

CHAPTER TWELVE
TRANSLATING FOREGROUNDING:
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF CHINESE
AND CANADIAN READERS

GAO WEI, DAVID S. MIALL AND DON KUIKEN

Abstract

Foregrounding in a literary text, such as special sound effects or a metaphor that draws on local cultural knowledge, presents a specific problem for translation: it risks a diminution of poetic effect, or a kind of entropy. To study this issue we collected empirical evidence for the effectiveness of the translation into English of passages from an early 19th-Century Chinese autobiography, *Six Chapters of a Floating Life*. The passages were presented in segments (usually one sentence) in the original Chinese and in English translation to readers in China and Canada respectively. Readers provided reading times per segment and ratings of these segments for strikingness. Overall, a close correspondence of these measures between Chinese and Canadian readers suggest that the stylistic variations in Chinese were largely recreated in the English translation, since readers tended to linger over the same passages and find the same passages striking. In addition, four selected passages were rated on bipolar semantic-differential-type judgements and dimensions relating to stylistic effects. Differences in these ratings indicate that the translated passages were found more formal by Canadian readers, while their ratings also reflected Canadian unfamiliarity with several aspects of Chinese culture. The empirical methods used here help measure the aesthetic comparability of a source and translated text.

Introduction: Foregrounding and Translation

“Like a healthy human heartbeat, which has an intrinsic irregular system, the body of an artwork gets its vitality from a rhythm based in uncertainty” (Howe 2006, vii).

The rhythm of a literary text is influenced by the foregrounding it contains; and foregrounding not only varies from one part of a text to another, but its occurrence is marked by readers’ increased uncertainty. Following the work of the Russian Formalists, Mukarovsky, Leech and Short, and van Peer, we (Miall and Kuiken 1994) have proposed that foregrounding is a characteristic feature of literary texts; similarly, Hogan (1997) has argued that the presence of foregrounded features in literature of all cultures is evidence that foregrounding is a cultural universal. Some empirically documented effects of foregrounding include reported defamiliarization, feeling intensification (Emmott 2002), depth of appreciation (Hakemulder 2004), and shifts in literary understanding (Miall and Kuiken 2001).

But, how does foregrounding fare in translation? In an effort to preserve the effects of foregrounding, Venuti advocates what he calls “foreignizing translation” or “abusive fidelity.” By foreignizing he means a translation strategy that resists domestication, fluency, and transparency (Venuti 1995, 148 ff.). By abusive fidelity he means reproduction of those very features of the foreign text that “abuse” or resist the prevailing forms and values in the receiving culture, thereby remaining faithful to aspects of the source text while still effecting cultural change through the target language (Venuti 1992, pp. 12-13; 1995, pp. 182-183).

However, because words that “abuse” or defamiliarize in the same dimensions as the source text are not always available, the translation of textual foregrounding risks a certain kind of entropy. Several aspects of foregrounding are vulnerable to loss or degradation in the translation process, especially the effects of sound and rhythm, but also the wording that constitutes a metaphor or the idiom that requires local cultural knowledge. In various ways, then, the translation process is likely to diminish the poetic qualities of the source text, and attenuate aesthetic appreciation. While a translator may aim at the “functional equivalence” of the two texts, in Nida’s (1993) words, “This maximal level of equivalence is rarely, if ever, achieved, except for texts having little or no aesthetic value and involving only routine information” (117-8).

For an example (taken from Lodge 2003), consider these lines in a German poem by Rose Ausländer called “Mühlen aus Wind”: “Mühlen aus Wind / mahlen sandmehl” – which can be translated, “Mills made of

wind / grind sand-flour" (264). The sound progression of *Mühlen, mahlen, -mehl* has no equivalent consonance in the literal English equivalents. The substitute effect of *grind, grains*, and *sand* is striking, but the effect is harsher and not in accord with the original tone of the poem. As Lodge puts it, a translator has little hope of translating the effects of sound in a poem from one language to another: "Alliteration, assonance, rhyme and rhythmic patterns have to be crafted anew during the process of translation" (263). Whether a translator will be as adept as the original author seems, as a general rule, unlikely.

A study by Baker (2004) demonstrates the process of entropy in translation, although it is based on a different premise than is our present concern about foregrounding. Her assumption is that "translators are more conservative in their use of language than the authors they translate; that they tend to prefer more standard forms of the language; that there tends to be a raising of the level of formality in translation; that translated text is 'sanitized' (in terms of translators avoiding certain features such as regionalisms and irregular spelling); and that translators tend to produce more 'uniform' texts, for example by avoiding disruption of tense sequences, etc." (172). According to her, fluency is the main aim of the translator. She carried out a computer-based examination of two bodies of literature: a selection from the British National Corpus, and a corpus she compiled of English texts that had been translated. Her primary measure for comparison of these two text types was lexical repetition: she searched the texts for repeated phrases, on the supposition that greater repetition implies regression to a "normalized" form of English. She found a higher frequency of lexical repetitions in the translated English corpus. As her Table 1 (Baker 2004, 175-6) shows, of the 12 phrases she counted, 2737 occurred in the translated corpus compared with 1134 in the native corpus. Variation across translations was also found, as might be expected, with some translators showing more repetition than others. (Some deliberate repetitions of a phrase were also found, such as "that is to say," used to distinguish a character's verbal style).

Table 1. Frequency of lexical repetitions in two corpora, Baker (2004)

	TEC	BNC
<i>at the same time</i>	669	323
<i>in the middle of the</i>	401	209
<i>from time to time</i>	394	137
<i>on the other hand</i>	347	150
<i>that is</i>	288	119
<i>in other words</i>	161	36
<i>that is to say</i>	129	31
<i>once and for all</i>	120	26
<i>when it comes to</i>	78	35
<i>at the edge of the</i>	67	46
<i>I thought to myself</i>	43	12
<i>in a manner of speaking</i>	40	10
Totals	2737	1134

Note. TEC: Translated English Corpus; BNC: British National Corpus. From Mona Baker 2004. A corpus-based view of similarity and difference in translation. *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics*, 9: 175-6. Reprinted with kind permission from John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam/Philadelphia. [www.benjamins.com].

The issues raised by translation, then, seem analogous to those raised by empirical studies in which the foregrounded features of literary texts are manipulated: the *unintentional* removal of foregrounding in translation may be comparable to the *deliberate* removal of foregrounding in studies of its effects. For example, Hakemulder (2004) assessed readers' response to two literary texts (an excerpt from a Rushdie novel and a short poem by Nabakov) from which most of the foregrounding had been deliberately removed. Readers' responses indicated a greater depth of appreciation of the original texts than of the manipulated versions. Analogously, when the translator aims, according to Baker, for a target text that will read fluidly but that unintentionally eliminates its poetic qualities, the result will be diminished aesthetic appreciation.

Our goal in the present research was to assess the fate of foregrounding in the process of translation. Rather than attempting critical analysis of a text and its translation, an approach that implicitly assumes an understanding of readers' responses, we adapted the empirical methods used in our earlier foregrounding studies, as we will describe. For this

preliminary study we chose a source and target text in languages that are linguistically very different: Chinese and English. The text was a short section from *Six Chapters of a Floating Life*, an autobiography by Shen Fu (1999) written in the early nineteenth century (c. 1805): the main focus of the excerpt we chose is the author's initial acquaintance with his wife Yun and their early marriage; it has a lyrical, elegiac character (his wife was to die young). The translation was by the famous Chinese writer Lin Yutang, who wrote several works of fiction, philosophy, and social commentary. Lin lived for a number of years in the west, acquired native fluency in English, and was the translator of a number of Chinese works into English, including poems by the famous Chinese poets Li Po (699-762) and Tu Fu (712-70). A Chinese scholar writing in 1947 in the USA refers to "his excellent English, certainly the very best any Chinese has ever written, which always holds a spell over his readers" (Chang-Win 1947, 164).

To compare readers' reactions to the Chinese and translated English versions of this text, we adapted measures from our previous foregrounding studies (Miall and Kuiken 1994). In those studies, we observed a strong relationship between the occurrence of foregrounding at the segment level (approximately one sentence) and readers' ratings of how striking they found each segment; in addition, we found that reading times per segment (controlled for segment length) were strongly influenced by level of foregrounding. We used these associations to examine the effectiveness of Lin Yutang's translation stylistically.

Design

We matched an excerpt from the Chinese version of *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* with an English translation of that excerpt by Lin Yutang. The excerpt was divided into 63 segments (approximately one sentence) that corresponded in both languages. For example, here are the opening two paragraphs of the excerpt in English, divided into numbered segments:

1. At this time the guests in the house all wore bright dresses, but Yun alone was clad in a dress of quiet colour, and had on a new pair of shoes.
2. I noticed that the embroidery on her shoes was very fine, and learnt that it was her own work, so that I began to realize that she was gifted at other things, too, besides reading and writing.
3. Of a slender figure, she had drooping shoulders and a rather long neck, slim but not to the point of being skinny.

4. Her eyebrows were arched and in her eyes there was a look of quick intelligence and soft refinement.
5. The only defect was that her two front teeth were slightly inclined forward, which was not a mark of good omen.
6. There was an air of tenderness about her, which completely fascinated me.

The study was carried out in Canada at the University of Alberta, where we recruited 40 university students, and in China at the Tianjin University of Science and Technology, where 28 students participated. The text was presented on computer, segment by segment. In their first reading, participants read the entire excerpt, pacing their reading by pressing the space bar (while the computer calculated reading times per segment). They then read the excerpt a second time, rating each segment for strikingness on a scale of 1 (not at all striking) to 5 (very striking). Finally, four passages selected from the excerpt were presented again, and readers provided ratings on 19 scales for each passage.

Results

The overall pattern of reading times and ratings indicated that Chinese and English readers' responded similarly, suggesting that the stylistic variations in Chinese were largely recreated in the English translation. However, there were also some differences between these two groups of readers, and the source of these differences requires careful examination.

Reading Times

When the reading times and strikingness ratings provided by Chinese and Canadian readers were considered separately, Friedman's test and Kendall's Coefficient of Concordance indicated high interrater agreement, $p < .001$. Therefore, for our primary analyses, we computed the means per segment across all individuals in each data set. We found that, overall, the profiles of mean reading times for Chinese readers and for Canadian readers were highly correlated, $r(61) = .605$, $p < .001$; given that there was considerable variance in sentence length, this result could be expected. However, the profiles of mean reading times were similar even when corrected for sentence length. That is, reading times per syllable in English and per word in Chinese were still moderately correlated: $r(61) = .389$, $p = .002$, suggesting that readers in both languages lingered over the same text segments.

At the same time, Canadian readers generally read faster than Chinese readers: mean reading time per segment in China was 8.67 sec; in Canada it was 7.37 sec, $t(62) = 3.405, p = .001$. This implies that Canadian readers may have taken less time to reflect on, or to savour, the story excerpt. Another indication that Canadian readers were less fully engaged with the text was provided by comparing reading times per segment with segment position. It is commonly found that readers tend to speed up during the course of their reading, as though early familiarity facilitates later comprehension. This was indeed the case for Chinese readers: reading times per word were inversely related to segment position, $r(61) = -.284, p = .024$; the Chinese readers read faster as the story progressed. However, for the Canadian readers there was no such effect (the analogous correlation between reading times per syllable and segment position was not significant: $r = -.032$); Canadian readers appear not to have developed the same familiarity with the world of the text as the Chinese readers.

Strikingness Ratings

A similar pattern of results was apparent in the strikingness ratings. The mean segment by segment strikingness ratings for Chinese and Canadian readers were highly correlated, $r(61) = .549, p < .001$. On the other hand, Canadian readers gave lower ratings overall than did the Chinese readers: Canadian: 3.03, Chinese: 3.38, $t(62) = 5.761, p < .001$.

We also expected that reading times would be correlated with strikingness ratings, since in previous studies both of these measures varied in concert with levels of foregrounding. This was partly born out by the analysis. For Chinese readers, mean segment by segment reading times and mean segment by segment strikingness ratings were modestly correlated, $r(61) = .248, p = .025$; however, among the Canadian readers this correlation was not significant, $r(61) = .111, ns$. Moreover, comparing across national groups, the Canadian mean reading times and Chinese mean strikingness ratings showed the expected relationship, $r(61) = .224, p < .05$; however, Chinese mean reading times and Canadian mean strikingness ratings did not, $r(61) = -.035, ns$. These findings, at least for the Chinese readers, are consistent with the foregrounding hypothesis. However, they also suggest that Canadian readers were not responding to foregrounding in the same way as their Chinese counterparts.

Overall, the two versions of the text appear to have elicited similar *profiles* of response from Chinese and Canadian readers, even though they produced different *levels* of response on both the reading time and strikingness measures. One possibility is that Canadian readers' response to the translated text was diminished because foregrounded features in the original text were not faithfully rendered in translation. However, another possibility is that Canadian readers were less engaged because even Lin Yutang's finely translated text carried meanings that remained culturally remote.

To examine these possibilities more closely, we located the segments that had been rated most differently by the two groups of readers. The ten segments showing the greatest difference in strikingness can be seen in Table 2. Examination of these segments suggests that the differences can be attributed both to the limits of translatability and to Canadian readers' unfamiliarity with Chinese culture. For instance, segment 49 in Chinese is a sixteen-word sentence made up of four groups of four-word expressions (a formal expression in Chinese for which there is no obvious English equivalent); so, most of the stylistic effect is lost in the English version. Similarly, the original of segment 27 is written in typical classical Chinese, very different from a modern Chinese expression—and very difficult to translate into English. In contrast, in the Chinese version, segments 39 and 40 contain metaphors, antithesis, and some unusual, ancient expressions that would not be at all familiar to Canadian readers. Also, the poetry quoted in the last two segments (62 and 63) contained Chinese idioms that were found more striking by the Chinese readers.

Table 2. Mean Differences in Story Ratings (Chinese minus Canadian)

Diff	seg.	
1.29	62	“When the yellow stork comes again . . .
1.29	7	I asked for the manuscripts of her poems and found that they consisted mainly of couplets and three or four lines, being unfinished poems, and I asked her the reason why.
1.20	49	The light of a rapeseed oil lamp was then burning as small as a pea, and the edges of the bed curtain hung low in the twilight, and we were shaking all over.

- 1.19 27 All this was done naturally almost without any consciousness, and although at first we felt uneasy about it, later on it became a matter of habit.
- 1.12 63 "Just look at the white clouds sailing off . . ."
- 1.03 39 Then Yun stopped laughing and said, "The citron is the gentleman among the different fragrant plants because its fragrance is so slight that you can hardly detect it; on the other hand, the jasmine is a common fellow because it borrows its fragrance partly from others.
- 1.01 56 Yun wasn't interested because she did not think much of her, but I was intrigued and composed one on the flying willow catkins, which filled the air in May.
- 0.98 8 She smiled and said, "I have had no one to teach me poetry, and wish to have a good teacher friend who could help me to finish these poems."
- 0.84 55 There was a friend of mine, Chang Hsienhan of Wukiang, who was a good friend of Lenghsiang and brought her poems to me, asking us to write some in reply.
- 0.84 40 Therefore, the fragrance of the jasmine is like that of a smiling sycophant."

In addition to providing ratings for all 63 story segments, readers rated four selected passages on 19 separate 7-point scales, including semantic differential items (e.g., bright-dark, light-heavy, active-passive) and stylistic dimensions (e.g., simple-complex, informal-formal, unforeign-foreign). Cross-group comparisons of these ratings indicated the following:

Passage 1:

"Do you mean to tie me down with all this ceremony?"

For this underlined passage, Chinese readers and Canadian readers reported contrasting connotations: Canadian readers found it relatively fast, hard, dark, dead, and low. Moreover, Canadian readers found the style of this passage less colourful and more formal than did their Chinese counterparts.

Passage 2:

"Therefore, the fragrance of the jasmine is like that of a smiling sycophant."

For this underlined passage, too, Chinese and Canadian readers reported contrasting connotations: Canadian readers found this passage relatively slow, soft, bright, and light. Canadian readers also found this passage more unconventional in its sound, more complex, and (like passage 1) more formal.

Passage 3:

"They softly touch the spring sorrow in my bosom, and gently stir the longings in her heart."

Chinese and Canadian readers did not differ in their ratings of the connotations of this passage. However, like passage 2, Canadian readers found this poetic passage more unconventional in its sound, more complex, and more formal.

Passage 4:

When the yellow stork comes again,

Let's together empty the golden goblet,

Pouring wine-offering

Over the thousand-year green meadow
on the isle.

Just look at the white clouds sailing off,

And who will play the jade flute,

Sending its melodies

Down the fifth-moon plum-blossoms
in the city?

Again, Chinese and Canadian readers did not differ in their ratings of the connotations of this passage. However, Canadian readers found this embedded poem more unconventional in its sentence structure and (like passages 2 and 3) more unconventional in its sound, more complex, and more formal.

The greater formality that Canadians attributed to all four of these selected passages echoes Baker's (2004) claim that translated texts tend to be more formal than the original texts. Other ratings, however, help to elaborate the kind of formality that is at issue here. On 3 of the 4 selected passages Canadian readers found the text stylistically more unconventional, especially the sound but also the sentence structure. These ratings suggest that readers were attuned to formal, perhaps especially

phonetic or rhythmic, features of the text that were smoothly integrated into the original Chinese version but that became “unconventional” and “complex” when translated into English. Such formal features constitute one of the primary—and perhaps insurmountable—obstacles to effective translation.

However, other contrasts between Chinese and Canadian readers seem to reflect more mundane cultural differences. The contrasting connotations of two of the selected passages seem to reflect Canadian unfamiliarity with aspects of Chinese culture. In one of its forms this involves unfamiliarity with the meaning of idiomatic expressions (e.g., what it may mean to be “tied down” by ceremony); in another of its forms it involves differences that derive from disparate histories with common cultural artifacts (e.g., traditional connotations of the “fragrance of jasmine”). While idiomatic expressions present difficulties in translation that compare, perhaps, with formal (e.g., phonetic, rhythmic) ones, the connotative differences that emerge from different cultural histories with common artifacts present the translator with a somewhat different dilemma. On the one hand, it is possible to construe connotative non-equivalence as a reader deficiency, as though, for example, Canadian readers might be expected to have multi-cultural understandings of the “fragrance of jasmine.” On the other hand, it is possible to see connotative non-equivalence as a mandate for broadening the scope of translation, as justification for (non-literal) elaboration that would ensure equivalent description of the relevant cultural artifacts.

Conclusions

These results indicate that foregrounding — and translations of foregrounding — influence readers in similar ways, as shown by similar profiles of both reading times and strikingness ratings. At the same time, Canadian readers tended to read faster and find the text used in this study less striking. Differences in their rating patterns suggest that the contrast between Chinese and Canadian readers is due in part to the extreme challenge of translating some forms of foregrounding, especially phonetic and rhythmic features, and in part to the unfamiliarity of Canadian readers with Chinese cultural allusions and rhetorical forms.

These findings underline the difficulty of living up to Fu Yan’s (1896/1984) three-character translation principles: “faithfulness,” “expressiveness,” and “elegance.” In the preface to his translation of Huxley’s *Evolution and Ethics*, Fu Yan (1898/1984) asserts that “Translation has to do with three difficult things: to be faithful, expressive

and elegant.” However, Fu Yan considered a translator to be a creative writer, at liberty to rearrange the text, and he even thought deletion or addition of necessary information was acceptable — what has been called “hermeneutic translation” (e.g., Wilberg 1999). The Canadian readers’ lower strikingness ratings — and their contrasting understanding of the connotations of selected passages — prompt us to ask whether “hermeneutic translation” is required to create connotative equivalence between original and translated texts. Is that style of translation required for readers whose multi-cultural understanding is not well developed? Further study will be needed to clarify this issue, perhaps with more intensive exploration of specific figurative expressions translated from Chinese into English (such as “When the yellow stork comes again . . .”).

In the meantime, this preliminary study, drawing on empirical methods with groups of readers, seems to us a promising avenue for beginning the examination of the aesthetic comparability of a source and translated text. Although the “functional equivalence” of a translation, in Nida’s (1993) words, “cannot be understood in its mathematical meaning of identity, but only in terms of proximity” (117-8), the measurement of readers’ responses, as we have demonstrated, provides a useful method for quantifying the degree of that proximity.

Works Cited

- Baker, M. 2004. A corpus-based view of similarity and difference in translation. *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics*, 9: 167-193.
- Chang-Win Tsit. 1947. Lin Yutang, critic and interpreter. *College English*, 8: 163-169.
- Emmott, Catherine. 2002. Responding to style: Cohesion, foregrounding and thematic interpretation. In *Thematics: Interdisciplinary studies*, ed. Max Louwse and Willie van Peer, 91-117. Amsterdam / Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Hakemulder, Jemljan F. 2004. Foregrounding and its effect on readers’ perception. *Discourse Processes*, 38: 193-218.
- Hogan, Patrick C. 1997. Literary universals. *Poetics Today*, 18: 223-249.
- Howe, Fanny. 2006. Introduction to G. Bermanos, *Mouchette*, trans. J. C. Whitehouse, vii-xxii. New York: New York Review Books.
- Lodge, Ken. 2003. Phonological translation and phonetic repertoire. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 13: 263-276.
- Miall, David S. and Kuiken, Don. 1994. Foregrounding, defamiliarization, and affect: Response to literary stories. *Poetics*, 22: 389-407.

- Miall, David S. and Kuiken, Don. 2001. Shifting perspectives: Readers' feelings and literary response. In *New Perspectives on Narrative Perspective*, ed. Willie van Peer and Seymour Chatman, 289-301. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Nida, Eugene A. 1993. *Language, Culture, and Translating*. Shanghai: Foreign Language Education Press.
- Shen Fu. 1999. *Six Chapters of a Floating Life*, trans. Lin Yutang. Beijing: Chinese Translators Association, Foreign Languages Teaching and Research Press.
- Venuti, Lawrence. 1995. *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. London: Routledge.
- . ed. 1992. *Rethinking Translation: Discourse, Subjectivity, Ideology*. London: Routledge.
- Yan, Fu. 1984. Preface to the translation of *Evolution and Ethics*. In: *Essays on Translation Studies*. Beijing: Chinese Translators Association, Foreign Languages Teaching and Research Press. [Original publication 1896.]
- Wilberg, Peter. 1999, April. Interlingual Training and Technology. *Humanising Language Teaching*, Year 1, Issue 2 <http://www.hltnag.co.uk/apr99/mart1.htm> (August 23rd 2007)

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

IS THIS TYPICAL JAPANESE? INFLUENCES OF STEREOTYPES ON TEXT RECEPTION

JAN AURACHER AND AKIKO HIROSE

Abstract

This chapter reports the results of a study conducted to gain a better understanding of the influence of stereotypes when reconstructing the character of a protagonist in a story. Two versions of a fairytale, different only in their claimed cultural origin, were used as materials. When asked to assess protagonists' character traits, subjects who believed the text to be of Japanese origin tended to allocate significantly more (stereo-)typical Japanese traits than subjects who had been made to believe the text to be an Italian fairytale. Moreover, readers who studied either Japanese or Italian philology tended to assess the fairytale as more typically Japanese or Italian, respectively, when compared to students with other majors.

Assessing Protagonists

The interpretation of a literary text hinges – not least – on the interpretation of its protagonists. It is the protagonist who often carries the storyline, whose actions and thoughts cause readers to reflect on issues raised by the story. And, as the contributions by Green and Owen in this volume show, it is not exceptional for readers to draw consequences from the behaviour and/or beliefs of a character. By relating a sequence of actions to the motivation of the protagonists, the author constructs what E. M. Forster calls the 'plot', i.e. a story with "a sense of causality" (Forster 1974, 93; see also Carroll 2001). According to Oatley, the reader, by adopting the protagonist's goals, wishes, or hopes becomes emotionally involved in the story, allowing a deeper understanding of its development