

Exploration of Domestication and Foreignization in Cultural Translation

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Abstract: Translation is not only an interlingual communication but also a cross-cultural communicative act, closely intertwined with culture. Therefore, against the backdrop of cross-cultural communication, we cannot ignore the cultural phenomena and factors implicit in language; otherwise, communication cannot proceed smoothly. In translation, strategies such as “domestication” and “foreignization” are commonly employed to handle cultural elements. This paper attempts to explore the suitability of these methods and their respective advantages and disadvantages through extensive practical examples.

Keywords: Translation; Culture; Domestication; Foreignization; Advantages and Disadvantages.

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1. Introduction

The purpose and characteristic of translation lie in the exchange of ideas and cultures. Thus, translation is not merely interlingual communication but a cross-cultural practice that reconstructs source language symbols while facilitating a non-confrontational interplay between different cultures. In a broad sense, culture refers to all creations of humanity in social and historical practice; in a narrow sense, it specifically represents social ideologies, along with corresponding systems and organizational structures. As a historical phenomenon, each society has its own corresponding culture, encompassing ideologies, moral systems, social and political structures, as well as complexes of customs and behavioral norms. Culture is marked by distinct national characteristics, with significant differences arising from historical and geographical environments. These differences pose substantial obstacles and challenges to translation, making them a key issue that must be addressed in both theoretical and practical translation.

To ensure the smooth progress of cross-cultural communication and achieve its purpose, the relationship between language and culture must be properly handled. Language and culture are inseparable, interdependent, and mutually reinforcing. Daniel Shaw divides culture into surface structure and deep structure, as the cultural structure of meaning reflects the fundamental concerns and perceptions of a nation. The surface structure refers to visible behaviors and objects, while the deep structure denotes the meaning behind these surface forms. In the translation process, we must penetrate the surface structure of language to grasp its deep structure, i.e., the underlying cultural phenomena and essence.

2. The Emergence and Meanings of Domestication and Foreignization

In addressing cultural differences, the translation community is primarily divided into two camps: “domestication” and “foreignization”. The former advocates that translations should ultimately align with the source language, while the latter argues that translations should serve the target language or readers. Both theories have contributed to translations between different cultures to some extent.

As early as ancient Rome, Cicero, Horace, Jerome, and others proposed concepts of “word-for-word translation” and “sense-for-sense translation”, which gradually evolved into two major translation techniques: “literal translation” and “free translation”. “Domestication” and “foreignization” represent conceptual breakthroughs and

extensions of these techniques. While handling linguistic aspects, they expand the scope to include cultural, aesthetic, and other factors. These two translation concepts first appeared in *The Translator's Invisibility* by Lawrence Venuti, an American translation theorist. Venuti defines domestication as “bringing the author to the target language culture” and foreignization as “accepting the expressions of the source language text and enabling readers to embrace the cultural differences introduced by the source language” [1]. It is evident that although domestication and foreignization derive from literal and free translation, they encompass far broader dimensions, transcending the linguistic focus of the latter to encompass the broader context of two cultures and emphasizing differences in cultural expressions and customs.

Venuti argues that domestication should bring the source language as close as possible to the target language, minimizing strangeness while striving for cultural equivalence between the two languages. In contrast, foreignization aims to preserve the source language culture as much as possible, retaining linguistic and cultural differences, and even deviating from target language norms to enrich the target culture. In summary, domestication requires translators to center on readers and adopt their accustomed language patterns, while foreignization centers on the author and requires readers to adapt to the original language expressions.

3. Advantages and Disadvantages of Domestication and Foreignization

Generally, different translation methods are employed when translating source language culture into target language culture. “Domestication” and “foreignization” play distinct roles and yield different effects in cultural translation. Should translators translate literally to preserve the original flavor, allowing different ideas to collide and interpenetrate? Or should they replace images, sacrificing one party’s psychological habits to accommodate the other’s reception habits, thereby missing opportunities for cultural dialogue? Let us examine the translations of the following phrases:

(1) 势如破竹 (Shì rú pò zhú)

Translation 1: like splitting bamboo

Translation 2: with irresistible force

Translation 3: like a hot knife cutting through butter

In Translation 1, the translator adopts a “foreignization” approach, retaining the source language image, allowing target language readers to understand foreign cultures—a source of reader interest that facilitates their understanding of foreign cultures while enriching the target language’s vocabulary and expressions. Translation 2 uses a paraphrasing method, omitting the original image and only conveying its basic meaning. This enables readers to understand the meaning directly without association. However, such translation eliminates the original image, weakening the source text’s richness, suggestiveness, and aesthetic value—a significant loss for target language readers. Translation 3 employs “domestication”, replacing the Chinese image of “splitting bamboo” with the Western image of “a hot knife cutting through butter”. By substituting a source language image familiar to its readers with one familiar to target language readers, it enhances understanding, eliminates cultural barriers, avoids cultural conflicts, and achieves cultural exchange, thereby attaining so-called cultural equivalence. Nevertheless, a key task of translation is to introduce foreign cultures to the target language culture, enabling target readers to understand foreign cultures and meet their reading expectations—an objective that domestication cannot fulfill.

(2) 三个臭皮匠，胜过诸葛亮 (Sānge chòu píjiàng, shèngguò Zhūgě Liàng)

Translation 1: With their wits combined, three cobblers could surpass the mastermind, Zhuge Liang. (Zhuge Liang: a statesman and strategist in the Three Kingdoms period (220–265), who became a symbol of resourcefulness and wisdom in Chinese folklore)

Translation 2: Two heads are better than one.

Here, “Zhuge Liang” is a “culture-specific item”. Without proper handling, foreign readers would be confused. Translation 1 uses foreignization with literal translation plus annotations, effectively conveying source language cultural information and enabling target readers to learn about the source culture and history while reading, thus

achieving cultural exchange. However, the original artistic form is distorted in the translation, making it cumbersome and lengthy. Translation 2 employs domestication, replacing the phrase with a corresponding expression in the target culture, substituting unfamiliar and puzzling source language expressions with idiomatic target language ones. Its drawback is that it fails to achieve deep cross-cultural communication.

4. Strategic Use of Domestication and Foreignization in Cultural Translation

Given that “domestication”, “foreignization”, and paraphrasing each have their pros and cons, what method should translators adopt? This cannot be generalized; instead, translators should consider factors such as the author’s intent, text type, translation purpose, and reader requirements.

Let us analyze further examples:

(1) 谋事在人，成事在天 (Móushì zài rén, chéngshì zài tiān)

Translation 1: Man proposes, Heaven disposes.

Translation 2: Man proposes, God disposes.

These two translations are from different versions of *Dream of the Red Mansions*. Translation 1 is from Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang’s version, while Translation 2 is from Hawkes’ translation. The key difference lies in the translation of “天” (tiān, “Heaven”). In Chinese culture, influenced by Taoism and Buddhism, people believe in the “Way of Heaven”, where Heaven governs all natural phenomena, justifying the domestication of “天” as “Heaven”. In Western countries, however, Christianity prevails, where God created and dominates all things. Thus, Hawkes uses foreignization to translate “天” as “God”, easily accepted by Westerners. Which translation is more appropriate? From target readers’ feedback, Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang’s version is preferable. Hawkes’ translation distorts Chinese religious beliefs, transforming the original Buddhist undertones into Christian ones, leading target readers to misunderstand Christianity was practiced in feudal Chinese society. Only through Translation 1 can target readers appreciate the distinct religious beliefs of the source culture, understand it, and enhance cultural communication and mutual understanding.

Wilss argues that language has three major functions: expressive, informative, and vocative [2]. While cultural equivalence is important, preserving the cultural flavor of the source language is equally crucial, especially when translating authors with distinct personal styles. For example, Mao Zedong’s works contain numerous Chinese idioms, best translated using foreignization to retain their cultural essence:

(2) “又要马儿好，又要马儿不吃草” (Yòu yào mǎ’ér hǎo, yòu yào mǎ’ér bù chī cǎo)

Translation: Want the horse to run fast while not letting it graze.

(3) 到什么山，唱什么歌 (Dào shénme shān, chàng shénme gē)

Translation: Sing different songs at different mountains.

These translations accurately convey the source text’s meaning, reflect Mao Zedong’s stylistic features, and introduce Chinese culture. Although Example (3) could be translated as “When in Rome, do as the Romans do”, such domestication would erase the source culture’s flavor and the author’s style. Thus, for source texts rich in cultural connotations, foreignization should be prioritized to preserve cultural phenomena and convey cultural connotations, supplemented by annotations to aid reader understanding.

(4) 司马昭之心，路人皆知 (Sīmǎ Zhāo zhī xīn, lùrén jiē zhī)

When encountering such phrases, translators must consider strategies like domestication, foreignization, or paraphrasing, weighing their pros and cons based on text characteristics, target reader comprehension levels, and translation purposes. For instance, in a news report criticizing U.S. imperialist aggression— “The aggressive intentions of U.S. imperialism are like Sima Zhao’s heart, known to all passers-by”—which translation is optimal?

Translation 1: The Sima Zhao's trick is obvious to every man in the street. (Sima Zhao: a prime minister of Wei (220–265) who nursed a secret ambition to usurp the throne. The emperor once remarked: "Sima Zhao's intention is obvious to every man in the street")

Translation 2: The aggressive intentions of the American imperialists are none but an open secret.

Translation 3: The aggressive intentions of the American imperialists are as plain as the nose on one's face.

News reports prioritize information transmission, enabling readers to grasp key points quickly and easily, with cultural exchange as a secondary goal [3]. Thus, Translation 1 is inappropriate, as its foreignization creates comprehension barriers. Translation 2 uses paraphrasing to convey the source information concisely, fulfilling the news report's function of rapid and accurate information dissemination. Translation 3 employs domestication, easily understood by target readers, but its teasing tone may conflict with the article's style, requiring contextual alignment.

Another notable debate in translation concerns cultural differences in imagery, such as "east wind" and "west wind". Geographical disparities shape cultural perceptions: Chinese associate the east wind with spring, bringing vitality, while the west wind symbolizes winter, bringing desolation. In Britain, these associations are reversed. How should such cultural phenomena be handled?

(5) “碧云天，黄叶地，西风紧，寒雁南飞，晓来谁染霜林醉，尽是离人泪” (Bì yún tiān, huáng yè dì, xīfēng jīn, hán yàn nán fēi, xiǎo lái shuí rǎn shuāng lín zuì, jìn shì lí rén lèi)

Translation (by Shiyi Xiong): Clouds are grey in the sky while leaves are faded on the ground. The wild geese fly from the north to the south as the west wind is bitter. How are the white-frosted trees dyed as red as a wine-flushed face in the morning? It must be the tears of those who are about to depart.

Here, "west wind" is retained as "west wind". Some suggest changing it to "east wind" or adding annotations to align with the target readers' climatic experiences and psychological expectations. However, altering it to "east wind" would contradict Eastern climatic common sense and fail to convey the source text's information. While translators aim to accommodate target readers, their fundamental task is to reproduce the source text's style, making foreignization appropriate here without domestication [4]. Moreover, Western readers are not entirely ignorant of Eastern cultures; encountering conceptual conflicts encourages reflection, research, and ultimately understanding, facilitating cultural exchange.

5. Conclusion

Domestication and foreignization are not conflicting but complementary strategies. Translators should flexibly adopt or combine them after thoroughly analyzing the author's intent, translation purpose, cultural characteristics of the source language, and target reader traits, ensuring both preservation of the source language culture and adaptation to the target language culture [5]. With the rapid development of cross-cultural communication, accelerating cultural contact and collision, foreignization—emphasizing source language culture—has become increasingly prevalent. This trend has led to the full integration of some source language vocabulary or usages into the target language, to the extent that generations later, their origins are often forgotten. Examples include “武装到牙齿” (wǔzhuāng dào yá chǐ) and “armed to the teeth”, “一石二鸟” (yī shí èr niǎo) and “kill two birds with one stone”, “long time no see” and “好久不见” (hǎojiǔ bù jiàn), “Chin-Chin” and “请请” (qǐng qǐng), and “no go” and “不行” (bù xíng). Such translations enhance the target language's “exoticism”, enable target readers to understand foreign cultures, achieve cultural exchange, and enrich the target language's vocabulary, expressions, and syntactic structures [6].

Cultural differences are an indisputable fact that must be approached objectively. In translation, a cautious and sensitive attitude toward cultural differences, coupled with rational selection of translation strategies, ensures the smooth progress of cross-cultural communication.

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