A Comparative Study on the Translation of *Snowflakes* From the Perspective of the “Three Beauties Theory”

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Henry W. Longfellow, one of the most popular poets in the USA in the 19th century, wrote many poems in his life, such as *Voices of the Night*, *Poems on Slavery* and *Birds of Passages*, etc. *Snowflakes* is the poem which expresses the Longfellow’s melancholy and depression, as well as his deep mourning for his wife. From the perspective of Xu Yuanchong’s “Three Beauties Theory”, this paper analyzes the three translated versions of *Snowflakes* and discusses the embody and shortcomings of the “Three Beauties Theory” in the process of poetry translation.

*Keywords*: *Snowflakes*, Three Beauties Theory, three translated versions, comparative study

**Xu Yuanchong’s Theory of “Three Beauties Theory”**

Xu Yuanchong, a leading figure in the field of translation in mainland China, has refined the concept of the “Three Beauties Theory” in the translation of Chinese classical poetry, which exerts a great influence on the field of translation (Zhu & Zhang, 2020). The so-called “Three Beauties theory” refers to “beauty in sense”, “beauty in sound”, and “beauty in form” (Xu, 1987, pp. 70-77).

**Analysis of the Original *Snowflakes***

Henry W. Longfellow is an American poet and translator. This poem *Snowflakes* naturally expresses his melancholy and depression, as well as the deep mourning for his deceased wife (Yang, 2009). The original poem runs as follows:

Snowflakes
Out of the bosom of the Air,
Out of the cloud-folds of her garments shaken,
Over the woodlands brown and bare,
Over the harvest-fields forsaken,
Silent, and soft, and slow
Descends the snow.

Even as our cloudy fancies take
Suddenly shape in some divine expression,
Even as the troubled heart doth make
In the white countenance confession,
The troubled sky reveals
The grief it feels.

This is the poem of the air,
Slowly in silent syllables recorded;
This is the secret of despair,
Long in its cloudy bosom hoarded,
Now whispered and revealed
To wood and field.

The whole poem, short and exquisite, can be divided into three stanzas. The first stanza describes the falling of snowflakes, the second stanza describes the transition from snowflakes to the vast sky, and the third stanza expresses Longfellow’s sad feelings. From the whole poem, we can see that the embrace of the sky, the folds of clouds, the brown and bare forest, the lonely space of the field… all constitute a peaceful and quiet picture, with a trace of sadness.

The rhyme of this poem is very beautiful. “Out” appears in the first two sentences of the first stanza; “over” appears in the third and fourth of the first stanza; “even” appears in the first and third sentences of the second stanza; “the” appears in the fifth and sixth of the second stanza; “this” appears in the first and third sentences of the third stanza; especially, “silent, and soft, and slow”, “countenance confession”, and “Slowly in silent syllables”, which are apparently alliterations, are very beautiful. Therefore, we will see the beauty of repetition when we read this poem. By observing the whole poem, we can see that its rhyme format is “ababcc, ababcc, ababcc”, and the end of the first stanza is “air, shaken, bare, forsaken, slow and snow”, from which we can see that “air” and “bare” are /e/ rhymed, “shaken” and “forsaken” are /eiken/ rhymed, “slow” and “snow” are /ou/ rhymed. It can be seen that Longfellow has a knack for employing rhyme, which is harmonious and pleasant.

A Comparative Study on the Translated Versions of Snowflakes

There are many translated versions of Snowflakes on the internet. We select three of them and make a comparative analysis from the perspective of the “Three Beauties Theory”. The first is Mu Dan’s translated version, the second is Yang Deyu’s translated version, and the third is Wang Jinhua’s translated version, hereinafter referred to as Mu’s translated version (Mu Dan’s translation version), Yang’s translated version, and Wang’s translated version. Each translated version has its own advantages and disadvantages, which will be analyzed below.

The First Stanza

Mu’s translated version:
挣脱开大气的胸膛从它层叠的云裳里摇落在荒凉的、丰收后的田野上
在一片林莽、棕黄而赤裸静静的，柔软的雪花缓缓地朝地面落下。

Yang’s translated version:
从漠漠长空胸怀里逸出摆脱了天上云衣层层叠叠，向着枯黄而光秃的林木，
向着收割后的荒凉田野，无声，舒缓，柔和；雪花飘落。

Wang’s translated version:
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From the perspective of “beauty in sound”, the tone of the first and the second translated versions are extremely beautiful, which rhyme like the original poem and make it easy to read. In the Mu’s translated version, the rhyme /ang/ (“膛” [tāng], “上” [shàng]) in the first and third sentence, as well as the rhyme /uo/ (“落” [luò], “裸” [luǒ]) in the second and fourth sentence are used. In Yang’s translated version, the rhyme /u/ (出 [chū], 木 [mù]) in the first and third sentence and /e/ (叠 [dié], 野 [yě]) in the second and fourth sentence are used. The tone of Wang’s translated version is not as accurate as those of the former two translated versions, but the rhyme /an/ (间 [jiān], 然 [rán]) in the first and third sentence and the rhyme /i/ (地 [dì], 里 [lǐ]) in the last two sentence are used.

From the perspective of “beauty in sense”, the three translated versions accurately depict the snowflakes falling quietly, gracefully, and gently. However, Yang’s translated version is the best. This version gives people a sense of loneliness and sadness, which lays the emotional tone of sadness in the whole poem. The word “漠漠” in “漠漠长空胸怀里逸出” reflects the boundless sky, and the snowflakes are independent and falling. Everywhere they went, there were also vast forests and fields, like duckweed, which were constantly wandering and miserable.

Based on “beauty in form”, the three translated versions and the original poem are all six lines, which is in line with the characteristics of simplicity and clarity of poetry.

The Second Stanza

Mu’s translated version:

有如我们迷离的梦幻突然在庄严的字句里成形，有如我们苍白的容颜
显示了纷乱内心的衷情纷乱的天空也表白它所感到的悲哀。

Yang’s translated version:

像我们的悬想，暧昧朦胧，骤然之间凝成了神妙的词句；像忧郁的心灵，以苍白的面容
把重重心事披露出去；忧郁的天穹在倾诉内心的悲苦。

Wang’s translated version:

犹如我们朦胧的遐想突然之间在一种神圣的形式里得到表述，犹如受扰的心灵通过苍白的脸
将自己袒露，受到搅扰的天空在宣示着它的悲痛。

From the perspective of “beauty in sound”, the melodies of the three versions are very beautiful, which echoes to the rhythm of the original poem. The second and fourth sentence rhyme /ing/ (形 [xíng], 情 [qíng]); the fifth and sixth sentence rhyme /ai/ (白 [bái], 悲 [bēi]). The melody of Yang’s translated version and that of Wang’s translated version are also similar.

Based on “beauty in sense”, the second paragraph of the poem describes the transition from snowflakes falling to the long sky, and the melancholy sky is also telling the pain. We think that the third sentence of Mu’s translated version is not appropriate; “even as the troubled heart does make” is translated into “有如我们苍白的容颜, 显示了纷乱内心的衷情”, in which the original metaphor is changed. In Yang’s translated version, the translator personifies the sky and talks about the sufferings in his heart, which is also the true reflection of Longfellow’s missing his wife. We think that the second sentence of Wang’s translated version exists a little translationese.

Based on “beauty in form”, the first translated version is the most beautiful in style, with concise but not simple, and the second and third translation are inferior.
The Third Stanza

Mu’s translated version:
这是天空所写的诗, 慢慢写在寂静的音节里; 这是绝望的秘密
久久隐藏在阴霾的心底; 现在, 对着树林和田野; 它在低低诉说和倾泻。

Yang’s translated version:
这是天穹挥洒的诗篇, 从容舒缓, 用无声的音节写就; 这是“绝望”的秘密,
长时间藏在它浓云密布的心头, 现在才低声吐露: 向田野, 向林木。

Wang’s translated version:
这是大气的歌，被无声的音节给予记载; 这是长时间秘密地
郁结在云儿胸膛里的悲哀, 现在向树林和田野, 低低地倾诉出来。

From the perspective of “beauty in sound”, the tone of Mu’s translated version is natural and the rhythm is bright, while the tone of Yang’s translated version and Yang’s translated version are not as good as that of Mu’s translated version. The first, second, third, and fourth sentences of Mu’s translated version rhyme /i/ (诗 [shī], 里 [lǐ], 密 [mì], 底 [dǐ]). The rhyme /u/ (露 [lù], 木 [mù]) in the fifth and sixth sentence of Yang’s translated version is used; /ai/ (载 [zǎi], 哀 [āi]) in the second and fourth sentence of Wang’s translated version.

Based on “beauty in sense”, Mu Dan translates “the air” into “天空”, and Yang Deyu translates it into “天穹”. We think that “天穹” is much better, which vividly shows the vastness of the sky, heaven as well as the earth, and the loneliness of snowflakes floating between the heaven and the earth. In Wang’s translated version, it is translated as “大气”, which is a little improper. In addition, Wang’s translated version sounds translationese, which needs to be improved, such as “被无声的音节给予记载”.

Based on “beauty in form”, Mu’s translated version is concise and beautiful, which is commensurate with the form of the original poem. Yang’s and Wang’s also basically meet the translation rule of “beauty in form”.

Conclusion

Based on the translation principle of the “Three Beauties Theory”, we can see that each version has its own merits. The three versions all pay attention to the accuracy of the meanings of the original words and sentences, and present different versions with diverse advantages by various translation methods. Under the guidance of Xu Yuanchong’s “Three Beauties Theory”, it is extremely difficult to perfectly translate in terms of sound, form, and sense. However, appreciating the translated works from Xu Yuanchong’s theory will bring some inspiration to translators and translation researchers.

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