Reinterpretation of Narratological Duration Within the Framework of Translation Studies

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Abstract

During the recent years when cross-disciplinary probe prevails, more and more scholars have produced works combining narratology and translation studies. The majority of them are with regard to the discussion of a particular fiction translation in the perspective of its narrative story and discourse. Nevertheless, few have probed into the narrative duration, a sub-category of narrative time at the discourse level of narratology, and translation. This essay is an attempt in this direction with supporting examples from the fiction translation by Zhou Shoujuan, a translator of the Late Qing Dynasty and Early Republic in China.

Key words: Narratology; Narrative duration; Fiction translation; Discourse; Narrative time

INTRODUCTION

Fictional narrative study is believed to refer traditionally to the story and the storytelling, namely, the discourse. The essential distinction is between the "story" as the basic sequence of events that can be abstracted from any narrative telling and the "discourse" as the presentation and reception of these events in linguistic form (Teresa Bridgeman, see Herman, 2007, p.53). The attempted interpretation in the essay of narrative duration falls under the category of discourse and it is a subcategory of narrative time.

Bal (1997, p.208) defined time in narratology as follows: "Events have been defined as processes. A process is a change, a development, and presupposes a succession in time or a chronology. The events themselves happen during a certain period of time and they occur in a certain order". In accordance with such a definition, time is further divided into three types: order, duration and frequency. Among them, duration is an essential component of narrative time and it is a method for measuring the time span of an event by textual quantification.

1. FEASIBILITY IN COMPARING DURATION IN SL AND TL

It is a tricky business trying to measure the duration of an event by written text because there seems to be no way of estimating, let alone of making precise calculations. Genette (1980, p.86) also recalled what difficulties the very idea of "time and the narrative" runs up against in written literature. These difficulties are strongly associated with duration. Narrative duration of a story falls into two types: firstly, the duration of a text is often reflected by clear time indicators: three days, four years, yesterday, two days ago or since… Sometimes they are rather vaguely given and readers have to put all the details of the story together to figure out the time frame. With the help of such time indicators, readers can approximately understand or at least make a guess of how long the story lasts. Secondly, narrative duration of a story can be interpreted as the textual length of an event. The division of this type is hard to apply to the study of fiction creation since it is difficult to compare the textual length of an event with what vaguely exists in the author's mind and mentality cannot normally be interpreted through mathematical expressions.

Although it is difficult to measure individual cases, it is always feasible to compare the sizes or the lengths of different accounts of events. It is especially so with translation studies with different linguistic presentations of the same event. That makes the essay possible to compare the length of the original and the translation.

2. REINTERPRETATION OF FOUR COMPONENTS OF DURATION WHTHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF TRNASLATION STUDIES

Hard as it is to compare story duration and discourse duration, according to Genette (1980, pp.95-112), the duration element is divided into 4 types: summary, pause, ellipsis and scene, based on the relationship of the difference between the story time and the textual length. They can be imported to the field of translation studies to refer to a relationship between the textual length in the original and the textual length in the translation. It is a relationship of comparison which needs to be explained in the following.

2.1 Summary

Summary in the narrative sense refers to the account of events in short without details about actions or speech compared with the length of time that these events actually take. In translation studies, comparing the textual duration of events in the original with that in the translated copy, it is transformed into a translation strategy and reconciles with the translation strategy of condensation, both involving translating the meaning carried by big passages or sentences into a condensed linguistic form of a few words or sentences. The result is a much shorter length, as in one of the examples in "*The Mysterious Bride*" regarding the quarrel between Allan and his friend M'Murdie:

> They drank deep, bantered, reasoned, got angry, reasoned themselves calm again, and still all would not do. The laird was conscious that he had seen the beautiful apparition, and moreover, that she was the very maiden, or the resemblance of her, who, in the irrevocable decrees of Providence, was destined to be his. It was in vain that M'Murdie reasoned of impressions on the imagination, and…
>
> The Laird admitted the singularity of this incident, but not that it was one in point; for the one, he said, was imaginary, and the other real; and that no conclusions could convince him in opposition to the authority of his own senses. (Hogg, 1860, p.341)

The details of actions and speech were nowhere to be found in the translation, which merely summarized the particulars of their argument in the original as shown in the following:

> …….一面讲着那美人儿，一个说没有，一个坚说有，说得都面红耳赤，力竭声嘶，摩拳擦掌的几乎要用武起来. (Zhou, 1987, p.16)

Attention should be given to the fact that not only the meaning was summarized, but also the form. The seemingly redundant words of similar meaning and the repetition of the description of action in the original would not have seemed unnecessary. On the contrary, the summary of Allan's dialogue given in the translation left out the incoherent speaking style and chaotic use of conjunctions of the original text, which served to show how heated the debate was and how confused a state of mind Allan was in. The conceptual meaning of the words alone would not have been as effective. It had to work side by side with the linguistic forms to present vividly a dramatic view of argument. The rests were left to the imagination of readers based on the clues already given by the content and form of the description.

However, the translation had completely wiped out such linguistic incoherence, leaving an aesthetic gap unfulfilled. The part that was condensed, it was noted, was very often the one subsidiary to the main stream of the plot. The summary did not accelerate the development of the story but rather produced different feelings in the mind of the reader, who would likely be unable to follow the inclusion of such chaotic speech at the seemingly sensible conclusion of the argument scene.

2.2 Pause

Pause in the narrative sense refers to a suspension of story development. In its place is an extended description of background information or the environment. Some of these descriptions are irrelevant to the development of the story, like the passage to introduce the grand view of the castle and its surroundings in "The Tapestried Chamber", an ultimately unnecessary touch with respect to the plot. Such pauses can, however, prove important to an outstanding piece of storytelling. Readers will not consider them redundant, but rather appreciate their presence.

In the fiction translation of Zhou Shoujuan in the late Qing Dynasty and Early Republic, pauses often resulted from a conscious act on the part of translators. They thought direct explanation of the moral lessons of the story was necessary to guide the reader's thinking. It was deemed worthwhile and necessary to stop the storytelling and insert moral lectures based on their own opinions, regardless of the effect of such a move to the development of the story. This more or less reflected the translators' distrust of the reading ability of the ordinary people of the time.

Other translations that employed pauses in the linguistic form of the development of the story can be found in "*Dennis Haggarty's Wife*" whose translator Zhou Shoujuan added in the beginning of several paragraphs "唉，看官们啊！" (Ah, readers!) (Zhou, 1987, pp.88-90), previously mentioned as an example of the skopos of fiction translation in that particular time. The addition was not the meaning of the story itself but rather to the

linguistic form to give it more of a Chinese flavor and thus make it more popular among readers of the time.

2.3 Ellipsis

Ellipsis in the narrative sense refers to reduce the details of actions and speech in the story duration as much as possible in the written linguistic form of presentation. It is a comparison of an event between the duration in real time in the story and its actual textual length in narration. When it is borrowed for use in translation studies, it refers to the translation act of eliminating details in the original that have been deemed redundant to the smooth flowing of the storyline without serious consideration of poetic loss in the case of such a translation. It happens to be coincident with one of the translation strategies, deletion.

In "The Mysterious Bride", Allan's friend M'Murdie thought that Allan was out of his mind, chasing after a girl that did not exist, and rode away, refusing to waste any more time on tracking down a shadow. Before he left, he said to Allan,

> It is quite common for men of your complexion to dream of beautiful maidens, with white frocks and green veils, bonnets, feathers, and slender waists… and you may worship it without any blame. Were her shoes black or green? – And her stockings, did you note them? They symmetry of the limbs, I am sure you did! (Hogg, 1860, p.339)

What the translator had missed here was not only the effect, but also the poetic features of the following three sentences of step-by-step mockery. From her shoes to her stockings and at last to her limbs, it revealed to us a process that when her shoes were taken off, her stockings would be seen and when her stockings were taken off, her limbs would be exposed. Allan's friend was ridiculing his behavior by asking him the questions in such an order that normal people would not even notice, and further amplified the ridiculous effect through the order that the three questions were asked. The first question involved more the color; the second one was a simple question; while the third one consisted of a noun phrase and an answer to it which were actually the answer to all three questions. The sequence of these questions went from honest curiosity to an absolute mockery. The conceptual meaning of words was not enough to convey the step-by-step development of mockery which was achieved by the linguistic form.

The translation failed to capture the poetics of language in the original, and was translated as: 只是我还要问你, 你所见的那个美人儿, 穿着什么小蛮靴, 黑色的呢, 青色的呢, 你可瞧见么 (Zhou, 1987, p.15)？We can sense that it still carried some humor, but far from the extent of the original. It only consisted of one question and the humorous effect was achieved not by the step-by-step revealing questions, but by the Chinese words, the arrangement of which could form a mocking question on their own. I think the decision to keep only one question

out of three was because according to traditional Chinese social values, there was no way that an unmarried woman would ever let anyone catch a glimpse of her limbs. Furthermore, the whole revenge story was meant to put the blame on Allan, thus, eliminating all the temptations initiated by Jane, the ghost. The employment of two different managing methods in Chinese and in English both conveyed the humor intended by the author and by the translator respectively.

Apart from eliminating words or expressions that made representations more acceptable to readers of the time, ellipsis also involved the omission of a minor plot element that might serve as a distraction to readers, with the ambiguous purpose of casting the major stream of the story in the foreground. Readers were left to their own imagination concerning the background because very little was said. There are many such examples.

On several occasions in the original version of "The Mysterious Bride" the nightmare Allan had been dreaming of and dreading was mentioned, but it was nowhere to be found in the translation. It was never very clear in either the English version or the translation like what the nightmare was, but the original narration mentioned a similar enchanting object haunting his slumbers and its connection with some painful circumstances in reality. The revelation of a dreadful dream would certainly have provoked readers to imagine the implications for them.

The omission in representation of an even more mysterious suspense—the nightmare—did not interfere with the smooth flow of the major stream of the story, but considering its narrative sense, such translation was greatly shortened in the representative size and confined the story to the major plot only. Such a nightmare, as a minor plot element, served as the blood and flesh to the main bone, adding mysterious juice to the otherwise rather dry structure. The translation without the description of the nightmare was deprived of the sense of mystery and the effects of karma about which many authors went out of their way to educate readers.

In the translated version of "*Dennis Haggarty's Wife*" and "The Apparition of Mrs. Veal", such deletion of minor plot elements could also be classified as manipulation by the translator. Just to serve as a reminder, deletion or omission of such kind in the fiction translation in the late Qing Dynasty and early Republic only interfered with the size of the narration and the blanks left by the deletion of minor plot elements did not confuse the readers, but it did deprive them of many of the flavors of stories.

2.4 Scene

Finally, scene in the narrative sense refers to the faithful portrayal of every detail of an event where the story time is almost as long or as short as the discourse time. In translation studies, the word scene is hereby borrowed to mean the faithful representation of the original text both in meaning and in linguistic forms in translation.

In order to achieve the effect of scene in translation studies, translators must have a good command of both languages and acute awareness of the narrative linguistic deviations in the original, since many linguistic forms are of an obscure nature. If translators want a faithful portrayal of the original, the translation method of foreignization comes in handy. Some linguistic forms are bound to undergo change in translation, as in the number of words used and the rhyming patterns in poetic form. Such distortions or linguistic deviations are necessary because they involve the transformation between two languages and they are applied regardless of how superiority of the translator and the degree of foreignization in a given translation.

All in all, achieving the effect of scene in translation can only be partially successful. Perfectionism can be advocated but is not very realistic in the literary circumstances of translation. Some translators of a certain time had purposefully overthrown this translation criterion, like the transformation of the language or the entire fiction where story is valued over discourse for greater acceptability in the eyes of readers. Some other mistranslations were attributed to the carelessness of translators who did not pay enough attention to the linguistic forms of the original to let it slip by. There are also some mistranslations of the linguistic forms in the original because the textual characteristics which lent additional value to the meaning of a word were so obscure and hidden that they escaped the translator's detection. All of the above factors contributed to the absence of scene translation, particularly of linguistic forms.

Achieving the scene in translation is a goal that can seemingly never be fully reached, both in past and contemporary translation practice. There are always deviations from the original in translated texts either in meanings or in representations of words that deter them from being the scene, faithfully mirroring the original in every aspect. However, it always gives translators a direction and the desire for improvement in translation practice.

CONCLUSION

The above discussion probes into the reinterpretation of the four narratological components of duration of narrative time under the framework of translation studies, endowing new meanings with them. Examples are added to further prove the feasibility of such understanding. In a time of cross-disciplinary inquiry, it is hoped that a discussion as this can be a good addition to the existing narratological inquires and translation studies.

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