The Variation of Euphemistic Translation
of "Death" of *Border Town*

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Abstract: Euphemisms, as a common linguistic, social and cultural phenomenon in the process of human development, have attracted a lot of the academic community's attention. Due to the differences in social and cultural aspects between countries and nations, English and Chinese differ in their expressions and vocabulary choices, and the differences are mainly seen in the fact that English uses more euphemisms than Chinese, but Chinese is not devoid of euphemistic ways of presentation. With English and Chinese both having a large number of euphemisms, they have some similarities and differences, and current research on euphemisms tends to focus on the comparative study of different languages or dialects. The purpose of this paper is to compare the euphemisms of "death" in the two English translation versions of *Border Town*, YANG Xianyi's translation (translated by an author who speaks English as a second language) and Jeffrey's translation (translated by a native English speaker), to view the characteristics of the two translators through the lens of the "death" translation, and thus provide some insights for translators in how to do good translations.

Keywords: *Border Town*; Death; Euphemism; Comparative Study

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1   Euphemisms

Euphemism is a linguistic, cultural, and rhetorical phenomenon that exists in any language (GAO 2007:

54). Euphemisms cover a wide range of topics and have a rich cultural connotation, and they achieve the purpose of implicit expression by covering up taboo words. In an increasingly civilized society, people mostly use vague, embellished, and euphemistic ways to conceal human physiological phenomena, personal privacy, and certain sensitive social topics, trying to avoid the possible irritation and harm brought by direct speeches, showing personal respect and psychological care.

With the rise of cognitive linguistics, more and more scholars have begun to apply the relevant theories of cognitive linguistics to the study of euphemisms, arguing that the whole process of generation and comprehension involves cognitive processing and is well-documented (CHEN 2007: 41). In euphemism-related studies, euphemisms for "death" are the most abundantly studied, and papers exploring the relationship between euphemisms for "death" and society and culture account for a significant proportion. YANG Wenxiu (2000: 49–51) explores the cultural similarities and differences between Chinese and Western euphemisms in terms of the meaning of death, the ways and causes of death, and the descriptions of people's physical reactions. HE Xiaohong (2006: 129–131) explores the similarities and differences between Chinese and English euphemisms for "death" from three perspectives: religious culture, national emotion and social status. HU Yuanqun (2008: 358–360), ZENG Dongqing (2010: 87–91) compared the metaphors and metonymy in English and Chinese euphemisms for death from the perspective of cognitive linguistics and found that both English and Chinese languages have "death" as "leave," "rest," "give up," "end," and "return" metaphors; in terms of metaphors, they all use the way or purpose of death as a metaphor for "Death".

The author searched the CNKI with "euphemism" and "*Border Town*" as keywords, only to find out discussions from translation techniques and literary perspectives, and no relevant literature. This paper is a comparative study of the euphemism of "death" in the two English translation visions of *Border Town* – YANG Xinyi's translation (English as a second language) and Jeffrey's translation (English as a first language), explores the linguistic functions of cooperation, taboo and politeness in the euphemisms for "death" in the context of specific linguistic phenomena, so as to better help translators to analyze the cultural connotations behind them, thus achieving cross-cultural communication and providing a more comprehensive and scientific way for Chinese cultures to go abroad.

2   The Definition of Euphemism and the Euphemism of "Death" in the English Translation Versions of *Border Town*

The English word euphemism comes from the Greek prefix "eu" (good) and the root "pheme" (to speak), and the meaning of the whole word is "word of good omen" (good saying). The Oxford Dictionary defines euphemism from a semantic point of view as: Substitution of a mild or vague or round about the expression for a harsh or direct one; expression thus substituted (New Edition of the Oxford Concise Dictionary 1976). In Chinese, the word "euphemism" is also called "tactful expression, gentle words," and in "Rhetorical Patterns"

written by Mr. TANG Yue, he listed "euphemism" as a kind of rhetorical pattern by the name of "micro-rhetoric," and thus the name of "euphemism" came into being. In Chinese, we usually interpret "euphemism" as "polite language and sincere attitude." In the process of daily language communication, people cannot say certain words directly and cannot avoid them completely, so they choose to use words that can convey the original meaning in a roundabout way and can be understood by the recipient of the language.

Euphemisms have an important social function, which by using a more indirect way to talk about people or things that should not be spoken directly. However, with the development of the times, the scope of euphemism has become broader and broader, and its concept is no longer limited to euphemisms in a narrow sense. SHU Dingfang (1995) divides euphemisms into narrow euphemisms and broad euphemisms: narrow euphemisms are words or phrases that have been conventionally used for a certain period of time and are accepted by most people in a certain range, such as the euphemism for die in English: pass away; while the euphemism in the broad sense is an expression with euphemistic function constructed temporarily through various linguistic devices in the language system, such as phonetic devices (light reading, change of pronunciation, etc.), grammatical devices (negation, tense, morphology, etc.) or discourse devices (chapter) (SHU and XU 1995: 19).

The author read through the two English translation visions of *Border Town* and found a total of 45 descriptions of "death," including 44 descriptions of human "death" and only one mention of animal "death." According to the above definition of euphemism, this paper mainly compares the 27 euphemisms in the two English translations of *Border Town* in terms of vocabulary, grammar, discourse (chapter), metaphor and metonymy.

3   A comparative Study of the Euphemism of "Death" in the two English Translations of *Border Town*

3.1   Lexical Comparison

From the lexical point of view, English is an adherent and inflected language (CHEN 2004: 99). English euphemisms use inflected words to express things or situations that are not suitable for direct speech. For example, the original text, "當日頭落下時, 又不至於思量與日頭同時死去," Jeffrey (2009) translated as "and stopping him from thinking of expiring along with the sunlight when it faded at night." According to the explanation of the word "expire" in the Eduic Dictionary: pass from physical life and lose all bodily attributes and functions necessary to sustain life. However, YANG Xian Yi (2016) here translates as: and stops him from brooding about death at sunset. By contrast, "expiring" is more euphemistic than "death." In addition, such as "whereupon she went to the stream and drowned herself in the cold waters (Jeffrey)" and "she killed herself by drinking too much cold stream water (YANG Xianyi)," "drowned" is used as a euphemism for the death than "killed." There are also several euphemistic descriptions of Tangbao's death by drowning, which are used both

in YANG's and Jeffrey's translations to euphemistically express the fact that Tianbao drowned. The death of a cow… or any other fatal catastrophe (Jeffrey) and the loss of buffalo…or a death in the family (YANG), both "loss" and "fatal catastrophe" are relatively tortuous and euphemistic expressions of the meaning of death. In addition, both translations treat "the dead mother" and "the dead" as (the) deceased, or use deceased to modify the description, which also has a euphemistic effect.

3.2 Grammatical comparison

In *the Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching &Applied Linguistics*, grammar is defined as a description of the structure of language and the way in which linguistic units, such as words and pieces of speech, are combined to form sentences in that language, usually including the meaning and function of those sentences in the context of the language system as a whole (Richard 2002: 201). Grammar usually consists of eight categories: personality, morpheme, number, frame, tense, body, morphology, and tone. What is discussed here mainly is in terms of morphology.

There is a special tone in English called virtual tone, which expresses a hypothetical situation, a subjective desire, and it is generally used in spoken language, often making the tone seem more euphemistic. The two English translation visions of the original text "假若爺爺死了" and "爺爺死了呢" both do the same thing, using the virtual tone, with the help of the modal verbs could and can, which are translated as "Could grandpa be dead (Jeffrey)?" and "Can grandpa be dead (YANG)", which makes the whole context more euphemistic; but could is more euphemistic than can. Another example is that in the original text, Cui Cui, because she suddenly thought and feared that her grandfather would die, kept calling her grandfather back home and cried, when grandfather back home and said: "翠翠, 我來慢了, 你就哭, 這還成嗎? 我死了呢?" Here both translations use the if-guided virtual clause: "What if I were dead?" (Jeffrey) and "What if I die?" (YANG).

3.3 Comparison of discourse devices (chapters)

Euphemisms in the broad sense are used to achieve polite behavior and avoid straightforwardness through a variety of linguistic devices. It is a kind of expression with conversational meaning, i.e., the meaning is beyond words (SHI 2010: 109). Accordingly, the author notes two similar descriptions in the original text. At the end of Chapter 15, from the grandfather's question about CuiCui's attitude towards the marriage to the fact that CuiCui will leave sooner or later, CuiCui later asks her grandfather in return, "可是,你會不會走? 你會不會被一個人抓到別出去?" Grandfather did not answer, but there is grandfather's mental activity in the discourse: "祖父不做聲了,他想到不犯王法不怕官,只有被死亡抓走那一類事情。" Thus, it can be inferred that CuiCui's question, "你會不會被一個人抓到別處去?" It is actually referring to the possibility that the grandfather will die one day. Both translations express this meaning through linguistic means: "But would you? Might someone carry you off?" (Jeffrey) and "but what about you? What if someone carried you off?" (YANG) The reader only must continue to find that someone here actually refers to death, and here someone is used to refer to death, thus

achieving the effect of implicit expression.

At the end of Chapter 19, because of the thunder and rain, and the fact that Grandpa was sick for a few days, CuiCui said to Grandpa that she was afraid, and Grandpa replied: "怕什麼？一切要來的都得來，不必怕!" Here what CuiCui is actually afraid is her grandfather would be dead, and in Chapter 20, her grandfather did die in the night of the thunderstorm; her grandfather's reply is also a psychological construction for CuiCui.

"Grandfather, I'm afraid!"

"What's there to be afraid of? what will be will be. Don't be scared." (Jeffrey)

"I'm scared, grandpa!"

"What's there to be scared of? What must be, must be. Don't be afraid!" (YANG)

Both translations use the conversational meaning of the expression to obtain the euphemism of meaning beyond the words.

3.4   Comparison of metaphor and metonymy

The euphemism of death is a common rhetorical phenomenon in the world. In different countries or regions, because of the different geographical and social environments, people's euphemisms for death are also different. Many euphemisms in life are expressed through metaphors and metonymy, using the similarity between things, increasing the indirectness of people's cognition, and borrowing related or adjacent things to express another thing so as to achieve the effect of indirect expression of euphemisms. Traditional metaphor theory considers metaphor as a rhetorical device, while cognitive linguistics believes that metaphor is not only a rhetorical device, but also "a way of thinking and a way of perceiving the world" (WANG 2001: 312). Metonymy is also regarded as a rhetorical device in traditional rhetorical theory, as a means of linguistic ornamentation. However, with the development of modern cognitive linguistics and psychology, research has shown that metaphor, like metaphor, is "a powerful tool for the perception and expression of abstract concepts" (ZHAO 2001: 104). The cognitive basis of metaphor is similarity, and the cognitive basis of metonymy is contiguity (SHU 2005). Metonymy and metaphor are both ways of perceiving the world. Due to the taboo of "death", people have formed a large number of euphemisms for death through metaphor and metonymy to express death gently, that is, to perceive and express death through metaphor and metonymy. This indirect cognitive process creates a certain distance in psychology, thus achieving the purpose of euphemism. Accordingly, the author classifies the euphemisms of "death" in the English translation of The Border Town into the following categories.

a. Death is leaving

For example:

我呢，人老了，再過三年兩載會過去的。

But I'm old. I might pass from the scene a couple of years from now. (Jeffrey)

爺爺不在了，你將怎麼樣？

When your grandfather is gone, what will you do? (Jeffrey)

What will she do when I'm gone? (YANG)

b. Death is surrender

For example:

到來了對開老的和小的,卻陪那個兵死了。

In the end, she abandoned her elder and her young one to die with that soldier. (Jeffrey)

c. Death is rest

For example:

人老了,應當休息了。

He was too old, ready for his rest. (Jeffrey)

He has reached the age to rest. (YANG)

d. Death is a return

For example:

我呢,人老了,再過三年兩載會過去的。

Tianbao has met his end. (Jeffrey)

Tianbao's done for. (YANG)

e. To die is to join another group

For example:

我呢,人老了,再過三年兩載會過去的。

I'm old with one foot in the grave. (YANG)

到來了對開老的和小的,卻陪那個兵死了。

And in the end she left her father and child to follow her lover to the grave. (YANG)

談點那個躺在濕土裡可憐的祖父。

Telling her the story about the poor man lying in the wet soil. (Jeffrey)

Talk about the poor man in the cold. (YANG)

4　Conclusion

Through the above comparative study, it is easy to find that the euphemism of "death" in the English translation of *Border Town* is reflected in different ways in vocabulary, grammar, plot and metaphor, due to the influence of the translator's language and social environment. Jeffrey's translation is relatively more euphemistic, but in general both translations follow the meaning of the original text and translate it in such a way that readers of the English language can understand it well. This phenomenon reflects the socio-cultural universality between languages, but it also shows that the two translators differ in their choice of words driven by different ethics, morals and values. However, the author believes that translators should try to translate in the way that English language readers are accustomed to and make more useful explorations of the essence of the linguistic

phenomenon of death euphemism, which is helpful in understanding the commonalities and differences in different societies and cultures, and use language appropriately and freely in cross-cultural communication, so as to achieve the purpose of successful communication and promote the dissemination of culture.

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