

Comparison of active and passive voice in English-Chinese translation--taking the example of Howard Goldblatt's translation of *Rickshaw Boy*

Ziyan PENG

School of Foreign Languages, Jiangxi University of Finance and Economics, Nanchang 330013, China

Abstract: In the translation between English and Chinese, there are significant differences in sentence structure, grammatical features, rhetorical devices, expression methods, ways of thinking, and social and cultural factors between the two languages, which increase the difficulty of translation. Especially in English-Chinese translation, the similarities and differences in the usage of active and passive voice can easily lead to translation errors. In English, the passive voice is more regarded as a common grammatical phenomenon, while in Chinese, the active expression of passive meaning is more dominant. Taking Howard Goldblatt's translation of *Rickshaw Boy* as an example, through the analysis of the passive and active voice in English and Chinese languages with different structures, we can learn more about the similarities and differences between the two languages in order to improve the quality of translation.

Key words: active; passive; comparison between English and Chinese

1 Introduction

1.1 Research background

Lao She is considered as an outstanding writer in China's modern literature. And *Luotuo Xiangzi*, his great novel, has been translated into many languages, such as French, German, Japanese, Spanish, Italian and so on. These versions are based on Evan King's English version in 1945. In 1979, Jean M. James re-translated the novel with the name *Rickshaw: the novel Lo-t'o Hsiang Tzu*. This thesis will focus on another English version. Howard Goldblatt provided readers with another English version of *Luotuo Xiangzi* with the name *Rickshaw Boy* through Harper Collins Publisher in 2010. As a foremost translator, he tries to offer readers a complete, faithful and readable translation. Generally speaking, his translation is successful and makes great contributions to introducing this novel and our Chinese culture to foreign countries.

Up to now, a lot of studies that focus on translations of *Luotuo Xiangzi* are from such perspectives as linguistics, stylistics, culture, relevance theory, adaptation theory and so on. Most of the versions they have studied are Evan King's, James' and Shi Xiaojing's. The present thesis attempts to analyze the English version translated by Howard Goldblatt.

1.2 Research significance

For the two different translation directions of Chinese literary works, namely translation from mother tongue and

translation into mother tongue, what translation principles do translators with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds adopt? How to use different translation strategies and methods to express familiar and unfamiliar linguistic and cultural phenomena? What factors determine the translator's choice of translation strategy? In addition, Chinese-English translation also involves a basic problem, that is, how to preserve the cultural characteristics of the original text as far as possible without making mistakes, so as to achieve the purpose of cross-cultural communication. What are the effects of choosing different translation strategies? Due to the richness and complexity of literary language, literary translation is one of the aspects that deserves more attention and efforts of translators. The emergence of the theory of externalization and the theory of localization has exerted a profound influence on translation studies, and many translators have applied these two theories in translation. This thesis analyzes the translation of the active and passive voice in Howard Goldblatt's translation of *Rickshaw Boy* and summarizes that English predominantly uses changes in verb form to express the active and passive forms, guiding Chinese-English translation practice [1].

2 The theoretical foundation

"Passive sentences can be classified into structural passive and semantic passive. Structural passive refers to the use of passive voice of verbs to indicate a passive sentence, while semantic passive refers to the expression of a passive meaning using an active form without the passive voice of the verb [2]."

It is well known that due to various factors, English and Chinese have evolved into distinct language systems, resulting in significant differences in the use of passive voice between the two languages. Concordance is crucial in English expression, indicating that English places greater emphasis on syntactic structure and the manner of language expression. When the active form is not easily expressed, the passive form aligns more with the English mode of expression. In Chinese, the active form is the primary mode of expression, while the use of the passive form is subject to various limitations. As a basic differentiation, English employs verb form changes to indicate the active and passive forms, while Chinese primarily utilizes lexical changes to express this distinction. Furthermore, English sentences must adhere to the subject-verb structure, with the corresponding "be + passive structure" constituting the passive sentence. When the agent of the action is present, the "be" is followed by "by" to denote the agent of the action. In contrast, Chinese emphasizes the aggregation of meaning, lacking a clear passive structure. The main types of passive sentences in Chinese are: 1) using words such as "bei", "rang", "ai", "shou", "zao" to indicate passivity, and 2) special sentence structures such as "wei.....suo", "shi.....de", "...de shi..." to express passivity. The more common method is to express passive meaning through active form by employing borrowed vocabulary and sentence structures.

The differences in the use of active and passive structures in English and Chinese depend on several factors, primarily:

1) In English, passive sentences are often used when the agent is unknown or difficult to specify, or when the agent is known to all in the context, and the patient is more important than the agent. For example, her house was burned by fire.

2) In English, passive constructions are utilized to facilitate coherence in sentence sequencing, or when the subject of the sentence is relatively simple compared to the complex predicate. For instance, I was surprised that she is to go to travel with me.

3) Correct usage of passive sentences in English can enhance the rhetorical effect, making the sentence more engaging for readers and listeners. For example: "My tutor asked me to go to his office" versus "I was asked to go to the office by my tutor."

4) Compared to English, the use of semantic passive sentences is more frequent in Chinese. In ancient Chinese, the term "bei" referred to "suffering", and the use of a "beizishi" pattern is considered an unfortunate linguistic style, often used to express dissatisfaction or undesirable occurrences.

5) The format of "patient+verb" refers to the ancient Chinese style expressions, which recognize its passive meanings through context or understanding the language as well as the disseminators of the common sense. The extensive use of patient-subject sentences in Chinese has led to a large number of "inevitable passive sentences".

3 An introduction to *Luotuo Xiangzi* and its two English versions

3.1 Luotuo Xiangzi and Lao She

Luotuo Xiangzi is one of the masterpieces written by Lao She. As a great work, it is worthy of study from many perspectives. In order to have a better insight of the two English versions (Shi Xiaojing's *Camel Xiangzi* and Howard Goldblatt's *Rickshaw Boy*), it is of great significance to have an integral study of the author and the original novel.

Lao She (1899-1966), as the pseudonym of Shu Qingchun, was born in a poor family in Beijing. As a famous writer of modern Chinese literature, he was awarded with many honorary titles, such as "People's Artist", "Model Worker in Literature and Art Circle" and "Great Master of Language". He also enjoyed high prestige in China. His father, serving as a soldier of the Imperial Manchu Guards, died when imperialist troops of the Allied Forces of Eight Powers intruded into China. In order to support the whole family, his mother had to do laundry for others. With such a poor childhood and bitter experience, he had much sympathy and genuine love towards the poor, which had great influence on the themes of his works, concentrating on the miserable life of the middle and lower classes in Beijing [3].

Most of Lao She's works are based on the life of the citizens. He is good at depicting the life and fate of the urban poor, especially good at portraying the conservative and backward middle and lower class citizens who are steeped in feudal patriarchal concepts, in the national conflicts and class struggles, and under the impact of the new tide of history. He is also skilled at depicting the contradictory psychology of fear, hesitation, and loneliness, as well as the ridiculous behavior of being in a dilemma and at a loss. The colourful rendering of the natural scenery and the meticulous description of the customs and people add to the life and interest of the work. In the history of modern literature, Lao She's name is always closely associated with civic and Beijing themes [4]. He is an outstanding painter of customs and worldly conditions (especially the customs of Beijing) in modern Chinese literature. As a great man, the social reality he reflected may not be broad enough, but within the scope of his depiction, he combined and condensed history and reality, from the natural scenery of the four seasons of the year, the social atmosphere and customs of different eras, to the joys, sorrows, and subtle mentality of people of all kinds from the three religions and the nine streams of society, all of which are sound, colourful and lively, forming a complete and rich, full-fledged, "Beijing-flavoured" world of its own. This is a special contribution made by Lao She in the history of modern literature [5].

*3.2 Howard Goldblatt and his translation of *Rickshaw Boy**

Howard Goldblatt, with the Chinese name of Ge Haowen, works as a research professor at the University of Notre Dame and he is not only a famous scholar but also a foremost translator who focuses on modern Chinese literature. He is highly praised for his great contributions to translating contemporary and modern Chinese literature into English [6].

With the rapid development of China in recent years, more and more foreigners are interested in China, including Chinese literature. Therefore, the translation of Chinese literature is gradually becoming prosperous. "The fact we must be aware of is that foreigners are more eager to know China than ever. One phenomenon which we should not ignore is that more and more Chinese literature is translated into foreign languages and is also published in foreign countries. The translation mission of Chinese literature is much harder than anytime in Chinese history."

For anyone who is interested in Chinese-English or English-Chinese translation, the most effective and direct way is to "learn from a master translator" to read the master's translations carefully against the original works. As far as Chinese-English translation is concerned, there is no better teacher today than Howard Goldblatt.

Howard Goldblatt, who is known as "the chief translator of Chinese literature in the West", recently won the Xiao Hong Literary Award for his *Biography of Xiao Hong* written in Chinese. He travelled to Harbin to receive the award and arrived in Shanghai via Hong Kong. As he had just finished translating the long novel *The Spell Piano* by the Shanghai-based American writer Bela, which reflects the Jewish people's refuge in Shanghai during the Second World War, he took this opportunity to visit the old sites where Jews used to live in Shanghai in those years, so that he could make the final revision of the translation [7].

Howard is familiar with Chinese literature because he has translated a large number of works by modern and contemporary Chinese writers, the number of which is unparalleled among overseas sinologists. He was not only familiar with many old and new Chinese writers, but also close to them as family. Some writers simply ate and stayed at his home after arriving in the United States. But why did he keep such a low profile, unwilling to easily comment on their works or literary achievements in public? On the surface, he is unwilling to offend some Chinese writers, but on the deeper level, it is related to the mentality of Chinese writers.

Generally speaking, his rendition is faithful to the source to a great degree. It is obvious that he translated most parts of the novel with word-for-word translation. With advantages in mother tongue, his version is equivalent between source language and target language. However, because of many expressions with typical Chinese culture, he inevitably misunderstood some of them. Despite these blemishes, his version is still regarded as a successful one. His translation is of much help to introduce the novel and our traditional Chinese culture around the world [8].

4 The translation analysis of active and passive structures in *Rickshaw Boy*

Translation practice cannot be divorced from linguistic context. Only by combining the original author's thoughts, emotions, historical background, and creative intent can excellent translations be produced. Therefore, this article selects classic examples of active and passive expressions from Mr. Lao She's *Rickshaw Boy* to study the translation techniques of active and passive sentences in English and Chinese [2].

4.1 Translation from Chinese active voice into English passive voice

In Chinese expression, the personal subject takes the main role, and the corresponding active voice sentences are more readily accepted by language users. Conversely, in English expression, impersonal subjects are more common, and therefore passive structures are more common. However, even though the active voice is more readily accepted by language speakers in Chinese expression habits, different ways of expressing passive meanings also exist. Therefore, it is very common to translate the active forms in Chinese into passive structures in English [3].

Example1: Dang ran, ye wan bi bai tian xu yao geng duo de zhu yi li he ji neng, jin qian zi ran zhuan de geng duo.

Howard's translation: Working at night requires special care and skill, so there is more money to be made.

In the original text by Lao She, the entire sentence is expressed in active voice. However, in Howard Goldblatt's translation, the active form of "zhengqian" (earning money) is translated as "to be made", conveying that the "money" is being "earned". Howard Goldblatt changed the active sentence in Chinese to a passive sentence in English in order to conform to the linguistic structures often used in English-speaking countries and align with English ways of thinking.

4.2 Translation from Chinese passive voice into English passive voice

In Chinese, words with tangible markers, such as "bei" and "zao", can be directly translated into passive voice in English and generally have a negative emotional tone.

Example 2: Yi ge xiao fan huo yi ge shi ye de gong jiang, cong xun luo dui huo xue xiao fu wu dui che li chi guang le suo you de zi ben, huo shi shi ye le, dang mai bu chu qu de shi hou, jiu yao ya qie chi de zou shang si wang zhi lu.

Howard's translation: Laid-off policemen and school janitors, peddlers who have squandered their capital, and out-of-

work laborers who have nothing more to sell and no prospects for work grit their teeth, swallow their tears, and set out on this road to oblivion.

He uses the passive voice in English to correspond to the Chinese markers, vividly reflecting the helplessness of those who have lost their jobs and ultimately choose to become rickshaw pullers.

4.3 Obvious passive sentences

Example 3: ...er dao le sheng he si de jie xian yi jing bu shen fen ming, cai chao qi che ba lai de.

Howard: ...until the line between life and death has blurred for them do they finally pick up the shafts of a rickshaw.

In the expression thinking of Chinese, focusing on the theme leads the Chinese speakers to pay more attention to the theme. At this time, the initiator of the action appears less important or unnecessary to mention, as everyone would already know. In this "obvious passive sentence", "not very clear boundary" is expressed in Howard's translation as "has blurred", and Mr. Lao She's emotions are fully reflected in this sentence, since the "boundary" is "made clear".

4.4 The translation of Chinese sentences without explicit subjects

The omission of the subject or the passive sentence is very common in Chinese, while English, as an inflected language, has specific requirements for sentence elements, and the subject-predicate structure must be clear. Therefore, it is very important to accordingly change the voice in English-Chinese translation according to the language habits of the target language.

Example 4: shuo zhan zhu, bu lun zai pao de duo me kuai de shi hou, da jiao zai di shang qing ceng liang ceng, jiu zhan zhu le.....

Howard: When told to stop, no matter how fast he was going, he planted his feet and pulled up smartly.

In Mr. Lao She's original text, it is not expressed who "told" Xiangzi to "stop", but when we have a thorough understanding of the context, we realize that it was a customer who "told Xiangzi to stop". Therefore, in his translation, Howard turned the original sentence without a subject into a passive construction according to English expression habits, "When told to stop", making it more suitable for English speakers' thinking patterns and expression habits.

5 Conclusion

This thesis analyzes the translation of the active and passive voice in Howard Goldblatt's translation of *Rickshaw Boy* and summarizes that English predominantly uses changes in verb form to express the active and passive forms; whereas in Chinese expressions, active sentences focus more on the subject, and the passive voice often uses lexical forms to express it, or uses the active voice to express passive meaning or other sentence patterns such as sentences without explicit subjects that can express passive meanings. In conclusion, the passive voice is predominant in English expression, while the active form is more common in Chinese expression. Therefore, the transformation of sentence patterns and voice is the most basic translation requirement for translators. When translating the active and passive voice between English and Chinese, the translator should consider the morphological differences between the two languages, as well as the differences in the expression of tense changes [4]. The translator should also understand the original author's thoughts, emotions, historical background, and creative intentions, and choose different translation methods and techniques based on different expression modes of the target language. When choosing words and sentences, the translator should grasp their rich connotations to obtain a more accurate and accepted translation for readers.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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