tragic life story of "my" ancestors in Gaomi northeast during the Anti-Japanese war. Under the background of the Anti-Japanese War, the relationship between China and Japan is terrible. The appellation of Japanese in the article also fully shows this kind of antipathy, such as "鬼子" and "狗娘养的". But translators and target language readers, such as Westerners, have no such feelings towards the Japanese, especially if they want the book to go out of the world, they can't bring obvious feelings of Japanese hatred. Although the author does not want to use taboo, the translator does according to the actual situation. "鬼子" is replaced by the "Japanese", sounds more objective.

(10) "朋友——请不要误会——我们是八路军胶高大队——是抗日的队伍——"高粱地里那个人又在喊, "请回话,你们是哪个部分!"

爷爷说: "土八路, 就会这一套。" [10]190

"Comrades-we're the Jiao-Gao regiment-anti-japanese troops!" the man in the sorghum field yelled.

"tell me, whose troops are you." "Damn them!" Granddad cursed. "all they know how to do is shout." [11]198

The speaker Yu Zhanao has dual identities. He is not only a bandit who kills people and sets fire, but also a hero who resists Japan and saves the country. Yu Zhanao has killed both Japanese and Chinese compatriots, but in terms of the situation at that time, Yu Zhanao was a hero, who cannot be neglected. So Yu Zhanao's attitude towards the Eighth Route Army is complicated. There are both hero's sympathy and sneer's hatred. So Mo yan use the word "土八路", which is slightly derogatory. Howard Goldblatt did not want to destroy the image of Yu Zhanao, nor to discredit the Eighth Route Army, so he once again based on the translator's subjectivity, according to his own judgment, did not use the derogatory "土八路" or use other words instead. He choose to directly omit here and avoid talking about it.

(11) "县长说抽大烟拔豆芽, 一码归一码。"

(省略未译) [10]146

This is an allegorical saying. In the past, smoking cigarettes and pulling bean sprouts would pile up one yard at a time. Later, it led to the allegorical saying of returning one yard at a time. Allegorical saying is a special phenomenon in Chinese. Although Howard Goldblatt has been learning Chinese in Taiwan for a long time, it is really difficult to translate the complex allegorical saying. Even if it is translated reluctantly, it will only make the target language readers confused and interfere with the context understanding. Therefore, the translator, Howard Goldblatt, chooses to omit this sentence directly, which is also a method to avoid it. Here I think free translation is also feasible, for example, "The country chief has said that there are differences between these two things."

CONCLUSION

As a special language phenomenon, taboo has become an indispensable part of daily life. We may use taboos out of politeness, elegance or even a sense of humor. Compared with the Chinese, Westerners speak more directly, rarely in a roundabout way, and naturally

do not understand the use of taboos. When translating, translators should not only consider how to translate a word in a sentence, but also give full play to the translator's subjectivity, considering the acceptability of the target language readers and the cultural background of the two countries, and then choosing appropriate translation methods. The use of taboo can clearly see the differences between Chinese and foreign cultures. Therefore, the research on the translation of taboo is of great help to the improvement of translation skills and the quality of translators. The Red Sorghum family is not only a representative work of Mo Yan, but also a milestone of Chinese native literature. There are many excellent works in Chinese literary, but few can go abroad, which shows that translators have a long way to go. Howard Goldblatt has made great contributions to Mo Yan's winning the Nobel Prize for literature. His treatment of various jargon, dialects, euphemisms and allegorical sayings in Mo Yan's works is worthy of our reference. Although there are some shortcomings in some aspects, we can make full use of strengths and avoid weaknesses. An analysis of Howard Goldblatt's translation method can improve our understanding of translation.

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