

A study on the Untranslatability of Dialect in Black Literature

Liu Qing

School of Foreign Language, China West Normal University

Nanchong, China

Email: 759905773@qq.com

Published: 16 May 2019

Copyright © Qing.

Abstract

In the black literature, the authors choose to use a large number of dialects in their creation for the purpose of reflecting their special writing style, shaping characters and achieving ideal expression effect. In the process of literary translation, the translators have to find an appropriate way to translate these dialects, assuring the message can be conveyed completely and the effects can be achieved maximally. However, the different cultural backgrounds decide the untranslatability of dialects. This paper, comparing and analyzing three different types of dialect translations, tries to demonstrate the reason why dialects cannot be translated accurately.

Key words: dialect translation; untranslatability; black literature

1. Introduction

As early as the 19th century, the dialect translation had attracted researchers' attention. After the 1980s, the study of dialects continued to deepen. Since the 1990s, the study of dialect translation has turned to investigate the historical, social and cultural context of translation. In the 21st century, there has been a small upsurge in the study of dialect translation. However, the study of dialect translation in China is still in a relatively marginal state.

Cite this article: Qing, L. (2019). A study on the Untranslatability of Dialect in Black Literature. *International Journal of Liberal Arts and Social Science*, 7(4), 97-102.

This paper is going to take the translations of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Wang Jiaxiang (2017), *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Xu Ruzhi (2002), and *Gone with the Wind* by Fu Donghua (1988) for example, comparing and analyzing the dialect translation in these three black novels. In fact, when it comes to the dialects translation, the authors in the three black novels respectively adopted three different translation strategies. Through the analysis of the three translation strategies, this paper aims to explore the cultural untranslatability behind the dialect translation.

2. Dialects and Culture

Dialects refer to the language variety whose grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation are different from other language. It is often divided into social dialects and regional dialects. Social dialects are social variants formed by social differences in occupation, class, age, gender, culture and other aspects among social members in the same region. Regional dialects are variations of languages formed by regional differences, reflecting lopsided development in language of different regions. Social dialects are prevalent in a certain class, while regional dialects are prevalent in a certain region.

Black English, as a special social dialect, has its special status in the American language system and social system. For a long time, it has formed a systematic “variant” in pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar and other aspects. For historical reasons, there are a lot of black people living in the United States, which has become an eye-catching social class in the American society. The language they use also enjoys a unique name, Black English, because of its distinctive national characteristics. In recent decades, however, further research shows that Black English is actually not a very accurate term. Black English not only formed by the ethnic differences and different form of language variation, but also related to economic status, education level and other social factors. Therefore, American Black English has gradually become an important social dialect at present, rather than a national dialect. Black English, on the one hand, is not used by all black Americans. That is to say, the Black English, as a variant of English, is used by black people of low economic status in American society, or those who have risen to the middle income level but still keep in touch with the original class. On the other hand, there are many people who speak Black English are not black.

Chinese dialects, in comparison with the black dialects, are purely serve as regional dialects. In China, with a vast territory and a large population, different degrees of differentiation and unification have appeared in the process of social development, and dialects have gradually emerged. There are many factors contributing to the formation of dialects, including social, historical and geographical factors, such as the long-term small-scale peasant economy, the fragmentation of society, the migration of population, and the separation of mountains and rivers. There are also factors that belong to the language itself, such as the imbalance of language development and the conflicts between different languages. Among several modern Chinese dialects in China, the northern dialects can be regarded as the ancient Chinese developed in the vast northern region after thousands of years, while the rest dialects were formed gradually by the northern residents who continuously moved south in history.

We can draw a conclusion that the translators can never avoid the differences imposed by different culture. When the author uses the social dialect of Black English to write, he or she obviously aims to

highlight the differences of race, class and education. However, for Chinese readers, these differences are hard to identify in dialects. Therefore, it is so challenging a problem for the translator to translate this specific literary language. In the process of dialect translation, how can the translator do his best? What translation strategies can be adopted to reflect the original intention and reproduce the original image? Both questions are difficult to answer.

3. Case Study from Three Black Novels

Berezowski (1997), a Polish scholar, summarized ten strategies for the translation of dialects: 1) neutralize the expressions of source dialects, that is, convert them into target lingua franca; 2) add the rural and colloquial dialect vocabulary of the source language; 3) excerpt and translation of some source dialect expressions; 4) combination of partial translation and transliteration; 5) highlight the language errors of social dialect users in the source text; 6) delete the expressions with obvious dialect features of the source language, but try to retain the dialect address of the source language; 7) substitute pidgin in the target language for the dialect expression of the source language; 8) replace the source dialect expression with an imaginary language variant of the target language; 9) replace the source dialect expression with the colloquial expression in the target language; 10) replace the expression of the source language dialect with the target language's rural dialect. Then this paper will discuss three strategies and make comments on their effects.

3.1 Neutralize the expressions of source dialects

The first translation strategy analyzed in this chapter falls into the first category of the ten dialect translation strategies: neutering the expressions of source dialects, that is, transforming them into target lingua franca.

Wang Jiaxiang used this strategy in his translation of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Jenny's childhood is spent without racial discrimination. At first, she didn't know she was black. She lived in the back yard of the white and always stayed with the white children. The dialect of the black people is an important symbol of the identity of the characters in the novel and also an important means to reflect the racial difference in the literary works.

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, one of the characters who had an important influence on the life of the heroine Jenny and played an important role in promoting the plot of the story was Nanny, Jenny's grandmother. Wang Jiaxiang translated her name as 阿妈 in his translation. 阿妈 represents the image of traditional black women suffering from racial discrimination and oppression and destruction by the patriarchal society. 阿妈 is a black at the bottom of the society and a black woman at the bottom of the patriarchal. The author uses a lot of dialect dialogue to shape this character portrayal.

After she spotted Jenny and Johnny Taylor kissing at the door, she said, "Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his women folks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see." Here, the original author Zora

Neale Hurston used such kind of dialect in order to strengthen the authenticity of the novel, indicating that its users are discriminated against, of low status, and of low education level. Because of this, Nanny, as the ultimate victim of this unequal society, also has the determination to get rid of her fate and places her hope on her future generations. Therefore, she hopes Jenny can marry Logan who has land and house, so that she can be protected from repeating her mistakes. Dialects here have such a strong power in shaping characters and promoting the plot.

Here, Wang Jiexiang translated the black dialects into standard Chinese, “亲爱的，就我所知道的，白人是一切的主宰，也许在远处海洋中的什么地方黑人在掌权，但我们没看见，不知道。白人扔下担子叫黑人男人去挑，他挑了起来，因为不挑不行，可他不挑走，把担子交给了家里的女人。就我所知，黑女人在世界上是头骡子。”By converting the dialects into target lingua franca, Wang makes the translation easy to understand. However, this kind of formal and rigid language prevents readers from clearly understanding the story content, story background and the special cultural identity of the characters. In this way, there will be no difference between the words of black people and white people in the translation. The standard language in the translation will lose the difference that the original text wants to show and lose a lot of characteristics of the original text. In a word, translating source text into standard language will damage the cultural intention of the original text and weaken its expression and sense of identity.

3.2 Highlight the language errors

The second translation strategy analyzed in this chapter is the fifth translation strategy proposed by Berezowski: highlighting the language errors of social dialect users in the source text. XuRuzhi (2002) adopted this strategy in translating the Black English in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

For example, when Jim arrived in Cairo, he said, “Pooty soon I’ll be a-shout ‘n for joy, en I’ll say, it is all on accounts o’ Huck; I’m a free man, en I couldn’t ever Ben free ef it hadn’t ben for Huck.”Here, the author uses black dialect to write in order to shape the literary image of the black, Jim. Although he is a slave, he is not inferior or humble, but a brave, strong, faithful, reliable, thoughtful and emotional man.

Here, Xu translated it into, “马上，我就要欢呼（呼）啦。我就要说，这一切，都得归工（功）赫克。我是个自由人啦，可要不是赫克，我哪里会自由呢。全是赫克干成工（功）的。杰姆永生永系（世）忘不掉你，赫克，你是我最好的朋有（友），你也是我杰姆唯一的一个朋有（友）。”He replaces the original word with a similar pronunciation, in order to reflect the speaker’s non-standard language. In this way, the spoken language of the translation is more concentrated, reflecting the vivid characteristics of the original text. The modifications are generally understandable and do not cause too much ambiguity. However, it is undeniable that this translation method, to a large extent, is also controversial. By highlighting the language errors, it affects the smoothness and fluency of the original text. The use of wrong words in the translation cannot reflect the linguistic characteristics of the original text. Black English is a special language variant with its unique phonetic and grammatical features. This doesn’t mean that Jim can’t speak his own language, while the Chinese language errors merely mean that someone says something wrong. Therefore, it is possible to transfigure the character portrayal of Jim in this kind of translation. Therefore, the method of replacing the original word with a similar pronunciation to reflect the

speaker's non-standard language is also remained to be discussed.

3.3 Replace the source language dialects with the target language dialects

The third translation strategy analyzed in this chapter is the tenth translation strategy proposed by Berezowski: substituting the rural dialect of the target language for the dialect expression of the source language, that is, dialect to dialect translation. Fu Donghua's translation of *Gone with the Wind* uses this method. Because the novel describes the story of the American Revolution, southern American dialects, especially Black English, can be seen everywhere in the article.

Like what the nanny said, "So you need a spang new pretty dress ter borry money wid dat doan lissen jet 'right ter me. An' you ain 'sayin' whardemonryter come from."

Fu translated it into, "那么你要新衣服是为借钱用的了,这种事情俺不大听说过,而且你又不肯说向谁借钱。" In this shorter paragraph, the word "俺" is a typical Chinese dialect which comes from Shandong Province. Fu adopted this dialect to describe the identity of the black nanny is so-called dialect to dialect. Through this translation strategy, Chinese readers can clearly feel that the black nanny has not received a good education and has a certain intimacy to the translation. However, because of the special cultural background of black people, the translation of Black English has certain value orientation. Once the pattern of Negro English being translated into a certain dialect of Chinese is fixed, over time, people will subconsciously compare or even equate the status of black with that of Chinese speakers of the dialect. Moreover, black dialects have special functions such as social status and education level, which are different from Chinese regional dialects and inconsistent with Chinese dialect culture. This kind of translation is not only unfair to some Chinese readers, but also distorts their understanding of black culture. So this approach is controversial.

4. Conclusion

In a nutshell, there is no perfect way to translate black dialect because its untranslatability. Black dialect reflects the image and characteristics of the black people and some other race. In order to introduce the black to the Chinese readers accurately, the appropriateness of the translation method used by the translator affects the spread of the different culture. However, due to the differences in cultural background, way of thinking, values and readers' expectations, any existing translation strategy cannot reflect the original intention of source text and fail to reproduce the character portrayal in the original text. Dialect itself bears untranslatability, while the untranslatability of culture is hidden behind the dialect.

References

- [1] Margaret Mitchell. (2008). *Gone with the wind*[M]. Simon & Schuster US
- [2] Mark Twain. (2006). *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*[M]. Beijing Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press

[3] Zora Neale Hurston. (1998). *Their Eyes Were Watching God* [M]. Harper Perennial Modern Classics

[4] LuoXinzhang, ChenYing, Ed. (2009). *Translation Anthology* [M]. Beijing: Commercial Press.

[5] Liu Junping. (2009). *General History of Western Translation Theory* [M]. Wuhan:
Wuhan University press

[6] XuRuzhi. (2002). Mark Twain. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* [M]. Yilin press,