



A Study on the Chinese Translation of Lyrics from the Perspective of Translation Aesthetics —Taking Bob Dylan’s Lyrics as an Example

Ke Chen, Qiao Peng

School of Foreign Languages, Xi’an Shiyou University, Xi’an, China

Email: 1917223384@qq.com

How to cite this paper: Chen, K. and Peng, Q. (2024) A Study on the Chinese Translation of Lyrics from the Perspective of Translation Aesthetics. *Open Access Library Journal*, 11: e12433.
<https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1112433>

Received: October 5, 2024

Accepted: November 2, 2024

Published: November 5, 2024

Copyright © 2024 by author(s) and Open Access Library Inc.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

The purpose of lyrics translation is to seek a rendition that closely approximates the original’s vocal performance. The difficulty of translation lies in coordinating with the music, which involves aspects such as the emphasis, urgency, rise and fall of the translated lyrics, all of which are constrained by the musical composition. Given the literary and poetic qualities of Bob Dylan’s lyrics, the translator, from the perspective of translation aesthetics, utilizes Xu Yuanchong’s renowned “Three Beauties Theory” in appreciating poetry to analyze examples of Bob Dylan’s lyrics translations from these aesthetic dimensions. This analysis and summary aim to provide a brief exploration and generalization on how to translate lyrics from English to Chinese. English songs have been widely spread in China in recent years. Learning other countries’ music arts, in order to better express this work properly, it is necessary to use one’s native language as the medium of expression. Translated songs can make people have a deeper understanding and be easy to accept. This is the meaning of the lyrics translation.

Subject Areas

Linguistics

Keywords

Lyrics Translation, Translation Aesthetics, Three Beauties Theory, Bob Dylan Lyrics, English Songs

1. Introduction of Lyrics Translation

With the deepening of artistic exchanges between China and the West, more and more music from Western countries has been introduced into China, and many

Chinese pop songs have gradually become widely circulated overseas. In addition, the demand for lyrics translation is also increasing. In order to correctly convey the meaning of the lyrics, we ought to study the era, society, and culture, and delve into the core aspects of language to prevent technical inaccuracies and investigate the design style of music and pay attention to the words according to the background. Secondly, the lyrics translation belongs to the literary translation, and the genre closest to the lyrics of the song should be considered poetry. This article approaches lyric translation as a distinct variant of poetic translation, and subsequently, delves into an analysis of Bob Dylan's lyrics through the lens of translation aesthetics.

2. The Characteristics of Bob Dylan's Lyrics

Poetic poetry is the core part of Dylan's songwriting, and his work contains an extraordinary poetic power. The profundity of his lyrics rivals that of poetry, offering a perceptive dissection of everyday existence. Comprised of both trenchant protest pieces and insightful revelations, his verse illuminates the essence of truth. It is through meticulous engagement that one can fully comprehend the artistic depth embedded within.

In the mid-20th century, the famous rock band the Beatles had yet to form. At this time, rock music has just emerging, only a pure music. There is a group of music lovers who privately enjoy and spread black music and gradually turned to rock and roll music, as time goes by, these grown up rock youth have listened to folk music.

With the popularity of the rock band the Beatles in the 1960s, British rock music entered its heyday and swept the rock music industry in the United States strongly. Meanwhile, namely in 1965, Bob Dylan was also influenced by their musical style as the Beatles became popular. He tried to incorporate folk music into the electric vocal team, which predicted the birth of folk rock. This genre blends elements from both music styles, characterized by prominent vocals and lyrics, with a guitar pattern reminiscent of folk yet infused with the distinctive electric guitar elements of rock. Its influence on rock music is profound.

3. Different Angles of Translation Aesthetics

From the perspective of translation aesthetics, this article discusses the translation of Bob Dylan's lyrics, to discuss how to show the aesthetic artistic conception of the original text from the three aspects of "beauty in sense, beauty in form and beauty in sound". With a new research perspective of the lyrics translation, we can inject vitality into the translation research of the lyrics of similar songs. The angles of "beauty in sense, beauty in form and beauty in sound" just coincide with Xu Yuanchong's thought of "three beauties theory". Lu Xun put forward *the Outline of the Chinese Literature* [1], the first article of Chinese Literature. The original text is: "First, beauty in sense, second, beauty in sound, third, beauty in form" [2]. Xu Yuanchong of Peking University transplanted this theory into the translation

theory and formed his own “three beauties”. “Beauty in sense” is the first, “beauty in sound” is the second, “beauty in form” is the third. “Beauty in sense” aims to convey the content of the original text. It cannot be mistranslated, omitted or over-translated. “Beauty in sound” means that a poem should have rhymes similar to the original text, and express it by means of double sounds, overlapping rhymes, repetition and antithesis. “Beauty in form” mainly focuses on two aspects, the symmetry and the length of the sentence. The organic combination of “three beauties” is realizing the materialization of the traditional translation standard “letter, reach and elegance”, which provides a standard to refer to. When evaluating the quality of translations, Xu Yuanchong believes that “seeking truth” is the basic standard for literary translation, while “pursuing beauty” is the higher standard [3].

4. Case Analysis

4.1. Beauty in Sound

“Beauty in sound” belongs to one of the formal characteristics of a song. Whether to convey the characteristics of sound beauty in the translation is in essence the form or the content. In fact, the form and the content has always been dialectically unified, and one faction should not focus too much on one and completely deny the other. Under the condition of ensuring the transmission of the meaning of the text and on the premise that the translator’s language ability allows, the translation with the characteristics of “beauty in sound” can better reproduce the appearance of the original text than the translation without the characteristics of “beauty in sound”.

Example 1:

ST1:

How many roads must a man walk down
 Before they call him a man
 How many seas must a white dove sail
 Before she sleeps in the sand
 Before they’re forever banned
 The answer, my friend, is blowin’ in the wind

TT1:

一个人要跋涉多少路
 才能称为真正的男子汉
 一只白鸽要飞越过多少海
 才能抵达新彼岸
 才能被永远被驱赶
 答案啊 我的朋友 在风中飘扬

Analysis: The text is from *Blowin’ in the Wind* [4], the Chinese translation embodies “beauty in sound” mainly in the following aspects. In terms of rhyme and rhythm, the translation attempts to maintain a certain degree of rhyme, such as

between “路” and “汉”, “海” and “岸”, which, although not as strict as in ancient Chinese poetry, still provides a sense of rhythmic beauty. In terms of rhythm, the Chinese translation adopts a relatively neat sentence structure, like “一个人要跋涉多少路/才能称为真正的男子汉”, which makes the sentence smooth and rhythmic when read aloud. In terms of tone and pitch, the Chinese translation also varies in tone (also named the rise and fall of pitch), making the sentence sound varied intonation and rhythm and musical. For example, in the sentence “一个人要跋涉多少路”, the words “人”, “要”, “多”, and “路” correspond to different tones, creating a fluctuation in pitch. At the same time, the Chinese translation often uses repeated words and phrases for emphasis. By depicting images such as “跋涉”, “飞越”, and “新彼岸”, the Chinese translation creates a vast and profound atmosphere, making the sentence more emotionally fulfilling. Additionally, the sentence “The answer, my friend, is blowin’ in the wind” is translated as “答案啊, 我的朋友, 在风中飘扬”, which not only forms a rhythmic and rhyming beauty but also expresses a sense of confusion and seeking answers through the imagery of “在风中飘扬”. Overall, the Chinese translation strives to maintain musical beauty, preserving the rhyme and rhythm of the original text while also incorporating the characteristics and beauty of modern Chinese.

Example 2:

ST2:

Once upon a time you dressed so fine
Threw the bums a dime in your prime, didn't you?

TT2:

有那么个时候, 你衣着光鲜,
扔给游民几个小钱, 神气活现, 有这回事儿吧?

Analysis: The text is from *Like a Rolling Stone* [5], in this translation, “beauty in sound” is mainly manifested in the following aspects: In terms of rhyme and vowel ending, “鲜” (xiān) and “钱” (qián) share a certain rhyming relationship in their vowel endings, though they don't belong to the same rhyme category strictly speaking, they still bring a certain rhythmic sensation to readers or listeners. Similarly, “现” (xiàn) and “吧” (ba) also have a certain phonetic connection in spoken language, especially when “吧” is used as a modal particle, it often ends lightly, forming a contrast with the preceding syllables and adding a rhythmic sense to the language. In terms of emotional expression, the translation adds a sense of intimacy and vividness to the language through colloquial expressions like “有那么个时候” and rhetorical questions like “神气活现, 有这回事儿吧?”. Expressions like “扔给游民几个小钱” convey well the casualness and contempt in the original text's “threw the bums a dime”, while “神气活现” further emphasizes the character's self-satisfaction and arrogance at that time.

Therefore, in English and Chinese translation, we should pay full attention to the characteristics of Chinese pronunciation, and use various means, such as syllable coordination and syllables adjustment, to make the translated syllables more

harmonious, and the translation can be more authentic and beautiful.

4.2. Beauty in Sense

“Beauty in sense” aims to convey the content of the original text. It cannot be mistranslated, omitted or over-translated. However, it is difficult to achieve this realm. When English is transformed into Chinese, due to the differences in language habits, it is easy to show traces of stiffness and far-fetched. To completely preserve the original flavor, you must have a full understanding of Chinese and English, and master its rules and language habits.

Example 3:

ST3:

Hey! Mr. Tambourine Man, play song for me,
I'm not sleepy and there is no place I'm going to.
Hey! Mr. Tambourine Man, play song for me,
In the jingle jangle morning I come followin' you.
Take me on trip upon your magic swirlin'sp,

TT3:

嘿！铃鼓先生，为我奏一曲
我还不睡，而且无处可归
嘿！铃鼓先生，为我奏一曲
在这铿锵的早晨让我与你同去
带我上路罢，登上你魔样涡漩的帆船

Analysis: The full text is constantly repeated, “Hey! Mr. Tambourine” begins with each sentence, seemingly chaotic, but it is actually a progressive emotion, which fully conveys the author’s emotions. His tune was plain and plain, as if telling a story. His lyrics are simple in language, close to the public, emotional progressive, the lyrics pay more attention to current affairs, reflecting the pity for the public, and resonate with the public. Under his vicissitudes of life voice lived a delicate poet who yearned for a better world, Bob Dylan vividly embodies the Italian beauty of poetry in *Mr. Tambourine Man* [6], creating a dream poet and a dream world in life. However, this song is not popular in China, and many art and literature jewelry are forgotten because of the noise of the common world. Instead of mixing into the counter current, it is better to dive down, savor the beauty of the words, to find their own poetry palace.

The appreciation of English poetry involves the interpretation of English poetry and prose. In literature and art, poetic texts are the most open-ended. In addition, French beauty not only symbolizes the actual meaning of poetry, but also symbolizes the poetic meaning created by the writer. The poem sad lyrics interspersed with hints and metaphor, describes an artist in the day after day exhaustion and dissatisfaction, gradually kill their artistic creativity, exhausted, but eager to find a beyond secular spiritual world, an eternal realm beyond time limit, like child structure ethereal fantasy and imagination, hope to get comfort and satisfaction.

Five times, the poet asks *Mr. Tambourine* in the theme to play a song for the poet and flee him from the world. It is like to tell the reader and the audience that the poet will reach the palace of his dreams. Who does not want to escape from such a secular world, and who does not yearn for the artistic conception in the poem?

Example 4:

ST4:

Oh, where have you been, my blue-eyed son?

Oh, where have you been, my darling young one?

TT4:

啊，你曾去过何处，我那蓝眼睛的孩子？

啊，你曾去过何处，我年轻的情人？

Analysis: This passage comes from his work *A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall* [7], the lyrics made the audience feel that the irrational policies of the superpower rulers after World War II almost pushed the world to the edge of nuclear war. This Chinese translation has largely preserved the emotions and hues of the original text in terms of “beauty in sense”. In terms of conveying the artistic conception, the original lines “Oh, where have you been, my blue-eyed son?” and “Oh, where have you been, my darling young one?” express longing and inquiry towards someone (possibly a relative or lover) who has been absent for a long time. The translations “啊，你曾去过何处，我那蓝眼睛的孩子？” and “啊，你曾去过何处，我年轻的情人？” have basically retained the artistic conception of the originals. As for expressing emotions, the translations use the exclamation “啊” and the interrogative sentence “你曾去过何处” to effectively convey the longing and inquiry in the originals. At the same time, expressions like “我那蓝眼睛的孩子” and “我年轻的情人” demonstrate the translator’s deep understanding and delicate expression of the original emotions. In terms of the fluency and elegance of the translated language, the use of expressive words and phrases such as “啊” and “你曾去过何处” adds to the beauty and readability of the translation.

4.3. Beauty in Form

“Beauty in form” refers to maintaining the beauty of poetry, the translator is required to pay attention to the length of the poem, the number of columns of the poem and the unity of opposites. Try to achieve “shape”, is the form of confrontation, the number of lines and the length of the arrangement. This requires the translator to ensure that the translation and the original poem are consistent as much as possible, similar in the length of the sentences, and basically reproduce the shape and beauty of the original poem.

Example 5:

ST5:

Though I know that evenin’s empire has returned into sand

Vanished from my hand,

Left me blindly here to stand but still not sleeping.

My weariness amazes me, i'm branded on my feet
 have no one to meet
 And the ancient empty street's too dead for dreaming.

TT5:

尽管我知道，黄昏的帝国，早已归于尘土
 自我的掌心消逝
 留下我盲然在此伫立，却了无困意
 我惊奇于自己的倦乏，我的双足俱已烙印
 此地无人可遇
 古远旷废的街道又过分死寂，不宜梦想

Analysis: The above six lines are both from *Mr. Tambourine Man* [6]. If this song is classified, it should belong to the free-style poem, while the above displayed lyrics belong to the six-line verse. This poem has no rigid rhythm, but it beats the rhyme of French romantic poetic "aabccb". At the same time, the number of steps of a-rhyme is the same as that of c-rhyme, so the length of the two lines is also the same. This form gives the text a sense of rhythm and gives people visual enjoyment.

Poetry translation demands not just precise word-for-word conversion, but also the adept conveyance of intangible rhythmic nuances. To truly appreciate, readers must delve into the text, understanding its context and cultural backdrop. Incompleteness ensues without every element.

5. Conclusion

In the process of this study, the translator deeply realized that the research is not easy. Lyrics translation is a special literary translation, and academic masters translate different versions. First, how to select effective fragments from a large number of literature is a very difficult work. Secondly, the current academic research on lyrics translation lacks depth, and there is not a fully mature mechanism in place for lyrics translation. This is an area where translators should strive for improvement in the future, as lyrics translation, influenced by economic globalization, will become a popular trend in foreign song translations and a favorable tool for people to learn about foreign cultures. Thirdly, due to the particularity of Bob Dylan's lyrics, the full text appreciation form of Bob Dylan's lyrics as poetry translation, but their political nature and creative background are very different from Chinese poetry, the research methods are limited. The direction of our collective efforts lies in how to more effectively utilize aesthetic techniques.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

References

- [1] Sui, R.Y. and Li, F.P. (2007) First Exploration of Translation Aesthetics. *Foreign Languages and Their Teaching*, **11**, 54-57.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1004-6038.2007.11.013>

- [2] Lu, X. (2011) *The Outline of the History of Chinese Literature*. Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, 61.
- [3] Xu, Y.C. (1984) *The Art of Translation*. China Translation Corporation.
- [4] Gold, M. (2002) *Life and Life Only: Dylan at 60*. *Judas! Magazine*, 43,
- [5] Considine, S. (2004) *The Hit We Almost Missed*. *The New York Times*.
- [6] Lavezzoli, P. (2007) *The Dawn of Indian Music in the West*. Continuum International Publishing Group, 162.
- [7] Dylan, B. (2004) *Chronicles: Volume One*. Simon & Schuster, 85.