A Contrastive Study of English Source Text and Back-Translation Version and Its Application

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Back-translation is the translation of a translated text back into the language of the original text, which is an effective way to ensure accurate translation and assumes to be beneficial to improving learner's English competence. This thesis, based on the author's back translation training exercise, intends to make a contrastive study of source text in English and its back-translation precisely from the aspects of word choice, collocation, and sentence mechanics. Results have shown that by doing back-translation practice, the learners will strengthen their awareness of language differences between English and Chinese. Besides, as a special kind of translation, back-translation has its implications on English learning and Chinese-English translation, such as being a recitation method and testing tool.

Keywords: back-translation, contrastive analysis, language competence

Introduction

Introduction to the Translation Materials and Back-Translation Process

All the materials collected for research in this thesis are taken from the first chapter of a newly published book *Business Etiquette in Belt and Road Countries*. As the title indicates, the practical book provides key information about business culture, etiquette, and customs in the 63 countries along the Belt and Road. The first chapter of the book, including 11 countries in Southeast Asia, is a typical reflection of how the customs and etiquette differ from country to country in the aspects of dress code, greetings, meetings, negotiations, and gift-giving and how business culture affects the etiquette as well.

Back-translation is the process of translating a document that has already been translated into a foreign language back to the original language—preferably by an independent translator process. In this study, the original text (source text) is in English, precisely, about the relevant English articles from the online journals or websites concerning business etiquette in Southeast Asia. It is translated into another by the translator. The product of the process is TT1 (translated text). The translator (may or may not be the same person as the previous translation process. In this thesis, TT1 was produced by one of the chief compilers and authors of the book rather than the author of the thesis) treats TT1 as the source text in the second phase of the translation, i.e., back-translation and then translates it into the source language of the 1st phase. The final translated text is termed TT2.

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Research Significance

In the global English learning environment, translation has become a unique field warmly welcomed by Chinese English learners. As a result, Chinese academia have witnessed rapid progress in translation studies during the past decades, for one thing, translation is isolated from linguistic studies and has become an independent major, which inevitably soars the development of translation. For another, substantial theses have been published on translation studies. Among all the studies, back-translation, as one of the special types of translation, soon becomes a heated concern for translation researchers. The merits of back-translation can be evidenced in many studies. It is admitted that back-translation makes language learners become more aware of the differences between two languages, for example, in the choice of words, collocation and in different sentence structures. Thus it is worthy of being further explored, which FENG Qing-hua and LI Mei (2001) pointed out that “Back-translation remains a new territory awaiting exploring in translation studies and it is worth all kinds of research and discussion” (p. 436). However, the difficulty of learning back-translation is definitely a challenge for English learners, so few of them are on the study of it and cannot fully apply this method during their translation practice, let alone still less on the contrastive analysis of source text in English and its back-translation.

In view of this situation, the significance of studying and exploring the contrastive analysis of source text in English and its back-translation is self-evident, that is, to enhance the learners’ English language competence and translation skills and what is more to provide practical evidence for the back translation studies.

Studies on Back Translation

Definition and Translation Process

What is back-translation? Shuttleworth and Cowie (1997, pp. 14-15) pointed out that back-translation is a process in which a text which has been translated into given language is re-translated into the source language (SL). In a word, by its name back-translation is to translate A into B and then to translate B into A. Back-translation is directional, which is its essential difference from translation. If we say, for translation that one thousand translators may have one thousand Hamlets, then for back-translation that no matter how many translators there are, there can be only one. The procedure of back-translation has been used for various different purposes, i.e., An early use of the term can be found in Spaldin (1967), while Ivir defines it as Chapter One Elucidation of the Key Words in the Title “a check on the semantic content” (1981, p. 59) which can be used to reveal instances of *Formal Correspondence*. It is also used to refer to a *Gloss Translation* of the original Biblical text (Gutt, 1991). At the same time, back-translation is applied in contrastive linguistics as a technique for comparing specific syntactic, morphological, or lexical features from two or more languages.

From the definitions for back-translation mentioned above, a conclusion can be drawn that back-translation is regarded as an approach to evaluate whether the translation is accurate or not and it has already been used in numerous fields.

Application and Major Functions

Back translation proves to have a number of merits in translation teaching, language learning, and some other areas. The main functions can be summarized into five:

Firstly, it is to test the quality of translation. Back-translatability is a factor when judging translation and testing what has been lost during translation. According to FENG Qing-hua and LI Mei (2001), “the testing function is incomparable of other methods so it should play a more important role in translation practice” (p. 92).

Secondly, back translation is also conducive to both language and translation teaching in particular. ZHANG Chun-bai (1997, p. 53) also uses back-translation in his translation teaching. It helps teachers to identify the gaps of the students so that they can modify their way of teaching. Kavalisuskien (2007, p. 57) argued that back-translation was a significant way to strengthen the students’ awareness of transition in vocabulary, grammar, style, and language, in his eyes he believed that back-translation was the most effective activity in class.

Thirdly, back translation is a good way to reserve culture, which means, restoring the original by back-translating.

Fourthly, it is to improve the language learning. WANG Qi (2009) pointed out that by back-translation, learners will enhance awareness of the differences between the source and target language, which is a vital approach to improve their abilities in understanding and appreciating the original English text. After practicing back-translation repeatedly, learners can find it easier to learn both English and Chinese.

The fifth function is for research. Baker (2002) considers back translation as a researching tool to specify linguistic forms and culture-related issues in translation. Back-translation is beneficial for the learners to be aware of the similarities and differences of both languages, thus conducing to improve their writing skills as well as the translation competence.

Contrastive Analysis on Diction, Collocation, and Sentence Mechanics

Generally, back-translation can be analyzed from three levels, i.e., word/phrase level, sentence level, and paragraph/text level. In this essay, contrastive analysis is made from the aspects of word choice, collocation, and sentence mechanics.

In Word Choice

In translation practice, how to choose the right words in a specific context is still one of the difficulties for most language learners. Back-translation is a necessary way to ensure your translation of word choice accurate. As a matter of fact, the translator, after doing the comparison between ST and TT2, will improve his or her translation as a result of having the proper diction in the context.

Example (1):

ST (English original): If you wish to avoid the Bangkok gridlock, you can always commute by boat.

TT1 (Translated text): 要想避开曼谷的拥堵, 多选择水路。

TT2 (Back-translated text): If you want to avoid the traffic congestion in Bangkok, you can always commute by boat.

The two words “gridlock” and “congestion”, both explaining how bad the traffic is, are used separately in ST and TT2. When deciding which the more appropriate diction is, we should explore further and figure out the minute distinctions between the two words in meanings, associations, usages, etc.

The distinction of these two words might exist in connotation. To be more precise, “congestion” means the state of being overcrowded, especially with traffic or people (see

<http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/congestion>). According to *COBUILD Advanced British English Dictionary*, “gridlock” refers to the situation that exists when all the roads in a particular place are so full of vehicles that none of them can move. By contrast, “gridlock” is more accurate than the other word “congestion” in the context of explaining that the traffic is so bad that cars can hardly move.

Example (2):

ST (English original): Thai business people value relationship building, and saving face is paramount.

TT1 (Translated text): 泰国商人十分注重人际关系和面子。

TT2 (Back-translation text): Thai business people focus on building relationships, and saving face is paramount.

By contrast, the biggest distinction between ST and TT2 is the different words chosen, namely “value” and “focus on”, explaining the similar meaning. In order to figure out which word is closer in meaning to the original, the translator can analyze the context and what information that the source text will convey, that is, Thai businessmen consider relationship building and saving face the most important thing in business. In the dictionary, the word “value” means thinking something important and appreciating it whereas “focus on” only refers to center upon.

In Collocation

Collocation plays an important role in improving English learners’ language competence as well as making their writing more natural and native. Collocation is still a big challenge for most English learners in that there is a wide range of meanings embraced even a single common English word.

Example (3):

ST (English original): Yet its people continue to steadfastly uphold some strict tradition.

TT1 (Translated text): 尽管如此, 泰国人仍然坚守一些恪守教规的传统习惯。

TT2 (Back-translation text): However, the Thais still steadfastly persevere in some strict tradition.

TT2 is not the same as ST in collocation of the word “habit”. In ST and TT2, the biggest difference exists in the collocation. Both of the phrases “persevere in habits” and “uphold habits” mean that the tradition should be kept. In order to find which is more frequently used in most English context, the author searches them separately in the corpus. In the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), “uphold” and “persevere” are used as index words and “tradition” as the same collocates. Results can be seen that “uphold” has 23 hits, much more frequently used than that of “persevere” which has no hits implying that “persevere in tradition” is not acceptable or sounds strange to native English readers (see <http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/>):

SEARCH		FREQUENCY					CONTEXT				HELP		
CONTEXT: CLICK ON WORD (ALL SECTIONS), NUMBER (ONE SECTION), OR [CONTEXT] (SELECT) [HELP...]													COMPARE
	☐	CONTEXT	ALL ☐	SPOKEN ☐	FICTION ☐	MAGAZINE ☐	NEWSPAPER ☐	ACADEMIC ☐	1990-1994 ☐	1995-1999 ☐	2000-2004 ☐	2005-2009 ☐	2010-2015 ☐
1	☐	TRADITION	23	2	5	6	6	4	1	8	6	5	3

Figure 1. Frequency of collocates of “tradition” in coca.

CLICK FOR MORE CONTEXT					[?] <input type="button" value="SAVE LIST"/> <input type="button" value="CHOOSE LIST"/> <input type="button" value="CREATE NEW LIST"/> [?]		
1	2015	FIC	BkclngOnCorpse	A B C	" the one who presented a gift to the town groundhogStan had a tradition to uphold . Namely, no one could see the present before Lillypad. Many citizens had		
2	2013	FIC	WorldLitToday	A B C	wives were treated. I contemplated more. But what if Imran wanted everyone to uphold an ancient Muslim tradition ? When I told Ann this, she looked gravely at		
3	2012	NEWS	CSMonitor	A B C	on Harvard President Faust to immediately correct the record with the relevant federal agencies and uphold Harvard's 400-year-old tradition of abiding by the tr		
4	2009	FIC	Analog	A B C	chambers, down ways John never took. Besides, I got a tradition to uphold . " " What tradition ? " He grunted and assumed his " Noble Redman		
5	2008	MAG	SportsIII	A B C	of each page and on the back cover of his weekly playbooks are the words UPHOLD THE TRADITION . " It's something we want to feed into," says		
6	2007	ACAD	MusicEduc	A B C	, causes, and relevance to current events. Music educators, too, can uphold tradition while embracing the future. Creating a Movement for Change in Music Edu		
7	2006	SPOK	Fox_HC	A B C	enforce our laws. We're also a nation of immigrants. And we must uphold that tradition , which has strengthened our country in so many ways. These are		
8	2005	ACAD	AgricResrch	A B C	# Since becoming part of SPRRS in 1940, SPER has helped the Woodward lab uphold its tradition of keeping use of Plains land in sync with the needs of its		
9	2003	NEWS	Houston	A B C	said. # Junior Michael Rozelle has gone 13-6 in the pole vault and should uphold St. Thomas' tradition in that event. The Eagles managed a 1-2-4 finish last		
10	2002	FIC	U.S.Navallnst	A B C	leaders from John Paul Jones to Arleigh Burke. It is your turn now to uphold that proud tradition . There is little that you can do with your life more		
11	2002	MAG	CountryLiving	A B C	collectible is all about sentiment," says Sullivan. " Newlywed brides want to uphold family tradition and use grandma's china," but they only have four or		
12	2002	MAG	WorkMonth	A B C	the magazine enjoying a late summer lull. I decided it was a good time to uphold the tradition of being workaholic while the boss was otherwise occupied for		

Figure 2. Context of “uphold” and “tradition” in coca.

In Sentence Mechanics

Syntax is the way that words can be put together, or are put together, in order to make sentence. Sentence mechanics show the basics of sentence structure. However, both English and Chinese have their own sentence patterns, among which hypotaxis is characteristic of English while parataxis is a prominent feature of the Chinese language. If learners have a good awareness of hypotaxis and parataxis, it will help them to avoid this mistake and master C-E translation better, thus achieving their goal of enhancing language competence. There is no doubt that a contrastive analysis of source text in English and its back-translation is an effective way to be more aware of the difference between parataxis and hypotaxis in C-E translation. There are some examples:

Example (4):

ST (English original): Women should wear plain conservative dresses or suits. If skirts are worn, they should be knee-length or longer.

TT1 (Translated text): 女性穿简洁、保守的裙装或套装，裙子必须过膝。

TT2 (Back-translation text): Women are supposed to wear plain conservative dresses or suits, and skirts should be knee-length or longer.

Hypotaxis is syntactic subordination (as by a conjunction), according to the definition of Webster (see <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hypotaxis>). It is subordination of one clause to another, or when the clauses are coordinated or subordinated to one another within sentences. Hypotaxis is defined as a grammatical arrangement of constructs that work in the same way, but they play unequal role in a sentence (see <http://literarydevices.net/hypotaxis/>). In Example (4), the ST has two independent clauses in which the first conveys the key information of the sentence, that is, what may be appropriate for women to wear and the second explains further about more detailed information about the dress code. The second sentence about the length of the skirts provides additional information using subordinate clause to support the main clause with the subordinator “if”. The main feature is that the remaining clause subordinates the main description and amplifies the central idea.

However, in contrast, parataxis is in most cases self-evident in Chinese sentences. Parataxis refers to the realization of the connection of them without the help of the language form but the logical meaning of the words or phrases. Hypotaxis focuses more on the language cohesion in form, while parataxis focuses on the significance of the continuous coherence. In TT1, it is acceptable for the Chinese readers to identify two subjects and find no connectives between them. When translating the Chinese version back into English, the

translator should pay attention to the differences between the two languages and be fully aware of how English sentence patterns should be. In comparison, TT2 is also equivalent in meaning to the TT1. Both conform to the English way of sentence mechanics of using overt cohesion. The difference between TT2 and ST is that the connectives they use vary from one to the other. Subordinator “if” is used in ST whereas the coordinator “and” is used in TT2.

Example (5):

ST (English original): Traffic in Bangkok is so bad that many Thai business people conduct meetings from their cars via cell phones, laptops and fax machines.

TT1 (Translated text): 曼谷的交通状况不佳, 许多泰国商务人士只能在车里通过手机、电脑、传真机等方式组织会议。

TT2 (Back-translation text): The traffic conditions is bad in Bangkok, and many business people in Thailand conduct meeting from their cars via cell phones, laptops and fax machines.

Example (6):

ST (English original): Depending on the degree of superstition, the older generations of Singaporeans may tend to follow the rule of “avoiding white” more than the younger generations, due to the association of the color white with death and funerals.

TT1 (Translated text): 新加坡年长一辈人比年轻人的迷信思想更重, 往往更遵循不送白色礼物的习俗, 因为迷信说法是白色与死和葬礼有关。

TT2 (Back-translation text): The older generations of Singaporeans are more superstitious, so they may follow the rule of “avoiding white” more than the younger generations as they consider white as the association with death and funeral.

Sentences are nice little packages of words that come together to express complete thoughts. Generally, there are four sentence structures, namely simple sentences, compound sentences, complex sentences, and compound-complex sentence.¹ A poly-syndetic sentence style employs a great number of coordinating conjunctions (especially “and” and “but”). In a paratactic sentence style, phrases and clauses are arranged independently—coordinated rather than subordinated. In contrast to parataxis, hypotactic structures rely on subordinate clauses to establish clear relationships among different elements in a sentence. Participial phrases and absolutes can add vigor to our writing while adding information to our sentences.² In Example (5), the connector “so” is followed by that + clause expressing a result or effect in the ST. This pattern seems more compact and concise than the compound sentence structure with the coordinator “and” in TT2. In Example (6), the participial phrase at the initial part of the sentence of ST acts more vigorously than the complex-compound sentence structure of TT2.

In a nutshell, conclusion can be made that in Chinese English translation, it is necessary for translators to learn something about the comparison between English and Chinese and what is more, to get some knowledge about the English grammar and sentence mechanics. Doing back translation exercise may trigger more reflection on the distinction and better translation method.

¹ See <http://www.english-grammar-revolution.com/sentence-structure.html>.

² See <http://grammar.about.com/od/sentencecombining/a/Sentence-Structures-And-Styles.htm>.

Application of Back Translation Training to English Learning and Chinese-English Translation

Back-Translation as a Recitation Method

More reading, more writing, and more recitation are the shortcuts to improve learners' English language acquisition. Back-translation acts a recitation method to improve the learner's English in an all-around way. Simply taking her for an example, the author used to recite 30 minutes every day and the efforts of back-translation should not be denied. By back-translation, she gained plenty of new vocabularies, collocations, sentence patterns, and grammars. How long recitation should last depends on the learner's individual differences, environmental factors, etc. The most important point is that with the help of back-translation, recitation is more time-saving and effective, meanwhile, recitation can strengthen our memories which the traditional way may not, as you are supposed to compare the English original and back-translation text constantly. After doing translation practice repeatedly, you will have a deeper and higher understanding of English thus improving your language competence.

As a matter of fact, the process of insisting recitation is demanding. At the same time, the status of recitation is not optimistic, the answer to this question is that back-translation is worthy to be tried to seek the secrets of learning English better.

Back-Translation as a Testing Tool

Many scholars on translation studies mainly take back-translation as an approach to testing its quality, and the effectiveness of testing translation quality by back-translation is fully admitted by scholars both at home and abroad. In brief, back-translation is not a decisive factor, but can be an auxiliary tool in evaluating translation. And back-translation is also the most direct and reliable tool to inspect mistranslations (FENG, 2001). On the other hand, ZHANG Chun-bai (1997) proposed that he had applied back-translation as a tool in Chinese-English translation teaching and got good results, so it is a useful way to use back-translation as a teaching tool in English teaching. With the method of applying back-translation in English teaching, the English learners can take advantage of this opportunity to check their competence of foreign language acquisition when their teachers ask them to do back-translation.

By back translation practice, the translation will become more native and idiomatic.

Back-Translation as Rudiments to Translation Skills

As one of the special types of translation skill, HE Xian-bin (2002) pointed out that "Besides testing translation, back-translation can also be used as a translation strategy in translation teaching, and an auxiliary tool in language studies and translation studies" (p. 4).

If English learners determined to acquire translations well, they should do more back-translation. Since she studied translation courses, the author of the thesis insisted on doing practices: translating what is assigned and then doing the proof-reading after making a specific comparison between the source text and the back translation version. In this way, she has increased her vocabularies, improved the sentence patterns, and been more familiar to how English is organized. The disadvantage of doing back translation is that it is time-consuming and not that effective sometimes. The process took up too much time. In order to improve, the author chose several texts of the same topic at one time and then she tried to recite them in English according to the Chinese, in this way, she can

master the same type of the words choice, collocations, and sentence patterns of that topic. It cannot be denied that back-translation is a useful translation skill in Chinese English translation.

Conclusion

In the field of translation studies, back-translation has not been widely concerned by scholars. The thesis has been made to have a contrastive analysis of source text in English and its back-translation in word choice, collocation, and syntactic level, and also concluded some implications of this translation method. The author quotes her own back translation experience to explain how the English learners who study translation will have an improvement in English after having taken back-translation training. What is more, back-translation can help English learners better recognize the differences between English and Chinese as well as learn the translation skills and techniques. In other word, the back-translation can improve English learners' both C-E and E-C translation competence and their awareness of language learning. Most importantly, back-translation has been testified to have a series of advantages in recitation, translation testing, and some other areas, all of which are the key to making English learners good at translation.

The thesis is far from perfect, however, as it only discusses the influence of back-translation from word choice, collocation, and syntactic level neglecting other aspects such as the paragraph/text of the translated text. There still exists much room for further study.

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