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Application of Proximity in Translation of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

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Abstracts

Childhood serves as the crucial period of human life. Children's literature translation has drawn more and more attention of researchers and scholars. In the light of Gestalt law of proximity, this paper analyzes the language feature—explicitation of word meaning in Zhao Yuanren's version of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. The result shows that proximity law is helpful in determining the meaning of words in contexts, thus making the translation more accurate and easily accessible for child readers.

Key words: Children's literature translation; Proximity; Explicitation; Child readers

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INTRODUCTION

The status of children has been increased historically during the recent centuries. From being ignored to being respected, people's view on children has changed thoroughly over time. People's view on childhood serves as the origin and determines the direction of children's literature and children's literature translation. And it has gone through several stages. Before the mid of 18th century, the doctrine of original sins in *Bible* exerted a strong influence on people's attitudes toward childhood. It was approved that children need to be reshaped and corrected for better adulthood in the future. Books for children at the time were seriously religious and instructional. Later, childhood was thought in new ways. Innocent and free, children were seen as raw materials from which adults were made. During this period, children's books were free of religion and for entertainment. The notion of childhood at this stage was neutral. By the end of 18th century, children were viewed in a positive light. It was believed that children were close to God and childhood was the ideal state of human life. Since then, the appealing characters in children's books were clearly meant to please its audiences and children's literature began to flourish. Until nowadays, a large quantity of literary books has been written for children and publication for children's literature is increasingly booming in the world.

Children's literature in China has been greatly influenced by that of the western world. The history of it in China is short and starts from the introduction of foreign children's literature at the end of 19th century, whereas at the same period, children's literature in the western world has gained fruitful results. Translation plays a vital role in the introduction of children's literature from western countries. With different translated versions of the same book on the market in China, parents always have a hard time choosing the right one or their children. And children without instruction from teachers may not have the opportunity to truly appreciate the excellent foreign books. Thus, study on children's literature translation is both necessary and practical in modern times.

Some scholars have made their efforts in this field. Generally, they made studies on the development of children's literature translation in different stages, the translation thoughts of a particular translator and

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translation strategies and techniques. Few have paid attention to the general linguistic features of children's literature translation. What's more, the theories they apply are mostly Skopos Theory, the Relevance Theory, the Reception Theory and etc.. The application of psychology theory has been limited to translation works for adults, leaving children's literature translation unnoticed. This paper analyzes one of the linguistic features of children's literature translation—explicitation of ideational meaning in the light of Gestalt law of proximity to demonstrate that proximity law is rather helpful in solving certain kind of problems in children's literature translation.

1. EXPLICITATION OF WORD MEANING IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE TRANSLATION

Unlike the religious and instructional books before 18th century, children's literary works in modern times concentrate more on the entertainment and interests of children. In order to satisfy the special group of audience, authors make efforts in polishing their language as active, simple, and vivid. Chinese version of children's literature works is expected to allow children in China to appreciate the pleasure embodied in the original works. While respecting the author's authority is necessary, translators should pay more attention to the linguistic features of Chinese young readers.

Explicitation has always been the hot subject in the field of translation, and it is regarded as one of the translation universals. However, expliciation in children's literature translation remains unnoticed until recent years. The present paper proposes that compared with translations for adults, explicitation should be particularly emphasized in children's literature translation because of the immature cognitive development of children. Rather than ambiguous objects, the cognition of a child has a preference for concrete things, even though they are gradually developing in abstract thinking pattern. Accordingly, children's literature translation should avoid ambiguous and be clear and concrete as much as possible.

Many scholars have realized the importance of explicitation in children's literature translation. Gong Jihui argues that in the process of children's literature translation, explicitation is indispensable. Translators, especially those who translate for children, should be loyal to the original texts. More importantly, they need to take into consideration the special audiences—children. Wang Mengmeng puts forward some concrete strategies of explicitation in children's literature translation of *Chinese Cinderella: The Mystery of the Song Dynasty Painting, which* includes addition of conjunctions, transformation of appellation, and the repetition of contents and so on. As for the reasons of explicitation, Peng Zhiying's paper analyzes explicitation in *Charlotte's Web* from the aspects of language and culture, audience orientation, and translators. The present paper borrows the term "ideational meaning" of ideational function from Systemic-Functional Grammar, which puts forward the three meta-functions of language, namely ideational function, interpersonal function and textual function. This paper proposes that one of the language features of children's literature translation is explicitness of ideational meaning, which can be reflected in explicitation of nouns, explicitation of adjectives and explicitation of verbs.

1.1 Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

The book *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* was first published in 1865, which was written by Lewis Carroll, an English author. The novel mainly describes a dream story about the little girl, Alice. She followed a rabbit and fell into a fantasy world, and there she encountered many strange things. The most prominent feature of it might be "nonsense", with all the animals behaving and speaking like people. Just like the Cat said, "we're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad." (Carroll, 1965).

The background of the times of this book can be concluded into two related reasons. At the time when this book reached the public, attitudes of society toward childhood have changed. People no longer associate childhood with "original sin" and negative feelings. Instead, they saw children as innocent and childhood an ideal state of human life. Many authors at the time even describe in their books the little boy or girl who refuses to grow up, expressing the adult authors' longings of going back to childhood. Another reason is that the focus of children's book has transformed from education and religious instruction to delight and entertainment. The ideas of writing for children and reading in amusement have been strongly influential. Therefore, particularly created for children, the classic novel of nonsense. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, plays a vital role in the historical development of children's literature. This book has been popular all over the world since its publication. Now they have been translated into more than 80 languages and it is said that they are only second to the translation of the Bible and works of Shakespeare. In view of the above reasons, we choose this novel in the present paper.

In China, there are many translation versions of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland.* The author adopts examples from Zhao Yuanren's version, the first Chinese version of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland,* which was published by Commercial Press in 1922 (Carroll, 2002). Zhao Yuanren got his PhD from the Harvard University and was one of the most famous linguists in China. He is also honored as "the father of Chinese linguistics".

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His translation of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is considered as unparalleled even though it is not the newest version.

1.2 Gestalt Psychology

Gestalt psychology was founded in 1912 and the three representatives of it were three Germans: Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Kohler and Kurt Koffka. The term Gestalt also came from German, which means "shape" or "form" in English. At modern times, Gestalt theory has been widely used in the fields of physics, clinical diagnosis, computer science, art, and so on. For those who study translation, the term "Gestalt theory" evokes the concept of Gestalt image actualization and the idea that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. However, as the most ubiquitous and basic parts of Gestalt theory, laws of perceptual organization or Gestalt principles are barely noticed by translation researchers.

1.3 Laws of Perceptual Organization

The traditional perception theory adopted an atomistic approach, which held that human perception could be divided into separate parts in the organization of perception experiences. However, Gestalt psychologists drastically disagree with this point of view, which is predominant at that time. Gestalt psychology starts from the study of perception and Gestalt perception has completely changed people's view of seeing the physical world since its production.

Gestalt psychologists put forward that people tend to perceive stimuli in the physical world into a whole by using a series of rules. Such rules are named as laws of perceptual organization. Believing that the top-down perspective, namely the holistic approach, is used in the perceptual organization, Gestalt principles maintains that perceptual system is inherently capable of arranging physical stimuli or sensory data into organized wholes according to certain laws and thus shaping the perceptual experience of human beings. The organized whole in the system of perception is produced by the interaction and integration of its components. Consequently, the perceptual experience is created in the psychological field which modifies the data or stimuli in the physical world.

1.4 Law of Proximity

Proximity principle or law of proximity refers to "objects that are physical close to one another will be grouped together." (Plotnik, 1996, p.117) It is also called law of nearness by Wertheimer. Wertheimer uses the distance between dots to present the law of proximity (Wertheimer, 1938, pp.71-88). Law of proximity relates to the most basic attribute of being a group, namely physical distance. Elements that are physically close each other tends to be grouped together and be perceived as a whole in perceptual field. As shown in Figure 1: In condition that other factors remain the same, dots that near one another are seen as one group. Thus it is natural to give the description that there are five pairs of dots in Figure 1. Yet, it is impossible to organize the spaced dots into a group in the perceptual system.

Figure 1
Law of Proximity

Law of proximity is pretty applicable in determining the meaning of an individual word. Every word is meaningful only in a specific context whether it is a noun, an adjective or a verb. Proximity law relates to physical distance of elements. Gestalt is formed by elements near each other and every individual element carries the attribute of the whole gestalt. In the case of written language, context can be drawn from words and sentences nearby, and the meaning of every word is greatly influenced by the context it belongs to. The meaning of the same word changes when the context is different. This explains why translators assign different meanings to the same word in different sentences and context.

2. LAW OF PROXIMITY AND EXPLICIT TRANSLATION OF *ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND*

At the beginning of the preface of Zhao's translation, he wrote clearly that "this book was especially written for children". With children in his heart, Zhao focused on how to convey the meaning directly and easily to his audiences while doing the translation. Due to the differences in language and culture, it is unavoidable to use the strategy of exclicitation in translation. In this part, the meaning of nouns, adjectives and verbs are analyzed separately under the guidance of proximity law. Due to the length limitation of this paper, it is impossible to lists too many examples. Therefore, we use one example from each category to explain.

Example 1:

For, you see, so many out-of-the-way **things** had happened lately, that Alice had begun to think that very few **things** indeed were really impossible. (Carroll, 1965, p.20)

你想, 阿丽思近来遇见了这么些出奇的事情, 她简直觉得天下没有真做不到的事情了(Zhao, 2002, p.5).

Example 2:

And she tried to fancy what the flame of a candle looks like after the candle is blown out, for she could not remember ever having seen such a **thing**. (Carroll, 1965, p.21)

她说着就想摹拟一个吹灭了的蜡烛的火苗的样子, 可是想了半天也想不出来, 因为她记得从来没有见过这么件东西. (Zhao, 2002, p.6)

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Example 3:

And when she had tried herself out with trying, the poor little **thing** sat down and cried. (Carroll, 1965, p.22)

左试右试扒的又累又没法子, 那可怜的孩子就坐在地上哭了起来. (Zhao, 2002, p.7)

The examples focus on translation of the noun—"thing". In the first sentence, "out-of-the-way things" and "things indeed were really impossible" were transferred as "出奇的事情" and "真做不到的事情". The noun "thing" was replaced by "事情" in Chinese. "Such a thing" in the second sentence was translated into "东西" and "the poor little thing" in the last sentence was made into "那可怜的孩子". The same noun "thing" was explicited in translation and means "事情", "东西", and "孩子" separately in different sentences. Proximity law holds that objects close to one another in physical distance will be grouped into a united gestalt. And every individual object will carry the attribute of the gestalt. In the above sentences, three different gestalts or contexts were constructed, which determined the meaning of "thing". The noun "thing" is a general word in English. What it really refers to is greatly influenced by its nearby companions, namely the context. Only with the law of proximity can the translator grasp the meaning of "thing" and explicit it out correctly and properly.

Example 4:

"Come back!" the Caterpillar called after her. "I've something **important** to say!" (Carroll, 1965, p.50)

"回来!" 那毛毛虫追叫道, "我有要紧话说!" (Zhao, 2002, p.36)

Example 5:

"Ahem!" said the Mouse with an **important** air. (Carroll, 1965, p.32)

那老鼠做着个高贵的样子, 咳一声道, "呃哼!" (Zhao, 2002, p.16)

Translation of adjective "important" is going to be analyzed in this example. The word "important" is quite a common adjective in English, but the translation of it does not seem to be easy. According to the law of proximity, the meaning of every single word is greatly influenced by its neighboring words. In the first sentence, the adjective "important" was used to modify the noun "something". Accordingly, "something important" was translated as "要紧话". However, in the second sentence, "an important air" (高贵的样子) was a phrase in English. The word "important" served as the modifier of the noun "air". The gestalt in this sentence is different from the one in the first sentence. Thus the adjective "important" was translated differently as "高贵". Zhao Yuan Ren recognized different gestalts in two sentences and made his translation vivid and explicit.

Example 6:

"He **took** me for his housemaid," she said to herself as she ran. "How surprised he'll be when he finds out who I am! But I'd better **take** him his fan and gloves——that is, if I can find them." (Carroll, 1965, p.39)

她跑着自己想道, "他拿我当他的丫头. 他回来看出我到底是谁, 那才诧异呢！可是我还是拿给他他的扇子和手套好——要是找得着的话."

Example 7:

Alice glanced rather anxiously at the cook, to see if she meant to **take** the hint (Carroll, 1965, p.62).

阿丽思很着急地对那厨老妈子瞧了一瞧, 看她会不会会公爵夫人的意 (Zhao, 2002, p.49).

As a transitive verb, the meaning of "take" depends on the noun that follows it to a large extent. Different collocations constitute different gestalts. According to law of proximity, objects close to each other tend to be perceived as a whole. Thus, the gestalt or context should be first acknowledged in translation and then the meaning of single verb is determined. In the above sentences, the verb "take" appeared three times, and it was assigned different meaning in three collocations. In the sentence "he took me for his housemaid" (他拿我当他的丫头), the noun that followed "took" was a person "me". So the verb "took" was translated into "拿…当…". In English, "take sb. sth." was a fixed phrase. Thus, the gestalt in the phrase "take him his fan and gloves" was easily recognizable, which can be translated into "拿给他的扇子和手套" or "把他的扇子和手套拿给他". In the second sentence, the neighboring word of verb "take" was "the hint" and "take the hint" (会意) was perceived as a group in the translator's mind. In a word, the same verb "take" was transferred as "拿…当…", "拿给" and "会…的意" respectively in three contexts. It is the application of proximity law that explicitation of word meaning becomes possible.

The above examples illustrated three categories of word meaning explicitation. It is obvious that the translator used proximity law in deciding the meaning of every single word, no matter it is a noun, an adjective or a verb. Law of proximity guided Zhao Yuanren to present concrete and vivid expressions in the act of translating.

CONCLUSION

Riitta Oittinen, the author of *Translating for Children*, gives a philosophical description of children in her book, and mentions that people are sometimes kept in a state of being children for a long period of time, some of us even for life. Such positive attitudes toward childhood have been and are going to keep its enormous influence on every culture. With this background, publication and translation of children's literature will definitely be on the right track of development. This paper applies the law of proximity and builds a connection between Gestalt psychology and children's literature translation. Gestalt laws of perceptual organization are practical in solving problems in children's literature translation.

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The application of other laws still needs further exploration.

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