

Reflection on the Translation Methods in Traditional English-Chinese Translation Coursebooks for Translation Undergraduates

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Abstract

According to relevant documents from the Ministry of Education, current undergraduate translation programs primarily focus on teaching translation methods. Traditionally, translation method systems have relied either primarily on form conversion or meaning conversion. Taking *A Course in English-Chinese Translation* which primarily references form, and *A Course in English-Chinese and Chinese-English Translations* which primarily references meaning as examples, this paper elaborates on the shortcomings of these two types of

textbooks and ways to overcome them based on fundamental Chinese-English differences, pointing out that translation method systems should be constructed based on Chinese-English differences and primarily reference meaning conversion.

Keywords: Translation undergraduate program; English-Chinese translation method system; meaning conversion as reference; two fundamental Chinese-English differences

1. Background

First, to properly position undergraduate translation textbooks, we need to understand what master's and doctoral translation textbooks should be like, and what non-translation major undergraduate textbooks should be like, avoiding the phenomenon of some textbooks trying to include everything imaginable in translation materials. Strictly speaking, before these questions are answered, this paper cannot be discussed in detail. This paper will take two influential textbooks in undergraduate teaching as examples, assuming these two textbooks basically meet the requirements of translation undergraduate teaching, avoiding the issues that this paper cannot address.

Similarly, without answers to the following questions, it would be impossible to specifically discuss the compilation of English-Chinese undergraduate translation textbooks, such as the training objectives of undergraduate translation majors, curriculum settings, the relationship between course objectives and overall objectives, and so on.

The “*Guidelines for Undergraduate Translation Program Teaching in Regular Higher Education Institutions*” (hereinafter referred to as “*Teaching Guidelines*”) states in its “Training Objectives” that “the translation program aims to cultivate compound talents with good comprehensive qualities and professional ethics, rich humanistic accomplishments, solid

English-Chinese bilingual foundation, strong cross-cultural abilities, solid translation professional knowledge, rich encyclopedic knowledge and necessary related professional knowledge, who are proficient in translation methods and skills, can adapt to national and local economic construction and social development needs, and can competently handle various industries' interpretation and translation language services and international exchange work” (English Major Teaching Steering Committee of the Foreign Language Teaching Steering Committee of Higher Education Institutions, Ministry of Education 2020: 25).

Obviously, the English-Chinese translation course alone cannot achieve all these objectives, but undeniably, it is one of the inevitable paths to achieving these goals, meaning that mastering English-Chinese translation is one of the inevitable paths for English-Chinese translation undergraduate graduates to become “compound talents who can adapt to national and local economic construction and social development needs and can competently handle various industries' interpretation and translation language services and international exchange work.” Therefore, when these objectives are implemented in English-Chinese translation textbooks, there must be primary and secondary distinctions. The English-Chinese translation teaching has its own [core objective], namely cultivating compound talents who can competently handle English-Chinese written translation and other language services and international exchange work. The [core means] is that students must master translation methods and skills; the prerequisite for mastering this core means is that students have solid English-Chinese bilingual foundation, strong Chinese-English cultural ability, and various knowledge related to translation. At the same time, to serve the needs of socialist construction, good moral awareness and legal awareness are required.

The “*Teaching Guidelines*” describes the teaching objectives and content for English-Chinese/Chinese-English written translation courses as follows:

Teaching Objectives:

This course aims to cultivate students’ English-Chinese/Chinese-English written translation ability. Through course study, students should master the main theories, methods, and quality standards of translation; understand the textual features and cultural differences between English and Chinese; be able to translate articles of certain difficulty from English-Chinese newspapers, magazines, books, as well as excerpts from novels, essays, plays and other literary originals, at a speed of 300-350 words per hour; and be able to independently undertake general English-Chinese/Chinese-English written translation tasks from employers.

Teaching Content:

This course mainly cultivates students’ translation practice ability. Through example analysis and written translation training, students should become proficient in various translation methods, techniques, and strategies based on translation standards and the similarities and differences between English and Chinese in vocabulary, syntax, discourse, and socio-cultural aspects. Translation materials should balance knowledge, interest, and ideology, generally selecting formal texts from literature, technology, tourism, news, advertising, business, law, instructions, and other types.

The above course “Teaching Objectives” are very clear: this course aims to cultivate students’ English-Chinese/Chinese-English written translation ability^①. The teaching content serves this objective, with the focus on “becoming proficient in various translation methods,

techniques, and strategies.” However, these course teaching objectives leave many questions that need to be considered:

1. Which theories are the main ones?
2. What are the translation methods? What are the quality standards for translations?
3. Which language and cultural differences are referred to?
4. What does “certain difficulty” mean?
5. How to define “general employer tasks”?

The above statements also raise questions, such as:

1. The “Teaching Objectives” mention translation “methods,” while “Teaching Content” mentions “methods, techniques, and strategies”? So, what is the relationship between methods, techniques, and strategies?
2. Currently, there is a special need to strengthen ideological and political education, why is there no specific mention of political texts in the description?

This paper cannot answer all these questions, but it will provide answers to some questions or bring some inspiration to answering some questions.

Based on the core means of implementing undergraduate translation training objectives and the focus of English-Chinese translation teaching content, we believe that the main focus of English-Chinese translation teaching is the teaching of English-Chinese translation methods, techniques, and strategies. The following text mainly discusses the translation methods, techniques, and strategies that need to be learned in undergraduate English-Chinese written translation courses. For convenience of narration, the following text adopts the term “translation methods” from “Teaching Objectives,” rather than “methods, techniques, and

strategies” from “Teaching Content.” Additionally, we believe that the inconsistency between “Teaching Objectives” and “Teaching Content” itself indicates that these terms are difficult to distinguish, which is beyond the scope of this paper to clarify.

2. Issues with Translation Methods in Textbooks

Zhang Meifang (2001) divides translation textbooks into three categories: lexical and syntactic, functional (meaning), and contemporary translation theory. Contemporary translation theory mainly refers to textbooks that use semiotic theory to build frameworks, which in our view is actually also functional (meaning) type. Just as Nida points out that translation is translating meaning, but its focus is on functional equivalence.

In other words, translation methods can be referenced according to form and meaning (function). Current translation courses propose methods that are primarily referenced by form or primarily referenced by meaning to construct translation method systems. However, the current systems have at least two main problems:

1. Translation is translating meaning (Nida 1982; Newmark 1982), and systems that primarily reference form ignore this essential characteristic of translation.

2. Systems that primarily reference meaning usually borrow Western theoretical frameworks, constructing systems with certain universality but lacking targeted consideration of the language characteristics and translation direction characteristics specific to English-Chinese translation.

The following takes *A Course in English-Chinese Translation* (Zhang Peiji) which primarily references form and *A Course in English-Chinese and Chinese-English Translations* (Ke Ping) which primarily references meaning as examples to analyze the deficiencies in the

method systems proposed by current major textbooks, and respectively propose ways for improvement.

2.1 Zhang Peiji's *A Course in English-Chinese Translation*

The first chapter of this book is “A Brief Introduction to Chinese Translation History.” The second chapter is “Translation Standards, Process and Requirements for Translations,” which discusses translation standards, process, and requirements for translators (Note: this point does not correspond to the title “Requirements for Translations”). As a textbook specifically explaining English-Chinese translation, should it only need to specifically discuss English-Chinese “translation history” and English-Chinese “translation standards” and other content, and note “English-Chinese” in each chapter title?

Chapter Two mentions translation “methods” such as “literal translation” and “free translation,” while several subsequent chapters are titled “Methods and Techniques,” so what is the relationship between “literal translation” “free translation” and the subsequent “methods and techniques”? Additionally, how are “literal translation” and “free translation” defined? What is the direction of free translation? Should it rely solely on intuition?

Furthermore, “understanding” the meaning of the original text and “expressing” the meaning of the original text are discussed too generally, lacking more specific explanations.

Chapter Three only compares vocabulary and syntax aspects of language contrast, without discourse comparison. As a basic textbook, it can explain basic discourse differences, but in-depth explanation may not be allowed by the textbook's length.

Chapter Four “Commonly Used Methods and Techniques in English-Chinese Translation” (Part One) focuses on the word level. The overall arrangement is Section 1 “Word meaning

selection, extension and commendatory/derogatory sense,” Sections 2 and 3 are both “Part of speech conversion method,” Sections 4 and 5 are “Word addition method,” Sections 6 and 7 are “Repetition method,” Section 8 is “Omission method,” Section 9 is “Positive-negative, negative-positive expression method.” The debatable points in this chapter include:

1. Section 1 “Word meaning selection, extension and commendatory/derogatory sense” and Section 9 “Positive-negative, negative-positive expression method” focus more on meaning conversion, while other sections focus on form conversion. This creates inconsistent classification standards.

2. Focusing on form conversion ignores the basic characteristic that translation is translating meaning, form conversion is a by-product of meaning conversion, and the focus should be on meaning conversion rather than form conversion. Specifically:

(1) Whether part of speech conversion occurs depends on the needs of meaning expression, aesthetics, and values, rather than presetting that the original text needs part of speech conversion. For example, “A good catch” translated as “抓得很准”. If translated as “一个好抓”, it does not conform to Chinese aesthetics, and the part of speech conversion of “catch” is the result of the translator adapting to Chinese aesthetics.

(2) Proposing “word addition and omission techniques” based on form reference lacks logic. “Addition” and “omission” cannot be actions that occur in the original text, nor can they be said to be actions in the translation, because the translation is written by the translator themselves, and it is illogical to talk about adding vocabulary or omitting certain words in one’s own translation, unless the translator has an initial translation, and the final translation adds or omits some words from the initial translation, which is logically valid.

Chapter Five “Commonly Used Methods and Techniques in English-Chinese Translation” (Part Two) focuses on the sentence level, with Section 1 being “Sentence division and combination method,” Section 2 being translation of passive voice, Section 3 being translation of noun clauses, Section 4 being translation of attributive clauses, Section 5 being translation of adverbial clauses, Section 6 being translation of long sentences. However, the classification is debatable, such as:

1. From the cases of “sentence division and combination method,” many are caused by English having a higher degree of lexicalization and richer word meanings. By classifying according to form, the implications of English-Chinese vocabulary meaning differences for English-Chinese translation are obscured.
2. The classification of “noun clauses” “attributive clauses” “adverbial clauses” is also not unified, with noun clauses being named from the perspective of parts of speech, while the other two are named according to sentence components.
3. The translation of passive voice emphasizes the translation of voice, mainly referring to meaning conversion for explanation, while others mainly explain the conversion of structural forms.
4. The cases in “translation of long sentences” can be included in any of the other five sections, especially with sections other than “translation of passive voice,” creating a high degree of overlap.

Chapter Six “Commonly Used Methods and Techniques in English-Chinese Translation” (Part Three), with Section 1 being “Translation of idioms,” Section 2 being “Translation of onomatopoeia,” Section 3 being “Foreign word absorption method.” Why these contents are in

this chapter needs explanation.

In short, “A Course in English-Chinese Translation mentions very little theoretical content, with the vast majority being about translation practice techniques, and these techniques are disconnected from theory” (Lao Long 1990), the root cause being that this book’s translation method system is primarily referenced by form conversion.

2.2 Ke Ping’s *A Course in English-Chinese and Chinese-English Translations*

This textbook is divided into four chapters, in sequence: “Introduction,” “Semantics of Translation,” “Translation Process,” “Error Analysis,” using semiotics to divide meaning into denotative meaning, illocutionary meaning, and pragmatic meaning. Pragmatic meaning includes representational meaning, social meaning, imperative meaning, and associative meaning; it adopts Nida’s definition of translation: translation is reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style.

Based on their semiotic analysis of semantics, the editors proposed “semiotic translation principles”: within the limits of target language syntax and idiom norms and specific receptor acceptability, adopt appropriate flexibility and compensation measures, with the premise of ensuring priority transmission of the most important meanings in specific contexts, to transmit the multiple meanings of source language information as much and as accurately as possible, to strive for maximum equivalence between original and translation.

Chapter Three is the focus of this book, with Section 1 “Understanding” including “Accuracy of Understanding,” “Understanding Governed by Illocutionary Factors,” “Understanding Governed by External Factors,” “Cultural Factors.” Section 2 includes

“Expression” including “Word Order,” “Passive Sentences,” “Subject Selection,” “Long Sentences,” “Flexibility and Compensation Measures,” “Metaphors,” “Proper Names,” “Onomatopoeia,” “Multiples,” “Rhythm.” The flexibility and compensation measures include: annotation, amplification, perspective conversion, concretization, generalization, paraphrase, domestication, and back translation.

However, some problems emerge here, such as:

Understanding and expression are not sufficiently consistent. Understanding methods are basically discussed according to the editor’s semiotic meaning classification. But expression methods are partly proposed based on target text expression forms, partly based on source text expression meanings, and partly specifically discuss the translation of certain source text forms. Reference to form deviates from meaning, while based on meaning deviates from form. Looking at case analyses alone is very brilliant, but the various methods given show no systematic connection.

At the same time, translation principles are proposed with reference to meaning but have not formed a system with the methods of “understanding” and “expression,” such as the “appropriate flexibility and compensation measures” mentioned in translation principles, which are the methods that best reflect reference to meaning conversion, but this is only a subsection among many discussion “expression” methods.

Additionally, the comparison between English-Chinese and Chinese-English translation directions could have more clearly shown the reversibility of the two directions, but the book did not highlight what patterns exist in the differences between methods in the two directions. For example, for the translation of “long sentences,” there is only English-Chinese

translation, without even mentioning Chinese-English translation, which does not meet reader expectations. At the same time, it also reflects the editor's lack of consideration of differences between the two translation directions.

In short, the root of this textbook's problems mainly lies in its lack of systematic understanding of Chinese-English differences, and failure to consistently construct a layered translation method system that primarily references meaning.

3. Suggestions

The construction of English-Chinese translation method systems needs to rely closely on Chinese-English difference systems and consistently implement the principle that translation is translating meaning. The following first introduces the basic Chinese-English differences pointed out by Wang Jianguo (2023), then discusses how to improve the translation method systems in the two textbooks mentioned above as examples.

3.1 Basic Chinese-English Directional Difference System

Translation is translating meaning, so translation methods cannot primarily reference form conversion, but must primarily reference meaning conversion. That is, they must focus on solving such problems: through target language verbal forms and non-verbal forms, to transfer the meaning carried by source language verbal forms and non-verbal forms.

Looking at the two textbooks above, even methods based on meaning still lack hierarchy. The reason for this is the lack of hierarchical analysis of meaning conversion problems in English-Chinese translation, and the direct source of this lack is the absence of systematic grasp of Chinese-English difference systems with hierarchy.

Nord (1997) points out that translation is divided into understanding, conversion, and

expression stages, therefore, English-Chinese translation must have understanding problems, conversion problems, and expression problems, these problems are almost all related to translation problems brought by Chinese-English language and cultural differences. To solve translation problems, it is necessary as stated in “Teaching Objectives” - to understand “Chinese-English language and cultural differences.” The hierarchy shown in Chinese-English differences can basically reflect the hierarchy of translation problems, therefore, the method system for solving translation problems will necessarily form the hierarchy of translation method systems due to the hierarchy of translation problems.

Wang Jianguo (2023: 2-5) points out two basic Chinese-English directional differences:

1. In terms of boundary (consciousness), Chinese (people) is weaker, English is stronger. This is reflected in Chinese-English language structure, psychological attributes, and social attributes.
2. Chinese (people) has stronger retrospective consciousness, while English (people) has stronger prospective consciousness. This is reflected in Chinese-English language structure, psychological attributes, and social attributes.

These two basic Chinese-English directional differences cover three levels of English-Chinese contrastive studies (as shown in the figure below), including the social culture, psychology, and language characteristics of the two nations: The first level is the comparison of surface structure forms; the second level is the comparison of expression methods; the third level is the comparison of language psychology and thinking modes (Liu Miqing 1991).

Language surface -- [Language surface structure]: Form structure level, basic formal means and syntactic formal means of expression methods



Intermediate layer -- [Expression method system]: Intermediate layer, pattern-based expression means when thinking takes language form



Language deep layer -- [Thinking form]: Basic structure level, philosophical mechanism of language

Understanding these two basic directional differences and systematically grasping Chinese-English differences, translators can understand or seek to understand the reflection of social, geographical, aesthetic, and value characteristics of source and target languages in language expression, consider whether conversion can or needs to be done, then either abandon without choice or selectively express in the target language, achieving logical unity of understanding, conversion, and expression, showing the systematicness of translation methods.

3.2 A Course in English-Chinese Translation

The main measures to improve the translation method system of *A Course in English-Chinese Translation* are: grasping the essence that translation is translating meaning, taking meaning conversion as the main reference object, form conversion as the main observation object, and combining theory with practice.

The course takes meaning conversion as the main reference to reclassify translation methods, avoiding the problem of methods primarily referencing form conversion having cross-overlap in the book. Dividing chapters according to source language word, sentence and other language structure forms, this approach will, due to Chinese-English differences and translation being translating meaning and other reasons, appear with many overlapping

statements in different chapters. Such as Chapter Four and Chapter Five. Referencing meaning, Chinese topic chains (structures formed by topic semantic continuation) can be used to express English long sentences, multiple sentences, and even paragraphs, avoiding entanglement with how some source language words and sentences achieve corresponding expression in the translation, and even according to differences in thinking modes, aesthetic modes, values, and pragmatic modes, the translation may not correspond to translate according to source language forms, the translation may even directly use expressions that are very different from source language forms.

In some specific details, for example, “omission” at the form level can be distinguished from “deletion” and “implication” at the meaning level, while “explicitation” at the form level can also be distinguished from “addition” at the meaning level. Also, various form conversions mentioned in the text can get better explanation, for example, part of speech conversion is a by-product of various meaning conversions, rather than a technique used to solve meaning conversion problems.

Translation is a pragmatic behavior (Levy 2000), any translation is discourse translation. From the meaning perspective to construct translation method systems, this book proposes adding pragmatic comparison and (basic) discourse comparison with English-Chinese translation requirements, which can provide students with more guidance for translation practice facing social reality.

From the perspective of Chinese-English difference systems:

1. According to the directional difference that Chinese is more retrospective while English is more prospective, more precise recognition can be made of literal translation and free

translation. So-called literal translation, from the perspective of Chinese-English differences, often manifests in explicit boundary markers, such as tense, aspect, voice, number and other markers, how much is lost or added, while other parts correspond. So-called free translation, English-Chinese translation is mostly retrospective, less prospective, while Chinese-English translation is the opposite.

2. According to the directional difference that Chinese has weaker boundaries while English has stronger boundaries, the “omission” (as the technique name used in the book) of pronouns and function words can be explained. Pronouns and function words have boundary marking functions, when translating English to Chinese, boundaries need to be weakened, thus reducing the translation of function words in English source texts. Less use of function words, using symmetrical structures, including four-character phrases, are all related to Chinese planar aesthetics.

3.3 A Course in English-Chinese and Chinese-English Translations

This book primarily references meaning conversion, but the translation method system it proposes lacks strong hierarchy, the root cause being that it lacks a systematic and hierarchical Chinese-English difference system for support, leading to no explanation for various viewpoints such as how to “exploit target language advantages” [(Ke Ping 1993: 52)].

According to Chinese-English boundary directional difference characteristics, many cases in the book involve geographical dialects, social dialects, cultural markers, stylistic markers, grammatical markers, etc., these can all be classified as boundary markers, then continue to be divided into more subcategories, forming systems and hierarchy.

According to the characteristic that Chinese has stronger retrospective nature while

English has stronger prospective nature, many phenomena in the book can be uniformly explained. For example, the book only listed English-Chinese translation cases of English “comparative and superlative degrees,” “conditions and subjunctive,” “negative forms,” “passive sentences,” etc., without reverse Chinese-English translation cases (Ke Ping 1993: 54-56). Additionally, “generalization” uses far more Chinese-English cases than English-Chinese cases, and many cases are translations of culturally characteristic words (Ke Ping 1993: 120-122). The author did not explain any of these phenomena. If based on the characteristic that English is more prospective while Chinese has retrospectiveness, it can explain why English uses comparative or superlative degrees while Chinese might use positive degree; English uses non-conditional forms while Chinese uses conditional forms to translate English non-conditional and subjunctive forms; it can also explain why English uses more negative forms and passive sentences, and why generalization is more used in Chinese-English translation. Because cognitively, positive degree, conditions, affirmative, active voice, and concrete images come before comparative/superlative degrees, facts, negation, passive voice, and abstractions.

Some form-based cases can similarly be summarized from the meaning level, making the textbook more logical. The author mentions treating verb-complement relationships as verb-object relationships (Ke Ping 1993: 59), such as the case “They parted enemies, 他们不欢而散，成了冤家”，can be seen as result-oriented English being translated into process-oriented Chinese, that is, the Chinese translation explicates the process “不欢”. Also, the “word order” (Ke Ping 1993: 96-98) section mentions differences in Chinese-English attributives, adverbials, and parallel components, based on these differences, the translation not

only deviates from the meaning reference system but also only gives one reference translation, limiting readers' possibility of providing various translations. If discussing with reference to meaning, it would be found that different positions of English time adverbials and other components have different meanings, thus leading to multiple possible translations.

Some meaning-referenced method classifications, such as “domestication” “paraphrase” overlap with each other and with other methods. These overlapping areas can all be reclassified.

Overall, referencing the two major Chinese-English directional differences, the translation principles proposed by the editor would enhance their internal logic, especially their practical guidance power.

4. Conclusion

Writing textbooks referencing form, following word, sentence, and chapter systems, seems operationally simple but does not conform to the basic characteristic that translation is translating meaning, leading to theory being separated from practice. Translation methods referencing form conversion are methods summarized after comparing the forms of source text and translation after meaning conversion. To prove these methods, editors often only allow examples that conform to this form conversion. Cases referencing form conversion can hardly explain more specifically why such form conversion is needed. But in fact, as the editors themselves know, translations can have multiple versions and can express different functions.

This paper advocates closely relying on Chinese-English difference systems, primarily referencing meaning conversion, to propose translation method systems. However, currently there may not be a particularly suitable meaning conversion reference system, but the two basic

directional differences provide direction for the compilation of such textbooks. The summarization of two directional differences has organically connected the main traditional Chinese-English comparative research results, bringing systematic inspiration for organically developing English-Chinese translation courses and other similar courses.

Finally, it should be said that the two textbook cases selected in this paper both need to adapt to the times, adding new ideological and political elements; and need to discuss technical means needed for English-Chinese translation. Of course, how much content of ideological and political elements and technical means to arrange needs to refer to the entire translation undergraduate curriculum system to judge.

Notes:

- ① The “*Teaching Guidelines*” defines “translation ability” in “Terms and Definitions”: The ability to use translation knowledge, methods and skills for effective language conversion, generally including bilingual ability, supra-language ability (such as encyclopedic knowledge, topic knowledge, etc.), tool ability, strategy ability, etc.

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