

On Chinese-and-English Differences and Plain English of the Translation of Chinese Calligraphy: A Case Study of *Amazing Characters & Magic Brushwork*

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Abstract:

Chinese calligraphy is fine traditional Chinese culture. In the context of China's "Go Out" Policy, the translated works about Chinese calligraphy keep growing in number, but the total number does not amount to much. The same holds true for the translation studies on Chinese calligraphy, and no guiding theories, which are widely accepted or systematic, have come into being. Therefore, it is still of great necessity to further the translation studies and practice of Chinese calligraphy. This paper is to analyze the Chinese-English text of *Amazing Characters & Magic Brushwork* at the syntactic level, and emphasizes its Chinese-and-English differences: para-tactic vs. hypo-tactic, personal vs. impersonal, and active vs. passive, and the application of Plain English in the text: to simplify the pattern, to omit the category nouns, and to use strong verbs, hoping to provide some reference for the translation of Chinese calligraphy.

Keywords:

Chinese Calligraphy, Translation, Chinese-and-English Differences, Plain English

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background and Significance

Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2012, Chinese President Xi Jinping has stressed repeatedly that we should make a good job of external publicity, better tell China's stories, and present to the world a view of China that is true, multidimensional and panoramic, thus better building our country's international image in an all-round way. China, with thousands of years of history and civilization, is opening up to the rest of the world with unprecedented breadth and depth [1], but the Chinese culture is still marginalized abroad [2]. Western countries are unfamiliar with the Chinese culture, thus leading to cultural misinterpretations and misunderstandings from time to time.

Culture refers to something that represents the highest level of people's creativity in a certain period of time and is inspiring, informative, and referential to the creations of its kind. [3] In today's world, countries are closely connected, bringing about much more intercultural interactions where culture plays an increasingly bigger role. Translation studies are essential to intercultural communications, and culture has become the object of translation practice and studies with the rise of the "cultural turn" in translation studies. [4] Among Chinese culture, one of the oldest cultures, Chinese calligraphy is a vital part and ranks first in the Top Ten China's National Treasures. Chinese calligraphy has been practiced abroad as early as thousands of years ago, and is still influencing countries such as Japan, Korea and Vietnam. Doing a good job of inheriting and developing Chinese calligraphy can lead the development of Chinese culture to a certain degree, but now the international dissemination effect of Chinese calligraphy is not satisfactory.

About Chinese calligraphy, studies are growing, research fields and perspectives are increasing, and certain achievements have been made by scholars. However, high-quality translated works about Chinese calligraphy are in a small number, and the unsatisfied works have stopped Chinese calligraphy from "going global" in a faster manner. Internationally-accepted works rather than self-boasting ones should be the outcomes expected in translating traditional Chinese culture into English. Hence, this study of the translation of Chinese calligraphy, based on the analysis of *Amazing Characters & Magic Brushwork*, may help to enrich the academic researches, convey the connotations of Chinese culture, and provide some reference for the translation of Chinese calligraphy, so as to eliminate some deeply-rooted stereotypes about Chinese culture held by Western countries and further enhance China's cultural soft power in the international arena.

1.2. *Amazing Characters & Magic Brushwork*

Amazing Characters & Magic Brushwork, authored by Prof. Wang Xiaojun and published by Beijing Language and Culture University Press in 2009, is a textbook for the compulsory course of Chinese Language and Literature. The textbook is written in Chinese and English, thus making itself a typical work of the translation of Chinese calligraphy. Rich in exquisite pictures and literary compositions, this book is designed for the readers whose mother tongue is not Chinese. It focuses on both the theoretical and practical knowledge about Chinese characters and calligraphy, detailing the stroke order and pattern of characters, and the development and appreciation of calligraphy. Besides, it is accompanied by an exercise book so that reader or calligraphy learners can consolidate and practice what they have learned in a reinforcing way.

2. Chinese-and-English Differences and Plain English

2.1. *Chinese-and-English Differences*

Each nation lives in a specific natural geographical environment and has its own history and culture, thereby forming its unique way of thinking. [5] Language is the direct embodiment of thinking. Chinese and English come from different language families, with the former a Sino-Tibetan language and the latter a Indo-European one. For that reason, there are quite many disparities between the two languages when it comes to the sentence building or syntax.

In *Contrastive Studies of English and Chinese*, Prof. Lian [5] has concluded ten language differences between English and Chinese, of which three will be used as the

analysis focus in this paper: para-tactic vs. hypo-tactic, personal vs. impersonal, and active vs. passive. Grounded on these language disparities, translators and interpreters, when translating between the two languages, should adopt translation strategies, methods, and techniques in a flexible way, in order to improve the translation quality by better conveying both the informative and communicative intentions of the original text.

2.2. Plain English

Plain English is, namely, the concise yet expressive language, but it is by no means an over-simplified language, nor is it the language without the beauty of literary compositions. It is a highly expressive language that enables effective communication. Plain English is not the traditional literary and artistic language [6], but actually a way of conveying information [7]. It is a reader-centered language (or writer responsible language), and also a time-saving and an easy-to-understand writing style hailed and practiced by many countries and international organizations. Translation and writing are the same, only with a different frame of reference [6], making it of significance to use Plain English in translation when necessary.

In *Theory and Practice of Non-literary Translation*, Prof. Li [6] has generalized the basic principles of Plain English (writing), of which three will be used as the analysis focus in this paper: to simplify the pattern, to omit category nouns, and to adopt strong verbs. Plain English is a requirement for translators in many practical text translation (particularly the reader-centred translation), in that the use of Plain English can reduce translationese and ensure readability in translation.

2.2.1. Development of Plain English

On top of being the principle for English writing and translation, Plain English is an international movement that has grown and thrived in English-speaking countries. During the 1910s and 1920s, the “Plain English Movement” came at a time when the Vernacular Language Movement in China took place, though the concept or the term “Plain English” was not explicitly brought out. The origin of the Plain English can be traced back to *The Element of Style*, published in the 1910s, of which the content was basically the same as that of Plain English known to us today.

Over the past decades, Plain English has made its presence in many countries, with the UK and US as its strong advocates. Nowadays, it has been widely used in various fields including law, commerce, politics, translation and technology. A brief review of the development of Plain English in the UK and US will be made in the followings.

In the UK, the Plain English Campaign, established in 1979, defined Plain English as “something that the intended audience can read, understand and act upon the first time they read it”. In 1982, the UK government formally introduced a policy of the use of Plain English. In 1999, the UK legal system was reformed to prohibit the use of non-Plain English (like Latin words) in civil courts in England. Ever since 2011, December 9 was designated as Plain English Day by the Campaign.

In the US, the federal government has taken Plain English to the “political” stage. [6] In 1978, President Carter issued orders to make government regulations “cost-effective and easy-to-understand”, which were abolished by President Reagan in 1981. In 1998, President Clinton issued a president memorandum to ask government organs to adopt Plain English in written materials, which has still not been repealed. In 2010, President Obama signed the US Plain Writing Act. This plain writing act defines plain

language as the “writing that is clear, concise, well-organized, and follows other best practices appropriate to the subject or field and intended audience”. Ever since then, October 13 was set as International Plain English Day.

2.2.2. Practical Research on Plain English

The data from CNKI show that the practical studies on Plain English are mainly the dissertations of master’s degree in translation. Hao [8] analyzed the influence of Plain English over modern legal English and its translation, initiating the practical study of Plain English in China. Jiang [9] studied the application of Plain English principles in translating research reports on investment environment, thus enriching its application fields or text types and pointing out that these principles should be used based on the interpretation of the original meaning and the author’s intentions. Zhang [10] adopted Plain English in the translation of the traditional Chinese heritage text, taking the lead in studying traditional Chinese culture translation with Plain English.

In general, Plain English has taken hold as a means of communicating effectively with the public. [6] Academic research about Plain English has expanded into many fields. Hence, it is reasonable and feasible to employ Plain English principles into the Chinese-to-English translation of cultural text.

3. Case Analysis

Case analysis, the major part of this paper, is to analyze the sentence translation, including the source text (ST) and target text (TT), in *Amazing Characters & Magic Brushwork*, from the perspective of three linguistic differences between Chinese and English (para-tactic vs. hypo-tactic, personal vs. impersonal, and active vs. Passive), and three principles of Plain English (to simplify the pattern, to omit category nouns, and to adopt strong verbs).

3.1. Chinese-and-English Differences

In *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, the famous American linguist, Nida [11] put forth that there are four steps in the process of translation: analysis, transfer, restructuring and testing. The “testing” part can directly reflect the translation quality. To overcome cultural barriers and achieve the same communicative effect of the ST in the TT, the linguistic features of Chinese and English and their language differences should be taken into account in the process of translation or interpreting. The Chinese text of *Amazing Characters & Magic Brushwork* is dominated by short sentences, supplemented by long sentences, and some sentence patterns unique to Chinese, such as null-subject sentences, compact sentences and the ones with logic hidden. Since the two languages differ in sentence patterns, this section is to summarize and analyze three language differences between them through the examples selected from the text: para-tactic vs. hypo-tactic, personal vs. impersonal, and active vs. passive.

3.1.1. Para-tactic vs. Hypo-tactic

Chinese is a semantic language, while English is a morphological one. Speaking of sentence building, Chinese is about parataxis, focusing on coherence in meaning, whereas English is about hypotaxis, stressing cohesion in form. [5] In other words, grammatical and logical relations in Chinese are often implied between lines and expressed through word order, while they are done through linguistic connectives in

English. Translation is also a logical activity so that the logical relations of the ST should be maintained in the TT.

Example 1

ST: 甲骨文在汉字的形成与发展中起着承前启后的作用，而且中国汉字经历了从象形到抽象的复杂的转变进化过程。

TT: The bone and shell script **arose along with** the increasing complexity of the early Chinese writing system, **becoming** a link between earlier primitive writing and the complex writing system of today, **where** Chinese characters developed from pictograms to more abstract and sophisticated forms.

Example 2

ST: 有文字就有书法，有书法就有不同的书体。

TT: It is true that **where there** is a writing system, **there** is calligraphy; and **where there** is calligraphy, **there** are different approaches and writing styles.

The ST of Example 1 is a Chinese parallel sentence with two subjects: “甲骨文(bone and shell script)” and “中国汉字(Chinese characters)”, and loose logic. There is no obvious connective word in the ST in that the coherence in Chinese is achieved through the word order and its meaning. But the coherence in English is obtained by using cohesion means. Therefore, the TT has adopted the “..., doing ...” structure and an attributive clause started by the connector “where” to avoid changing the subject of the main clause, that is to avoid changing the main theme of the original text, making the para-tactic Chinese into hypo-tactic English. On top of that, in this example, “经历从……到……的进化过程(undergo the process of evolution from ... to ...)” has been translated into the strong verb “developed”, personifying the subject and making the translated text dynamic. The ST of Example 2 is a Chinese compact sentence. A compact sentence in Chinese is compressed by several clauses with the logic hidden and usually takes the form of one short single sentence, which can express parallelism, transitivity, concession and other logical relations. [5] In translation, it is significant to clarify the logical relations involved as “logic is translators’ last ‘trump card’ and the basic element they must possess” [12]. The hidden logic of this ST (“有……就有……”) is a conditional one. In TT of Example 2, the structure of the English proverb “**Where there** is a will, **there** is a way.” has been borrowed to fully unveil and express the logic of ST and to meet the expectations of target readers.

3.1.2. Personal vs. Impersonal

English commonly uses sentences with impersonal subjects, which allows things to be presented objectively; and Chinese uses sentences with personal subjects, which tends to narrate things from human perspective. [5] Impersonal sentences are broadly used in English, especially in its written language genres, such as news, proeses, and documents. Since there are many personal sentences in the original text, attention should be paid to the conversion of subjects (from personal to impersonal) so as to produce the translated text that conforms to the language features of English. The objectivity of academic English should be ensured in that the source text contains certain academic content.

Example 3

ST: 当人们开始书写的时候，他们也开始采用艺术的形式，试图写得美观，以满足各种需要。

TT: **The purpose of** writing in calligraphy is to **try** to write in an artistic style to look elegant or to meet a special need.

The ST of this example is a compound sentence with “人们(people)” and “他们(they)” as the subjects. In the TT, “书写(write)” and “试图(attempt)” has been rendered into “the purpose of writing” as the inanimate subject in a combined way, and the animate verb phrase “try to do ...” has been used as the predicate. A good few English impersonal sentences are built by employing abstract nouns as “inanimate subjects” in conjunction with “animate verbs” (such as “witness” and “see”). The “inanimate subject” refers to abstract concepts including feelings, time and place; and “animate verb” human action or behaviour. [5] These sentences, formed by inanimate subjects and animate verbs, are simple in grammatical analysis, but they can express the semantics as compound sentences do. [5] In this example, a Chinese compound sentence is turned into a simple English sentence without altering its meaning and logic, presenting an objective and compact text.

3.1.3. Active vs. Passive

Sentences in passive voice are not rare phenomena in both Chinese and English. The way of thinking of westerners is analytical; and that of Chinese people is holistic. Consequently, sentences in active voice are much more widely used in Chinese, while the ones in passive voice in English. [5] During the process of C-E translation, it is necessary to change the sentence voices in a flexible way in order to keep in line with the reading habits and expectations of target readers.

Example 4

ST: 看起来数量惊人, 但是其中多数的汉字很少**使用**。

TT: Although this may seem a great number of characters, many of those characters **are seldom used**.

Example 5

ST: 但在书法创作中, 人们还常常**使用**繁体字形, 以达到美观的效果。

TT: However, traditional characters **are often used** in calligraphic works to achieve the aesthetic effect.

The ST of Example 4 is an unmarked passive sentence in Chinese. There are two types of passive sentences in Chinese: marked ones and unmarked ones, in which the former are indicated by the character “被” or its equivalents, and the latter “use the active form to express the passive meaning [5]”. In this ST, the subject is “汉字(characters)”, and the predicate is “使用(use)”. As there is no verb conjugation in Chinese, unlike in English, this sentence looks like an active sentence, but the logic between the subject “汉字(characters)” and “使用(use)” should be that the subject is the undergoer of the action. As a result, the formal active Chinese sentence (unmarked passive sentence) has been translated into a passive English sentence indicated by the structure “are seldom used”, reproducing the same logic of the ST and conforming to the tendency of English to use passive voice. The ST of Example 5 is an active voice Chinese sentence, with “人们(people)” its subject and “使用(use)” its predicate. The text is written to introduce traditional Chinese characters, so the theme or the focus of the text should be traditional characters. If the ST is translated in line with its original structure into “But during calligraphic creation, people often use traditional characters to achieve the aesthetic effect.”, the translated text will be less expressive because the

theme of the ST has been shifted. If the agent is less important than the patient or the latter needs to be highlighted, passive voice is often used in English sentence building. [5] Therefore, in the TT, “traditional characters” has been put as the subject to meet readers’ expectations, and the shift of subjects leads to the change of voices to better help readers perceive the theme and meaning of the sentence.

3.2. Application of Plain English

According to Bühler, the three main functions of language are the expressive, the informative — he called it ‘representation’ — and the vocative (‘appeal’) functions: these are the main purposes of using language. [13] In accordance with Newmark’s language functions, textbooks can be roughly classified as the informative text to serve as the provider of necessary information for target readers. Therefore, the language function of *Amazing Characters & Magic Brushwork* is to offer information with expressive and vocative functions complemented. To produce the translated text that is concise and comprehensible, Plain English is worth promoting and applying in translation. This section is to summarize and analyze three principles of Plain English embodied in the translated text: to simplify the pattern, to omit category nouns, and to adopt strong verbs.

3.2.1. To Simplify the Pattern

There are disparities in way of thinking between peoples from China and western countries, with Chinese language being supple and English rigid. Text or discourse is the largest linguistic unit of a certain type of material. The rationality of text layout or pattern is an important criterion for assessing the translation quality. In the translation process, therefore, translators should work to add or subtract words, adjust word order, and simplify the pattern of a paragraph or paragraphs when necessary in an effort to overcome the differences in syntactic or textual pattern between Chinese and English.

Example 6

ST: “好的书写”至少包含两个方面的意思：首先是书写的形式要正确，是约定俗成的语言符号，得到使用同一种语言的大众的认可；其次是要把各种符号协调地组合到一起，通过自然和谐的书写形式，使人们得到视觉上和精神上的享受。

TT: It requires: **(1)** a sure knowledge of the correct form of writing, i.e. the conventional signs by which language can be communicated; and **(2)** the skill to inscribe them with a harmonious ordering of various parts, so that the knowing eye will see the composition as a work of art.

In the ST of Example 6, “……至少包含两个方面的意思：首先是……；其次是……” is arranged in a clear deduction logic, and can be literally rendered into “... at least contains two parts: the first is ...; and the second is ...”. Plain English must have clear structure and logic: for all information units, the main points should be stated first and then explained and justified. [6] The TT has integrated the logic by using Arabic numerals with brackets to point out the main points, which expresses the information in a direct and highlighted manner, so that target readers can understand the information focus and logic at a glance.

3.2.2. To Omit Category Nouns

Category nouns refer to the nominal words that tend to add categories in naming in China. The use of category words has been a linguistic habit in Chinese language.

However, such words, when translated into English, do not add any substance but will make sentences lengthy. [6] In English, it is usually redundant to use category words to qualify a word when the word itself has already specified its own category, making it reasonable to omit category nouns in C-E translation.

Example 7

ST: 学习书法不仅要有基本的理论知识，同时需要大量的练习。

TT: Learning Chinese calligraphy requires not only mastery of the basic theory, but also a lot of practice.

In the ST of this example, “理论(theory)” is part of “知识(knowledge)”, and “知识” is the superordinate of “理论”, making “知识” a category noun phrase. If “理论知识” is literally translated into “the knowledge of theory”, the meaning of the core phrase “理论(theory)” will be, to some extent, weakened by the category word “知识(knowledge)”, which is redundant. During the C-E translation, it is crucial to sort out category words, omit them flexibly, and highlight the meaning of the key words, that is, “to take the concrete and discard the general”. The TT, therefore, has stressed the core meaning via omitting the category word, otherwise the translated text would be logically repetitive and cumbersome.

3.2.3. To Adopt Strong Verbs

Strong verbs express a strong purpose or strong emotional content. These verbs are often used to describe a specific action or behaviour. In English, strong verbs generally have their abstract noun forms, which can be replaced by “a weak verb and their cognate abstract nouns” as the predicate of a sentence, for example, “implement an investigation of ...” substituted for “investigate ...”. Such replacement will make sentences more static. This debilitated style of expression tends to make the sentence wordy, verbose and lifeless, which is, hence, not recommended. [6] The use of strong verbs can make sentences way concise. [5]

Example 8

ST: 中国有一句俗语：“见字如见人。”这句话恰恰反映出中国人长期以来的信念，即从一纸书写中就可以窥测到书写者的教育水平、社会地位和内在的性格人品。

TT: There is a common saying in China, “one’s handwriting mirrors his face”. This saying explains the belief held up by Chinese—just a piece of calligraphic work reveals the writer’s education level, social status, personal character and spirit.

In the ST of Example 8, “见字如见人” is a compact sentence and also a saying, meaning “If one looks at the words written by a person, he can tell what the person looks like.”. If the phrase is translated directly into a sentence with an adverbial clause led by “if”, it would make the text quite long, and little philosophical and archaic style of the ST could be shown. In the TT, the strong verb “mirror” has been applied to convey the meaning of “见人(to reflect a person’s face)”, retaining the style of the aphorism nearly in the same length of the ST. In the ST, the sentence “从一纸中就可以窥测到……” is a Chinese null-subject sentence. In the TT, the impersonal subject (work) has been used, and the animate verb (a strong verb) “reveal” has been adopted, which makes the translation more objective and vivid.

4. Conclusions

Calligraphy is at the heart of Chinese culture and a garden unique to the Chinese soul. [14] In 2009, the Chinese calligraphy was inscribed onto the UNESCO World Heritage List, which not only enhanced the influence of Chinese calligraphy in the world, but also gave a great impetus to the translation practice and study of the art of Chinese calligraphy in China, bringing related research papers and results unseen before. [15] However, there is still a lack of groundbreaking research results in the academic community.

This paper analyzes the translation of the bilingual textbook *Amazing Characters & Magic Brushwork* by adopting the Chinese-and-English language differences and the principles of Plain English as the research guiders. Non-literary translation generically refers to document translation, pragmatic translation, or applied translation. The most distinct difference between literature and non-literature is that the former is fictional while the latter is based on facts. [6] The research object is a textbook, which mainly details the basics of Chinese characters and calligraphy, as well as instruction on how to practice calligraphy, which belongs to the non-literary text. This research finds out that the Chinese-and-English language differences and principles of Plain English are frequently adopted in the English translation of the book and can be used to produce a translated text that is concise and in line with the reading habits and expectations of target readers.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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