



A Comparative Study of Dialect Translation in Two English Versions of *The Divorce*

Liao Binyan

School of Foreign Languages, Qianjiang College, Hangzhou Normal University, China

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Abstract— In the literary translation, translation of dialect becomes a topic that deserves a lot of attention, because dialect is endowed with distinctive national and regional cultural characteristics and frequently cause many difficulties in the translation process. Exploring dialect translation is of great significance for the translation of literature. This paper aims to make a comparative study of dialect translation in two English versions of *The Divorce*, a short novel written by Lu Xun, a prominent figure in the history of Chinese literature, so as to analyze translators' translation styles and strategies, reveal the loss and gain of different translation methods and thus trigger more researches on the translation of non-standard literature dialect in novel translation.

Keywords— dialect translation, *The Divorce*, translation methods.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the translation of literature, dialect translation is always deemed as the most demanding and challenging, because dialect as a regional or social non-standard language generally has its strong “nationality” and varied cultural connotations, just as Lane-Mercier once pointed out that social dialect in literary works is “a clearly-defined untranslatable area” (Lane-Mercier, 1997). The striking differences of dialect from the standard language definitely pose a great challenge to translators and thus marks dialect translation as a field worth further exploring.

Lu Xun (originally named Zhou Shuren, 1881-1936) is a great writer of modern China and one of the founding fathers of Chinese modern literature. In his remarkable lifetime, he has created many renowned and influential literary works and a large number of them have been translated into foreign languages. Until now, 34 of Lu Xun's novels, including *The Divorce*, have been translated into English since the mid-20th century. Based on two versions of *The Divorce*, this paper intends to make a comparative study of dialect translation in two English versions of *The Divorce* so as to analyze translators' translation styles and strategies, reveal the loss and gain of

different translation methods and thus arouse more attention to the translation of non-standard literature dialect in novel translation.

II. AN INTRODUCTION ON THE DIVORCE AND ITS TWO ENGLISH VERSIONS

2.1 An Introduction on *The Divorce* and Its English Translation

The Divorce is one outstanding short story written by Lu Xun, one of the founding figures of modern Chinese literature, celebrated for his “powerful diagnoses of his nation's social and political crisis, and for his contributions to reinventing the vernacular as a literary language” (Lovell, 2009). It was first published in the weekly journal *Yusi* in 1925, and was later collected in *Panghuang*, one of Lu Xun's most famous anthology. Lu Xun's fictions, including the short stories in *Panghuang*, have won a large readership in the world and been translated into English by various translators and scholars.

The Divorce depicts a bold and outrageous rural woman named Aigu, who, with great fighting spirit, refused to get divorced when she was abandoned by her

husband for her disobedience to her husband's family but had to succumb to the defraud and threat from feudal patriarch and agreed to get divorced with her husband. This short story profoundly reveals the resistance and class limitations of rural women, attacks the feudal ruling class that persecutes them, and leads people to seek for the path to women's rights and liberation. In order to express the theme of the novel, the personalities of various characters and the customs of the Jiangnan water town in Shaoxing, Lu Xun used a lot of Shaoxing dialects in *The Divorce*. It could be safely said that *The Divorce* could serve as excellent research texts for the study of dialect translation.

Until now, there mainly exist four English translations of *The Divorce*. They are *The Divorce* translated by the famous American writer and journalist Edgar Snow and collected in *Living China: Modern Chinese Short Stories*, *The Divorce* translated by Chinese American scholar Wang Jizhen and collected in *Ah Q and Others: Selected Stories of Lusin*, *The Divorce* translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang and collected in *Selected Stories of Lu Hsun*, *The Divorce* translated by Julia Lovell and collected in *The Real Story of Ah-Q and Other Tales of China: The Complete Fiction of Lu Xun*. Our study on dialect translation will be based on the two versions produced by Yang Xianyi & Gladys Yang and Julia Lovell.

2.2 A Survey of Two English Versions of *The Divorce*

In this part, we will mainly elaborate on the versions of *The Divorce* by Yang Xianyi & Gladys Yang (referred to as Yangs hereafter) and by Julia Lovell.

Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang embarked on the translation activity in 1953 and for years of unremitting devotion, *Selected Stories of Lu Hsun* finally came out in 1960. At that time, Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang's translation of Lu Xun's novel was considered as an authoritative one and plays a role in the dissemination of Lu Xun's novels in the world. Their faithful translation to the original text in syntactic structure and authentic wording made the translation work favored by readers at home and abroad.

Julia Lovell, as one of the new generations of sinologists, devoted her life to the translation of modern and contemporary Chinese literary works and made undeniable contribution to the spread of Chinese culture. Her most well-known translation is *The Real Story of Ah-Q and Other Tales of China: The Complete Fiction of Lu Xun*, which was published by Penguin Classics in 2009. This is the first translation of Lu Xun's novels translated by a foreign translator and accepted by Western authoritative publishing organizations. It could be safely said that Julia Lovell's translation is undoubtedly a turning

point of the spread of Lu Xun's works in the West. Based on "A Note on the Translation" included in Lovell's version, it could be found that readability and fluency would be Lovell's priority in her translation process and thus domestication becomes Lovell's dominant translation method.

III. ANALYSIS OF DIALECT IN THE DIVORCE

According to on-line Merriam-Webster Dictionary, dialect is defined as "a regional variety of language distinguished by features of vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation from other regional varieties and constituting together with them a single language." That is to say, dialect is a kind of non-standard language, which contains a lot of specific and distinctive linguistic features. The differences between dialect and standard language are generally embodied in phonetics, grammar and vocabulary, which help to perform some special functions in literary works, including shaping characters, creating local atmosphere, enhancing the sense of reality, heightening dramatic effect, arousing readers' emotional resonance and so on. Therefore, the frequent use of dialects becomes a typical feature of Chinese local literature.

In *The Divorce*, one of Lu Xun's short novels, there is a mixed use of dialect. Lu Xun is a native of Shaoxing, and he spent at least one third of his life in his hometown. The dialect used in his works naturally come from Shaoxing. It is generally believed that Lu Xun's novels, including "*Hometown*", "*Village Opera*", "*The Divorce*", "*Storm*", "*The True Story of Ah Q*" principally take Shaoxing as the background and are full of a lot of Shaoxing local dialect. The reason for Lu Xun's use of dialect in his novels is that China was standing at the early stage of the development of modern vernacular literature in his time and there was a lack of available living and vivid language. Besides, fulfilling the literary function by means of local dialect is also a motive for Lu Xun's choice. Lu Xun held that the writers should make full use of verbal languages of the ordinary people in their literary creation and that's why Shaoxing dialect was so common in the novel *The Divorce*.

There are about four categories of Shaoxing local dialect in *The Divorce*: names and titles, curse words, customs and unique local expressions. To be specific, names and titles include names like "八三", "庄木三", "爱姑", "汪得贵" and titles such as "木叔", "七大人", "八公公", "蔚老爷", "长年", "皇帝伯伯", "蟹壳脸". Curse words were mainly spoken by Aigu, the female protagonist in the novel, which helped portray her courageous yet vulgar, ignorant personal traits. For

example, “老畜生”, “你这妈的”, “瘪臭虫”, “癞皮狗”, “娘滥十万人人生”, “连我的祖宗都入起来了”. Vocabulary concerning customs includes the names of objects such as “乌篷船”, “年糕汤”, “红绿贴” and traditions, such as “换贴”, “拆灶”, “会亲”, “三茶六礼定来的”, “花轿抬来的”, and so on. The last category refers to local expressions with unique Shaoxing features. For example, there are “捏着拳头打拱”, “不落”, “出了一口恶气”, “六畜不安”, “溜了一眼”, “塞得发昏”, “将身子牵了两牵”, “擷着念珠”, “团头团脑”, “报丧似的”, “天外道理”, “黄焦焦”etc..

The use of these Shaoxing dialects aims to fulfill the following literary functions.

Firstly, it could help to improve the expressiveness of language, and create a unique atmosphere.

Eg.1 庄木三和他的女儿——爱姑——
刚从木莲桥头跨下航船去·船里面就有许多声音一齐
嗡嗡的叫了起来·其中还有几个人捏着拳头打拱;
同时·船旁的坐板也空出四人的座位来了。(Lu
Xun, 2006)

In this example, the underlined part “捏着拳头打拱” is the Shaoxing dialect, which means greeting other people with their hands crossed. The use of this term vividly shows the respect of the local people to their senior Zhuang Musan.

Secondly, it could enhance readers’ interest by endowing new meanings to some ordinary words.

Eg. 2 “本来新年正月又何必来劳动你们。……”(Lu
Xun, 2006)

In this sentence, “劳动” does not mean “activity, labor, doing things” in daily use, but is extended to “trouble, disturbing”, which could arouse the reader’s interest in reading.

Thirdly, it could help to give readers the enjoyment of beauty and to promote their further understanding of the text.

Eg.
3在这些中间第一眼就看见一个人·这一定是七大人了
·虽然也是团头团脑·却比慰老爷们魁梧得多;
大的圆脸上长着两条细眼和漆黑的细胡须;

头顶是秃的·可是那脑壳和脸都很红润·油光光地发亮。(Lu Xun, 2006)

In this example, the four-character phrase “团头团脑” and the reduplicated word “油光光” are catchy to read, giving readers a sense of beauty in language. These words describe a fat-headed official, the representative of the feudal class, and present a pampered and parasitic life of this official vividly to the readers, laying the foundation for readers to understand why Aigu was later unjustly sentenced by the “Seventh Great Master” in the divorce.

At last, it helps to portray the distinct personality of the characters, especially the cursing and swear words from Aigu, which will be analyzed in the next part.

IV. ANALYSIS OF DIALECT TRANSLATION STRATEGY IN TWO ENGLISH VERSIONS OF THE DIVORCE

In this part, we will carry out our analysis of dialect translation strategy from the four categories of dialects mentioned above: names and titles, curse words, customs and unique local expressions.

4.1 Analysis of Translation of Names and Titles

Names and titles are generally indispensable in narrative novels and they usually contain unique local flavor. In the novel *The Divorce*, there are about four names and eleven titles according to our analysis. As for the translation of the four names, “八三”, “庄木三”, “爱姑”, “汪得贵”, we could find that both Yangs and Lovell adopt transliteration to deal with it and put them into “Basan”, “Zhuang Musan”, “Aigu”, and “Wang Degui”. In fact, in the process of literature translation, transliteration is a good way to deal with the translation of names. That is why both translators use the same translation method. However, it has to be pointed out that “汪得贵”, in fact, is the homonym of “枉得鬼” in Shaoxing dialect, and transliteration could not help to reproduce the cultural connotation behind the name. The translators might be aware of this but avoided giving extra information because for one thing, this character is not the main one in the novel and for the other, a translation should avoid “extensive interruption by footnotes and endnotes”(Lovell, 2009).

As for the translation of titles, some differences are presented in the two versions. The most prominent one is the translation of “七大人”. As we know, this character is a local official in the novel, and he serves as a symbol of supreme power in the eyes of the villagers. However, as

the plot of the novel advances, it is not difficult to find that he is actually a fatuous official who does not distinguish between right and wrong. Therefore, “大人” here has a pejorative connotation in itself. For this title, Yangs put it into “Seventh Master”, and Lovell translated it into Mr. Qi. Comparing the two translations, we may find that Yangs’ use of “Master” could keep the special implication of the original word to a certain degree and help to achieve the effect of irony, while in Lovell’s rendering “Mr. Qi”, “Mr.” is such a common word usually used in oral English that it could not reveal the social status of that figure. Besides, for the translation of “木公公”, another address form of “木叔”, Yangs rendered it into “Grandad Mu” to emphasize that this person won a lot of respect among the villagers, while Lovell put it into “Mr. Mu”, adopting the frequently-used word “Mr.” again. These different ways of rendering the titles show different translation intentions and styles of the two translators: Yangs are more inclined to retain the original cultural element and Lovell tends to focus more on the readability and acceptability of the target text.

4.2 Analysis of Translation of Curse Words

Dialogues occupy a large proportion in *The Divorce* and play a decisive role in pushing the development of the plots. In the dialogues, curse words are commonplace because there are a lot of conflicts among the figures in the novel. In fact, most of the curse words are spoken by Aigu, the female protagonist of the fiction, who suffers a lot of oppression and struggles to fight against that. Analysis of the translation of curse words is helpful for us to observe translator’s choice in face of the dialect translation.

Eg. 4

“那个‘娘滥十万人’的叫你‘逃生子’？”爱姑回脸去大声说。” (Lu Xun, 2006)

Version 1: “Who the devil is calling you a bastard?” Ai-ku rounded on him fiercely, then turned back to Seventh Master. (Yangs, 1981)

Version 2: “Who called you a bastard?” Aigu shouted back at him, before turning to face Mr Qi again. (Lovell, 2009)

In *The Divorce*, curse words could be considered as the finishing touch of the author’s success in shaping the character’s image. Therefore, how the translators deal with them in their translation is of great importance. Let’s first analyze the meaning of this phrase. In Shaoxing dialect, women with acts of fornication are called “滥人”, in which “滥”, equal to “烂”, is used as a verb here, meaning having sexual relationship with various people. “滥人生”

is a curse word, which is exaggerated by Aigu to express her uncontrollable anger.

Taking a look at the two translations, we may find that both Yangs and Lovell translated this word into “bastard”, however, Yangs added the phrase “the devil” for emphasis. “Bastard” refers to an offensive or disagreeable person, which is often used as a generalized term of abuse. Compared with the original text “娘滥十万人”, it downplays the strong emotion of the heroine. Therefore, this curse word has been undertranslated. To further understand this undertranslation and simplification, we could refer to the third version “daughter of a slut who’s made it with ten thousand men” from Lyell, another famous translator we mentioned previously. (Lyell, 1990) Based on this analysis, it is thought that both Yangs and Lovell adopted free translation method because they considered it much more readable and acceptable.

As for another pair of curse words “老畜生” and “小畜生”, Yangs put it into “old beast” and “young beast”, while Lovell rendered it into “swinish father-in-law, father of a pig” and “pig of a husband”. In the two renderings, beast and pig are respectively used to replace the original cultural image “畜生”. According to The Oxford Encyclopedic English Dictionary, beast is defined as an annoying person or thing. And pig here is a slang for someone who is greedy, dirty, stubborn, gloomy, or annoying. Choosing “beast” retains the image of “beast” in English, which is more faithful to the original text, but because “beast” has multiple meanings, it is unknown whether readers can truly comprehend the vulgarity in the curse word, which is very crucial for readers to understand the image of Aigu. The choice of the more familiar figurative “pig” in the West is to relieve readers of potentially strenuous comprehension, but in a sense, it cannot fully reflect the level of profanity of “beast” despite that the word “pig” is semantically richer. Therefore, both translations may reduce message transmission, lose the pragmatic function of the original cursive language, thereby weakening the personal traits of Aigu. This, from another perspective, fully displays the huge difficulty in dialect translation.

4.3 Analysis of Translation of Customs

Customs and traditions vary from region to region in China, and they are sure to be reflected in local dialects. *The Divorce* is such a novel filled with many customs and traditions, which poses a great challenge to the translators. For example, “年糕汤”, soup made primarily of steamed rice cakes, is a particular Chinese food popular in Shaoxing, and therefore endowed with strong local

characteristics. It is mainly made by steaming rice cakes and water. In Lovell's translation, “年糕汤” is translated into “new year's dumplings in soup”, in which “年糕” is replaced by “dumplings”, a Chinese food's name familiar to target language readers. Yangs put it into “soup containing sweet new year cake”. Based on the two versions, we could find that Yangs attach priority to the fidelity of the translation for the purpose of letting target language readers feel the Chinese cultural flavor. Lovell adheres more to the coherence rule, and employs a word that is familiar to the target language readers.

Another example “三茶六礼” is very typical in this category. The original sentence and its corresponding versions are as follows:

Eg.5 “...我是三茶六礼定来的，花轿抬来的呵！” (Lu Xun, 2006)

Version 1: “...I married him with the proper ceremonies—three lots of tea and six presents—and was carried to his house in a bridal sedan!...” (Yangs, 1981)

Version 2: “...I'm his wife—carried in on a bridal chair, with all the proper ceremonies!” (Lovell, 2009)

“三茶六礼” is a kind of customs and etiquettes in the process of traditional marriage in ancient China. “三茶” refers to the “giving tea” when getting engaged, the “setting tea” when getting married, and the “combining tea” on wedding night. “六礼” refers to the entire wedding process from the proposal to the completion of the marriage. This traditional wedding customs enable married couples to obtain the approval of ancestors. In ancient times, if men and women did not complete the process of “三茶六礼”, their marriage would not be recognized as a formally approved one.

For this term, it is obvious that Yangs gave a very full and complete reproduction of the original text and his translation “the proper ceremonies—three lots of tea and six presents” almost conveyed all the information involved in it to the target language readers. However, Lovell simplified this and just used “with all the ceremonies” to replace it. With different translation purposes, two translators adopt different translation methods and fulfill the function of translation in a proper way.

4.4 Analysis of Translation of Unique Local Expressions

The most intuitionistic dialectical elements in *The Divorce* would be those unique local expressions. These words or expressions are of distinct dialectical features. The rendering of these expressions is crucial to the success of

the translation of local literature. Look at the following example.

Eg. 6 连尖下巴少爷也低声下气地像一个瘪臭虫，还打“顺风锣”。 (Lu Xun, 2006)

Version 1: ...while even this young sharp-chin, with his soft talk and air of a flattened bug, was simply saying what was expected of him. (Yangs, 1981)

Version 2: ...and even Mr. Qi had clearly crossed the room himself, dragging that squeaky runt with a pointy chin with him. (Lovell, 2009)

“打‘顺风锣’” is a metaphor, which means following someone's words or doing things obediently. The use of this Shaoxing dialect is to ridicule the point-chinned man who flattered “七大人” and aided him with evil deeds. Among the two translations, Yangs translated the figurative meaning of the proverb, which led to a deviation from the original text while Lovell directly deleted it. In fact, it is found that Lovell adopted deletion frequently when dealing with this kind of dialect translation. Take another example,

Eg. 7
“本来新年正月又何必来劳动你们。但是，还是只为那件事，……我想，你们也闹得够了。不是已经有两年多了么？” (Lu Xun, 2006)

Version: This business should have been dealt with a long ago — saved you a trip so early in the New Year. I think you've caused quite enough trouble. Two years, it's been — isn't it that right? (Lovell, 2009)

In this example, Lovell used a subjunctive mood in her version, which means that if Aigu had got divorced, there would be no need for Zhuang Mushan to make a special visit during the New Year's Day. It is obvious that the dialect “劳动” in the original text is omitted, however, the translation, by way of the use of the special sentence pattern, still reflects Mr. Wei's blame and ridicule towards the Zhuang family.

Based on the analysis above, it could be concluded that the two translators take free translation as a reliable translation method when confronted with local unique expressions. The use of this translation strategy could be helpful for retaining the smoothness and coherence of the target text without creating too much “disturbance”. Besides, compared with Yangs, Lovell prefers translation method of deletion in dialect translation in order to “reduce readers' confusion”. (Lovell, 2009)

V. CONCLUSION

Through a careful research and comparison, this paper concludes that translators of the two versions employ a mix of translation strategies flexibly in the process of dialect translation, such as literal translation, free translation, transliteration, omission, addition, etc. and their versions could be considered as a great success in their respective historical period. However, some differences are presented in their dialect translation. For example, it can be seen that Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang favor the use of literal translation and transliteration more because they attach more importance to keeping the original flavor, showing great respect to the Chinese culture and literature, while comparatively Lovell uses deletion and free translation more often because she lays more emphasis on the acceptability of the versions, considering target language readers' needs and expectations. In a word, by adopting various translation methods, translators of the two versions display a unique and personal translation style and realize their translation purposes successfully and the ways how they deal with the translation of dialect could shed light on the research into and the practice of dialect translation in the future.

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