

The use of Translation Shifts Theory in Chinese Translation of military historical texts

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ABSTRACT

As a carrier of military historical events, military historical texts are objective and narrative, rendering their Chinese-to-English translation increasingly crucial as a bridge in fostering cultural exchanges between China and the West. Guided by J.C. Catford's Translation Shifts Theory, this paper conducts a case study of military historical text translation from the perspective of the four levels of category shifts. Through analyses, the author delves into the guiding significance of Translation Shifts Theory for the practical translation of military historical texts, aiming to provide valuable references and insights for the Chinese-to-English translation of such texts.

KEYWORDS

shift of category; Translation Shifts Theory; Catford; military historical texts

1 Introduction

In the annals of time, the past serves as a mirror to comprehend the present, underscoring the paramount significance of historical documentation translation and research in national development. In today's globalized world, mastery of Western history stands as a cornerstone for fostering international collaboration, exchanges, mutual understanding, and respect. military historical texts, as the vehicles that chronicle military events, embody both objectivity and narrativity, thereby playing an increasingly pivotal role as a bridge in facilitating cultural exchanges between China and the West.

Military historical texts, categorized as informative texts, are meticulously crafted documents that record and analyze military occurrences. Characterized by rigorous language, logical clarity, and an abundance of military terms, they emphasize the impartiality of facts and the dissemination of historical information. Consequently, the translation process necessitates that translators adhere to a content-centric approach, upholding principles of objectivity and accuracy to present readers with the most authentic, idiomatic, and professional translations.

J. C. Catford's Translation Shifts Theory, which underscores the equivalence of content rather than formal correspondence, offers valuable insights into this endeavor. By delving into the micro-linguistic levels, it delimits and analyzes the myriad shifts that occur during translation, providing a framework of relevance for translating military historical texts. In this paper, the author offers a concise overview of Catford's Translation Shifts Theory, and drawing upon her own practical experience, delves into its application and implications for the Chinese translation of military historical texts.

2 An Overview of Catford's Translation Shifts Theory

Catford, a famous British linguist and translation theorist, was the first to put forward the "Translation Shifts Theory" in its true sense. According to this theory, in the process of translation, "equivalence" is the key. According to Catford, in translation practice and translation theory, translation equivalence plays a central role, but "translation equivalence does not mean reproducing all the content or all the information of the original text" (Mu Lei, 1993: 56). That is to say, equivalence doesn't mean that the translator carries out a simple word-to-word correspondence, but focuses on semantic level of information conveyance.

In the book *A Linguistic Theory of Translation*, Catford suggests that shifts mean "departures from formal correspondence in the process of going from the SL to TL" (1965: 73). It means that the process of translation can leave the formal correspondence between the two languages. In fact, the essence emphasizes the need to translate the essential meaning of the source language in the transliterated language, not only sticking to the surface or the linguistic structure of the correspondence, but also importantly translating the deeper meaning to achieve the equivalence of the meanings of the two languages. Thus the readers of the target language and the readers of the source language will have the same reading effect. In this way, even if the forms of the two languages do not correspond, the equivalent effect of translation will not be affected.

Catford divided translation shifts into two main categories: level shifts and category shifts. Catford defines the level shifts as "a SL item at one linguistic level has a TL translation equivalent at a different level" (1965: 73). Based on Halliday's theory, Catford believes that language can be distinguished into the following four possible levels: grammatical, lexical, morphological and phonological. However, he argues that in practice, level shifts occur only at the grammatical and lexical levels. In terms of Chinese and English, "Chinese is a semantic language, while English is a grammatical language. For example, grammatical expressions such as various tenses in English become lexical expressions when they are translated into Chinese, and then the level shift in translation occurs" (Wu, Lixin, 2021: 88).

Category shifts refer to "unbounded and rank-bound translation: the first being approximately 'normal' or 'free' translation in which SL-TL equivalences are set up at whatever rank is appropriate" (Catford, 1965: 76). The structure of the two languages is also very different, in order to convey the content of the original text, the form of the target text will often be deviated accordingly. Therefore, the Translation Shifts Theory believes that the translator can realize translation shifts without formal restrictions in the translation process. Category shifts are mainly divided into structure shifts, class shifts, unit shifts and intra-system shifts.

3 Application of Translation Shifts Theory in Chinese translation of military historical texts

As military historical texts emphasize the accurate communication of information and the rigor of text content, translators not only need to retain the historical facts and military terminology of the original text, but also need to consider the expression habits of the Chinese language. By applying the strategies of structure shifts, class shifts, unit shifts and intra-system shifts, the translator is able to flexibly deal with the complex sentences, passive voice and nominalized structures in the original text, and convert them into forms that conform to the Chinese expression habits, so as to ensure the accuracy and readability of the translated text. Combining with the cases encountered in translation practice, the author will analyze the use of category conversion in the Chinese translation of military historical texts from four levels: structure shifts, class shifts, unit shifts and intra-system shifts, and analyze the applicability of Translation Shifts Theory in the translation of

military historical texts.

3.1 Structure shifts

Structural shifts, namely shift of grammatical structure, is the most frequent category shifts in the translation language level and is widely used in translation. The structural shifts aims at adjusting certain sentence structures of the target language, so as to better realize the equivalence between the translated text and the original text. Shift from passive voice to active voice, shift from positive sentences to negative sentences, etc. are all common structural shifts.

3.1.1 Shift from Passive Voice to Active Voice

As the content of military historical texts emphasizes precision, objectivity and logic, the use of passive voice in English texts is very common in military historical texts. On the contrary, in Chinese, passive sentences are seldom seen, mostly in active voice. Therefore, the translation of historical texts often uses Shift from Passive Voice to Active Voice.

Example 1

TT: The city of Vannes was small, confined to a peninsula of elevated land jutting out to the south like a sort of appendix.

ST: 瓦讷虽小,却扼守着一片半岛,该半岛向南突出,形似阑尾。

Lian Shuneng states that “when English uses objects as subjects, accordingly, the predicates are more often in passive form. Chinese, on the other hand, tends to use more active sentences” (2021: 118). In English, the passive voice can more clearly highlight the action itself and weaken or avoid mentioning the performer of the action. In Chinese, where the focus is more on the subject of the action, the use of the active voice can express the performer of the action more directly.

If “confined to a peninsula of elevated” is directly translated as “被限制在一个向南突出的高地半岛上”, it is neither in line with the Chinese expression habit nor easy for readers to understand. Converting the passive voice to active voice, translating the original text as “扼守着一片半岛”, and using “瓦讷” as the subject to develop the statement, not only conforms to the logic of Chinese thinking, but also makes the translation more fluent and coherent. The word “扼守” also emphasizes the importance of the geographical position of the Vannes in the military.

3.1.2 Shift from inanimate subject to animate subject

The inanimate subject is also called the object subject. He Mingzhu (2003: 51) defines English sentences with inanimate subjects from the metaphorical point of view: “English sentences with inanimate subjects refer to sentences that use entities that do not have a life meaning (such as physical objects, abstract concepts, and action nouns, etc.) as subjects and verbs that express material processes or mental processes as predicates.” In other words, according to the significance of having or not having life, we can categorize subjects in English into two types: animated subjects and inanimate subjects. When describing historical events, using inanimate things (e.g., cities, time, natural phenomena, etc.) as subjects can present the event or phenomenon in a more objective and vivid way. Therefore, the conversion of inanimate subjects in the translation process is also essential.

Example 2

ST: Covered by this fire the men-at-arms advanced to the assault. The attack met with a strenuous resistance and was everywhere repulsed.

TT: 在炮火的掩护下,披甲武士们向前发起进攻。然而,他们遭到了顽强抵抗,处处受挫。

In military historical texts, in order to ensure the objectivity of the content of the article, more inanimate subjects were used. If the translator follows the structure of the original English text, it is

difficult to produce a smooth translation. In this example, “the attack” is an inanimate subject, and the use of inanimate subjects in the original text aims at describing the war scene more vividly.

In translation, if the original sentence is literally translated as “在炮火的掩护下, 披甲武士们向前发起攻击。然而, 进攻遭到顽强抵抗, 并到处被击退”, the translation would not be able to convey the full meaning of the original text and would be contrary to the original author’s intention. Converting the inanimate subject “the attack” to the animate subject “他们(they)” and taking “他们” as the subject of the sentence, the sentence would read as follows “然而, 他们遭到了顽强抵抗, 处处受挫。” This treatment does not shift the focus of the original sentence, but also maximizes the message of the original text, showing that the men-at-arms’ attack could not go smoothly, and makes the reader feel as if they were in the battlefield and feel the tension of war.

3.2 Class shifts

Class shifts occur “when the translation equivalent of a SL item is a member of a different class from the original item” (Catford, 1965: 78). “One of the most significant differences between English and Chinese is static and dynamic. English language is static and prefers to use abstract nouns and prepositions which are static in nature, while Chinese language is dynamic and prefers to use verbs and linking sentences” (Lian Shuneng, 2010: 133). Therefore, in the process of English-Chinese translation, English abstract nouns and prepositions are often converted into Chinese verbs and adjectives. Here the author mainly focuses on the phenomenon of verbization under class shifts.

3.2.1 Shifts from Preposition to Verb

In English, when describing military operations, prepositions can clearly indicate the direction in which the army is moving, the target of its attack, or its defensive position, enabling the reader to accurately understand the development and changes in the battlefield. Prepositions are also commonly used in English sentences to introduce time or place, constructing a clear temporal and spatial framework for military historical texts. The accurate use of prepositions in military historical texts makes the sentence structure more compact and the expression more precise. Therefore, the shifts of prepositions is also a focus when translating from English to Chinese.

Example 3

ST: In his absence the inhabitants of the town, strongly pro-Blois, taking advantage of the absence of the main body, had risen against the depleted garrison and driven them out of the city.

TT: 在他不在的时候, 城里的居民强烈支持布卢瓦, 他们趁主力部队不在之机, 奋起反抗, 将兵力薄弱的守军赶出城外。

In the example, “against” complements “risen”, which describes the actions and targets of the Blois army. In this case, the preposition “against” is translated into the Chinese verb “反抗” through category shifts, which can accurately convey the original message and is in line with the Chinese language expression conventions.

Example 4

ST: On November 11 the two columns set off. The northern one marched by Pontivy, Ploermel, and Redon, capturing all places en route with ease, whilst the southern column marched by Hennebont to Vannes, which it promptly besieged.

TT: 11月11日, 两支纵队出发了。北路纵队途经庞蒂维、普洛埃梅尔(Ploermel)和雷东(Redon)进军, 轻松占领了沿途的所有地方; 而南路纵队则途经亨内布特直逼瓦讷, 并迅速将其围困。

“by” and “to” are prepositions used frequently in English. In the original text, the author uses these two prepositions to state the marching route of the South Road Column and point out the direction of the army’s movement. Therefore, using class shift to convert the preposition “by” to

the verb “途径” is more in line with the Chinese expression, giving the reader a spatial framework to convert the preposition “to” to the verb “直逼”. The shift of the preposition “to” into the verb “直逼”, while specifying the route of march, indicates the target of the attack, and also renders a tense atmosphere on the battlefield.

3.2.2 Shifts from Adjective to Verb

One type of lexical conversion that is more often used in the translation practice of military historical texts is the conversion of adjectives into verbs. This type of conversion often occurs in the form of be verb + adjective, which converts a tense structure in English into a verb in Chinese.

Example 5

ST: Thus caught between two enemies and vastly outnumbered, the plight of the English force was desperate.

TT: 这样一来,阿图瓦的军队就陷入了腹背受敌、兵力悬殊的绝境。

English prefers static vocabulary, while Chinese uses dynamic vocabulary. Chinese verbs are flexible and changeable, and are used more frequently than English, so English-Chinese translation often converts static narratives with dynamic momentum into dynamic narratives in Chinese.

In this example, “desperate” is an adjective, which reflects the difficult situation of the Artois’s army. If “desperate” is translated as an adjective, the translation will be “两面受敌、寡不敌众,英格兰军队的处境是绝望的”. Such a translation is loose, illogical and not in line with Chinese expression. Therefore, the adjective “desperate” should be converted into the verb “陷入...绝境” to realize the class shift. The shift makes the sentence more fluent, points out the desperate state of the Artois’s army at that time, and makes the narrative more vivid and graphic.

3.3 Unit shifts (rank changes)

Unit shifts, namely changes of rank, refer to “departures from formal correspondence in which the translation equivalent of a unit at one rank in the SL is a unit at a different rank in the TL.” (Catford, 2021: 145). Shuai Chenxiao and Jiang Bin (2021: 89) point out that “the English grammatical hierarchy includes morphemes, words, phrases, clauses and sentences, while the Chinese grammatical hierarchy is different, including morphemes, words, phrases, sentences and sentence groups”. It can be considered that the conversion between English and Chinese languages, and between units of different grammatical levels is unit shift. That is to say, it refers to the conversion between five linguistic units: sentence, clause, phrase, word and morpheme. In translation practice, the most frequently used is the shifts between the first four linguistic units.

3.3.1 Shifts from Phrase to Sentence

Example 6

ST: Instead of shutting himself up in the city and sending for help to Hennebout, d'Artois left a small garrison in the town and boldly advanced with the remainder to face his enemy in the open.

TT: 阿图瓦并未选择龟缩城内,也没有向亨内布特求援,而是留下小部分守军在城里,率领其余人马大胆地迎敌于城外。

The phrase “instead of doing” serves as a useful tool in sentence construction. In this particular instance, the phrase “Instead of shutting himself up in the city and sending for help to Hennebout” has been transformed into a sentence centered on “Artois”, rendering into “阿图瓦并未选择龟缩城内,也没有向亨内布特求援”. This transformation elevates “阿图瓦” to the subject position, facilitating a shift across grammatical levels. It emphasizes a series of military actions undertaken by Artois, thereby enhancing logical clarity and coherence within the sentence.

3.3.2 Shift from Clause to Sentence

Example 7

ST: Why Sir Thomas Dagworth delayed so long in going to the relief of the sorely stricken town is a mystery.

TT: 托马斯·达格沃斯爵士为何迟迟不去救援这个饱受摧残的小镇,这至今仍是谜。

Due to the differences between English and Chinese, we can't avoid the need to convert English clauses into sentences when translating. In this example, the subject clause guided by "why" serves as the subject of the sentence, and the sentence is long. If the subject clause is not split into separate sentences, the translation will be top-heavy, which will bring a bad reading experience to the readers.

Translating the subject clause led by "why" as "托马斯·达格沃斯爵士为何迟迟不去救援这个饱受摧残的小镇" retains the original's puzzled tone and leaves room for the reader's imagination. At the same time, the translator separates the epithet part of the original text into a separate sentence and adds "这" as the subject of the clause, which is more in line with the habit of Chinese expression and also plays the role of emphasis.

3.4 Intra-system shifts

"Translation changes the language, words or symbols and retains the meaning of the original" (Chen, D. L. and Chen, W. Y., 2022: 1). Intra-system shift refers to "the situation when two languages have roughly similar formal structures and the translation requires the selection of a non-corresponding form in the translation system" (Bao, Z. N., 1982: 72). Intra-system shift generally occurs between two languages with roughly the same linguistic composition. Specifically, "We use the term intra-system shift for those cases where SL and TL possess systems which approximately correspond formally as to their constitution, but when translation involves selection of a non-corresponding term in the TL system." (Catford, 1965: 73).

3.4.1 Shift of references

Example 8

ST: The delay thus caused gave a breathing space to those defenders who occupied the outlying parts of the camp, and presently a counter-attack was thrown in. It was repelled. A second met with the same fate.

TT: 由此造成的延误给占据营地外围的守军赢得了喘息之机,不久,他们便发起了反攻。第一次反攻被击退了。第二次返工亦是如此。

In English, demonstrative pronouns such as "this", "that", "these", "those", etc. can precisely refer to military concepts, events, equipment or people mentioned in the previous text, avoiding the frequent use of full names or complex descriptions in the narrative and making the text more compact and easier for readers to understand and remember.

However, when translating from English to Chinese, if the original "It was repelled" is directly translated as "它被击退了", it is not only incoherent, but also fails to have the same effect as the original in referring to the military operation. The translator, taking into account the context, should clarify the content of the pronouns and make the logic of the translation clearer. Converting "it" to "第一次反攻", although different in form, they serve the same purpose and realize the conversion within the system.

3.4.2 Shifts of metaphor

Example 9

ST: The victory was complete and staggering. Though no two accounts agree about the casualties, there is no doubt that the flower of the chivalry of the south of France was accounted for that day in killed, wounded, and captured.

TT: 奥贝罗什之战大获全胜,震撼人心。虽然关于伤亡的说法不一,但毫无疑问,法兰西南部骑士阶层的精英们在那天阵亡、受伤和被俘。

The original text uses the rhetorical device of simile, and “the flower of chivalry” contains a unique imagery, which we can’t find an equivalent expression to reproduce in the original text in Chinese. “The flower of chivalry” is often used as a high praise and symbol of chivalry. Chivalry played an important role in medieval European culture, emphasizing values such as bravery, loyalty, honor, respect and protection of the weak. Therefore, “the flower of the chivalry” can be understood as a concentrated expression and the highest symbol of these virtues.

If “the flower of chivalry” is directly translated as “骑士阶层的花朵”, it retains the rhetoric of the original, but it is easy to confuse readers who lack relevant background knowledge. Converting “the flower of the chivalry” to “骑士阶层的精英们” realizes the intra-system shift between different language systems, which makes it easier for the readers of the target language to understand the meaning of the original text and makes the translation clear and easy to understand.

4 Conclusion

The translation of military historical texts, characterized by objectivity, accuracy, and realism, necessitates a high degree of precision and standardization. Given these rigorous requirements, Catford’s Translation Shifts Theory offers a nuanced approach that delves into lexical and syntactic levels, emphasizing meticulous attention to detail.

Within this framework, category shifts, class shifts, and unit shifts frequently arise due to disparities in grammatical rules and expressive patterns between the source language and the target language, allowing for more flexible guidance in translation practice at a granular level. Intra-system shifts, on the other hand, are particularly useful in conveying cultural nuances, often capturing the deeper meanings intended in the original text, thereby enhancing the accuracy and standardization of the translation. When applying categorical shifts, translators must also consider contextual factors, striving to align the translated text with the original in terms of both meaning and emotional resonance.

Moreover, Catford’s Translation Shifts Theory, while systematically outlining language transformation mechanisms across various linguistic levels, is not without its limitations. As noted by Lin Ling (2009: 75), it tends to overemphasize linguistic factors while neglecting the influence of non-linguistic elements such as culture, psychology, and society on the translator and the translation process. Furthermore, it lacks a holistic approach to language analysis from a discourse-level perspective.

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that no translation theory is flawless. Translators should adopt a rational and dialectical mindset, recognizing both the strengths and weaknesses of Catford’s Translation Shifts Theory as they apply it in practice. By doing so, they can leverage this theory effectively to enhance the quality of translations and contribute to the further development of military historical text translation research.

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