

Research on the Chinese Translation of Academic Monographs under the Guidance of Relevance Theory

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Abstract: *This paper, framed by relevance theory, systematically explores the issues of cognitive inference and contextual reconstruction in the process of translating academic works from Chinese into English. By analyzing translators' dual grasp of the original author's intention and the target reader's cognitive context, it is proposed that academic translation should adhere to the principle of optimal relevance. The study employs a combination of text analysis and case comparison, focusing on the translation strategies of core elements such as proper nouns and culture-loaded words, complex sentences to reveal the guiding value of relevance theory for academic translation practice. This paper verifies the applicability of relevance theory in the Chinese translation of academic works through specific case analysis. It finds that translators need to establish a dynamic balance between the intention of the original author and the cognition of the target reader, and achieve effective information transmission through means such as explicating implicit information and adjusting context dynamically. The research conclusion indicates that relevance theory not only provides methodological guidance for academic translation, but also reveals the path to achieve cross-cultural cognitive equivalence.*

Keywords: Academic monograph translation; Relevance Theory; Optimal Relevance.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Research

"Babylonian and Assyrian Mythology" is a comprehensive study of mythology authored by the renowned mythologist Donald A. McKenzie. The book delves into the civilization history of Babylon and Assyria, spanning three to four thousand years, from various perspectives including ethnicity, religion, folk beliefs, core deities, architecture, law, and trade. The book serves as a significant reference for Western mythology research. "Babylonian and Assyrian Mythology" was first published in September 2005 and had never been translated before. This work is undoubtedly fascinating and has garnered attention from mythology enthusiasts and researchers. Therefore, in order to make it accessible to all readers, the author participated in the translation of this work. Given that "Babylonian and Assyrian Mythology" is an academic monograph, the translator must ensure the rigor and accuracy of the translation, and maintain consistency in form and style with the original text. Under the guidance of relevance theory, the author considers the differences between English and Chinese languages and strives to present this academic monograph to the target readers in rigorous and clear language. It is hoped that the conclusions of this study can serve as a reference for translators of future academic works.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Relevance Theory was developed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson in 1986, based on the pragmatic principle of relevance proposed by H.P. Grice. It is outlined in their book *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, published in the same year.

Their student, Ernst August Gutt, conducted research on translation based on Relevance Theory, after five years of research, "Translation and Relevance: Cognition and Context" was published in 1991. In this book, Gutt first proposed the relevance translation theory, marking the birth of this theory.

Regarding this theory, there are three core viewpoints: Ostensive-inferential process: Translation involves a dual ostensive-inferential communication chain of the original author → translator → target text reader. Optimal relevance principle: The translation should provide the target readers with a cognitive context effect similar to that of the original text, achieving optimal relevance with minimal cognitive effort. Cognitive contextual assumption: Translation requires dynamic adjustment of the contextual assumptions between the source text and the target text

to ensure that the information is comprehensible in the target culture.

Gutt (2004) thinks that the translation process is both an inferential process and a cognitive process concerned with finding out the optimal relevance between the source text and the translated version. It is imperative for translators to provide reasonable explanations after clarifying the translation purpose, in order to achieve successful communication or attain a certain communicative effect. Hence, it becomes evident that the essence of translation is a cross-linguistic activity encompassing two rounds of communication: the original author-the translator-the translator's reader. In this context, the translator holds a dual identity: the recipient and the communicator.

In the first round of communication, the original author serves as the communicator, while the translator acts as the recipient. In the second round, the translator becomes the communicator, and the target reader is the recipient.

Therefore, it can be determined that the translator plays a dual role and serves as the hub of information transmission (Lin, 1994). On the one hand, the translator, in the capacity of a reader, strives to fully comprehend the original text, weigh and consider the communicative intention of the original author. On the other hand, the translator needs to assume the role of the author, attempting to gauge the cognitive environment and acceptance level of the target reader, convey the communicative intention of the original author to the target reader, and, based on this, create a translation that meets the best expectations of the target reader, thus achieving optimal relevance between the source text and the translation.

2.1 Studies on Translation of Academic Monograph at Home

The academic translation studies in China have undergone four transformations: the research direction has shifted from academic Chinese translation to academic foreign translation, the research focus has shifted from academic translations to academic translators, the research dimension has shifted from inward-oriented ontological research to outward-oriented comprehensive research, and the research mode has shifted from empirical summarization to theoretical exploration.

The study of academic translation in China has undergone five major stages of development:

The first stage was the period of Buddhist scripture translation, spanning from the Eastern Han Dynasty to the Tang and Song Dynasties. During this time, the "Three Great Translators" represented by Kumarajiva, Zhenzhi, and Xuanzang translated a vast amount of Buddhist scriptures, developing systematic translation theories and methods. The second stage was the era of scientific and technological translation, specifically during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. Xu Guangqi, Matteo Ricci and others focused on the translation of Western scientific and technological works, pioneering the "translating foreign into Chinese" model. Translation activities bore distinct pragmatic characteristics. The third stage was the period of Western learning translation, specifically during the late Qing Dynasty and the early Republic of China. Yan Fu, Lin Shu, Liang Qichao, and others translated Western political, philosophical, and literary works. Yan Fu proposed the translation criteria of "faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance", which had a profound and lasting impact. The fourth stage was the period of translating Marxist-Leninist works, which began after 1949. During this time, China concentrated its efforts on translating Marxist-Leninist works and the Selected Works of Mao Zedong, and cultivated a great deal of professional translators. The fifth stage is the period of prosperity following the reform and opening-up, spanning from 1978 to this day. During this period, a disciplinary system for translation studies was established, with research areas continuously expanding and theoretical methods becoming increasingly diversified. Since 1991, research papers on the quality of academic translation have emerged one after another, and from 1991 to present, academic research on academic translation problems can be mainly divided into the following categories.

Category one: the translation quality of academic monograph, in *A Review of the Quality of Chinese Translation of English Academic Monograph*, He Keyong and Chen Yuanyuan (2015) systematically sorted and analyzed various academic journals published in China ranging from 1979 to 2011 based on the translation quality of English academic monographs, and summarized the five most common translation errors, expecting to brought the translation quality problem to the forefront of the translators, publishers, and scholars.

Category two: the translation of terminology in academic monograph, Liu Yameng (2008) mentioned in *Comparison Highlights Differences: The Western Academic Culture and Chinese-Western Academic Translation* that single and fixed academic context hasn't taken shape in the West society, and scholars haven't yet reached a

mutually agreed opinion on major academic questions such as the definition of key terms, therefore, the translation of terms should be placed in a broad Western academic context rather than a single disciplinary framework.

Category three: translation principles and norms within a discipline or field of academic monograph. The research in this area is most prominent in the field of law, which emphasizes some important principles of academic translation in a certain field and explores translation norms in that field. Most researchers are professionals. Wang Nan (2002) pointed out the problems in the Chinese translations of overseas sinological works, the restoration of culture and the unity of form, the expansion of translation techniques and the unification of translation in the translation norms of sinological works.

Category four: the difficulties faced by academic translation and its importance for the development of the entire social sciences

This type of research is based on macro perspectives, focusing on the academic translation industry, summarizing history, pointing out macro problems in academic translation, and providing a comprehensive overview.

Liu Yameng (2004) pointed out that when translating academic works between China and the West, it is necessary to pay attention to the overall framework of “Western academia”. “A comprehensive understanding of the Western academic environment is closely related to improving the quality of Chinese translation of Western academic works, and Chinese academic translation looks forward to a ‘cultural transformation’”.

2.2 Studies on Translation of Academic Monograph Abroad

As a core medium for cross-cultural knowledge dissemination, academic translation encompasses research areas such as cognitive reconstruction, cultural adaptation, and ethical decision-making behind language transformation. From a functionalist perspective, academic translation is not merely a symbolic transformation but also a process of knowledge system reproduction in the target context. Research in this field focuses on three main characteristics: firstly, the precision and consistency of terminology translation, especially in scientific and technical literature, which requires adherence to professional norms; secondly, strategies for handling culturally loaded terms, involving a balance between domestication and foreignization; and thirdly, practical paths of translation ethics, such as the collaborative win-win theory emphasizing cultural negotiation between translators and original authors. Current research has transcended the traditional linguistic framework and shifted towards interdisciplinary integration with cognitive science, sociology, and other fields. For instance, corpus technology is applied to translation quality assessment, and eco-translatology explores the impact of environmental factors on translations. These advancements signify that academic translation research is deepening from the technical operational level to systematic theoretical construction. Foreign academic translation research exhibits diverse development trends in both theoretical construction and practical application. Research in the practical field focuses on two major directions: one is the cross-cultural transcoding of culture-loaded terms, such as the English translation of “The Song of Garlic Scapes” which achieves cultural output by retaining Chinese folkloric imagery; the other is the normative construction of academic ethics. Pym’s collaborative translation theory advocates a risk-sharing mechanism between translators and original authors. It is noteworthy that the emerging perspective of cognitive translation studies has begun to pay attention to the translator’s thinking process, revealing the cognitive load distribution rules in academic translation through techniques such as eye tracking. These studies collectively promote the transformation of academic translation from language manipulation to knowledge governance. Especially in the context of open science, how to promote global academic discourse equality through translation has become a frontier issue.

3. SOURCE TEXT ANALYSIS AND DIFFICULTIES IN ACADEMIC MONOGRAPH TRANSLATION

3.1 Translation Difficulties at the Lexical Level

Culture-loaded words often carry the history, customs, or values of a specific nation, and there may be a lack of corresponding concepts in the target language culture. The incommensurability of such cultural symbols makes it difficult to convey the original meaning through literal translation

Example 1

ST: The Tell-el-Amarna letters testify to Nefertari's influence in the Egyptian "Foreign Office", and we know that at home she was joint ruler with her husband.

DT: 阿玛尔纳书信证实了王后奈菲尔塔利在埃及“外交部”的影响,在国内她则与丈夫联合执政。

The Tell-el-Amarna letters pose three key translation challenges: 1) No direct Chinese counterparts exist, making reference materials scarce; 2) The vast volume of related versions complicates selection of the most accurate translation; 3) Literal translation risks incomprehensibility for target readers without supplementary cultural context.

3.2 Translation Difficulties at the Syntactical Level

As an academic monograph, *Myths of Babylonia and Assyria* features a predominance of complex sentence structures. These sentences frequently incorporate multiple modifiers, coordinated elements, and subordinate clauses, which collectively pose significant challenges for translation. Given the inherently complex nature of the text, accurate translation is particularly demanding, as any failure to fully comprehend these intricate syntactic components may readily result in mistranslations.

Example 2

ST: In the end he took prisoner the new king, Bau-akh-iddina, the successor of Marduk-balatsu-ikbi, and transported him to Assyria, and offered up sacrifices as the overlord of the ancient land at Babylon.

DT: 最后,他俘虏了巴比伦的新王,巴乌阿克伊地那,即继承人,马杜克巴拉苏伊克比,将其送到亚述,并摆上贡品,奉其为巴比伦的领主。

In translation practice, three key difficulties require special attention. Two of them stem from the differences between Chinese and English languages: Firstly, Chinese commonly employs a parallel structure, while English tends to use an appositive structure. The optimal translation method should integrate both expressions; secondly, the focus in Chinese is often placed at the end of the sentence, while in English it is placed at the beginning. Therefore, the abstract noun "successor" should be reordered when translated as "马尔杜克-巴拉图-伊克比继承人"; thirdly, in the sentence "and offered up sacrifices as the overlord...", "as" may indicate time (when...) or identity (as...), and the translator needs to accurately determine its meaning based on the context.

3.3 Translation Difficulties at the Discourse Level

Cohesion, often referred to as lexical or grammatical linkage, denotes the interconnectedness among all elements within a paragraph through shared vocabulary or syntactic structures. The handling of cohesion in translation directly impacts the readability of the target text. Therefore, translators must establish logical connections between lexical units, sentences, and paragraphs through cohesive devices, thereby ensuring the coherence and integrity of the translated text.

Example 3

ST: The swift Euphrates, which is 2800 miles long, begins to rise early in March and reaches its highest level in May.

DT: 幼发拉底河流速快,总长两千八百英里,水位自3月初开始上涨,于5月达到峰值。

In this case, the relative pronoun *which* refers to the Euphrates river. However, Chinese lacks relative pronouns and only has demonstrative pronouns. To bridge this gap, demonstrative reference—a cohesive device—can be employed for substitution. In other words, demonstrative pronouns can replace relative pronouns in translation.

4. CORRESPONDING SOLUTIONS UNDER THE GUIDANCE OF RELEVANCE THEORY

This chapter examines translation challenges encountered in practice, analyzing suitable translation approaches from two perspectives within the framework of Relevance Theory, with a focus on the linguistic divergences between English and Chinese.

4.1 Strengthening Contextual Effect

4.1.1 Inferring the Implicit Meaning of the Context for Cohesion

Example 4

ST (Source Text): The dove was certainly not a popular bird in the religious art of Babylonia, but in one of the hymns translated by Professor Pinches Ishtar says, "Like a lonely dove I rest". In another, "Like the dove I moan".
DT (Draft Translation): 在巴比伦的宗教艺术中, 鸽子显然是不受欢迎的鸟, 但是平奇斯教授翻译的一首赞美诗中这样写道: 伊什塔尔说: "我栖息, 如同一只孤独的鸽子"。在另一个, 她同样说道: "我哀叹, 如同一只悲伤的鸽子"。

RT (Revised Translation): 在巴比伦和亚述的宗教艺术中, 鸽子显然是不受欢迎的鸟, 但是平奇斯教授翻译的一首赞美诗中这样写道: 伊什塔尔说: "我栖息, 如同一只孤独的鸽子"。在另一首赞美诗中, 她同样说道: "我哀叹, 如同一只悲伤的鸽子"。

In the translation, the first sentence of the source text is themed around a hymn, and the beginning of the second sentence, "In another," lacks a subject, resulting in a weak contextual relevance in the Chinese translation version, "在另一个," which increases the burden on readers' comprehension. By analyzing the context, the translator deduced that "In another" actually refers to "in another hymn" so a referential cohesion strategy was adopted in the translation, explicitly translating it as "in another hymn." This treatment not only conforms to the logic of the source text but also reinforces the presentation of new information through context, ultimately achieving optimal relevance while maintaining the relevance of the translation.

4.1.2 Strengthening or Confirming Existing Assumptions for Cohesion

Example 5

ST: For several years he engaged himself in securing control of the north-western caravan road, and did not rest until he had subdued Hittite Empire.

DT: 几年来, 他一直试图控制西北商道, 直至征服西里西亚, 并占领赫梯帝国, 才停下休息。

RT: 几年来, 他一直试图控制西北商道, 直至征服西里西亚, 并占领赫梯帝国, 才停止征战的步伐。

In this example, the initial translation of "rest" as "停下休息" (stop to rest) creates a false implication that the king was too busy to sleep for years, which contradicts the context. The actual meaning of "did not rest" should be "never stop going on expeditions" (从未停止远征), as the main character was constantly conquering territories by force. This corrected translation eliminates the misleading assumption, aligns with the context, and enhances coherence by ensuring optimal relevance.

4.2 Reducing Processing Effort

4.2.1 Literal Translation plus Footnote for Cultural-loaded Words

Example 6

ST: Ur, the rebel son of the governor of Nishtun, who had been taken prisoner, was transported to Aden, where he was killed.

DT: 尼什通总督反叛的儿子乌尔被俘后, 被押送至也门, 并在那里被杀死。

RT: 尼什通总督反叛的儿子乌尔被俘后, 被押送至也门, 并在那里被杀死。 (尼什通: 也门东南部的一个小镇。)

Due to the differences between Chinese and English vocabularies, it is difficult for translators to find an accurate equivalent for "尼什通". Therefore, in addition to the context, translators also need to pay special attention to the overall background and content of the text, in order to convey the original author's true intention to readers with different knowledge backgrounds. After consulting relevant literature, the translator adopted a direct translation with annotation, translating "尼什通" as "尼什通: 也门东南部的一个小镇", which not only enhances the relevance between the original text and the translation, but also significantly reduces the difficulty of

understanding for the target readers.

4.2.2 Restructuring for Compound Sentences

Example 7

ST: It is not quite certain whether Sammu-rammat was the wife of Shamshi-Adad VII or of his son, Adad-nirari IV.

DT: 我们并不清楚塞米拉米斯究竟是沙姆什阿达德七世之妻, 还是其儿子阿达德尼拉瑞四世之妻。

RT: 塞米拉米斯究竟是沙姆什阿达德七世之妻, 还是其儿子阿达德尼拉瑞四世之妻, 还不得而知。

In this example, “it” serves as a formal subject, while “whether Sammu-rammat was the wife of Shamshi-Adad VII or his son, Adad-nirari IV” functions as both the real subject and an object clause. The author emphasizes “It is not quite certain,” but in Chinese (DT), placing the real subject in the second half deviates from natural sentence structure. Thus, the target text (RT) adjusts word order—placing the real subject first and moving the emphasis to the end—to enhance readability. This aligns the translation with the target audience’s cognitive environment, reducing processing effort while preserving the original meaning.

5. CONCLUSION

5.1 Major Findings

In the translation of Myths of Babylonia and Assyria, the author employs Relevance Theory to address practical challenges, aiming to enhance contextual effect and minimize processing effort. Key findings reveal that optimal relevance requires balancing the original author’s intent with the target readers’ cognitive context. To achieve this, translators must infer implicit meanings, refine contextual assumptions, and resolve contradictions. Additionally, strategies like literal translation, transliteration with footnotes, and restructuring help reduce cognitive load, ensuring the translation aligns with both the source text’s depth and the readers’ accessibility.

5.2 Limitations and Suggestions

This research has three key limitations: (1) As a relatively underexplored area, academic monograph translation lacks sufficient research from Relevance Theory’s perspective; (2) The examples exclusively derive from the author’s personal projects, limiting the generalizability of recommendations due to individual competence constraints; (3) The condensed introduction of Relevance Theory (omitting unused concepts) and the exclusive focus on this theoretical framework necessitate further methodological refinement for future studies, while encouraging multi-perspective research approaches to enhance academic translation strategies.

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