

Kenneth Rexroth's Translation of Du Fu Poetry from the Perspective of Functional Equivalence Theory

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Abstract

Kenneth Rexroth, a well-known American poet and translator, has contributed to Du Fu poetry translation in the Western society. From the perspective of Nida's functional equivalence theory, this research takes Rexroth's English translations of Du Fu poems as a case to study the translation strategies adopted by Rexroth. This explores translation strategies of Du Fu poetry from the perspective of functional reciprocity theory, and is supposed to provide references for the English translation of the ancient Chinese poetry in the future. The above examples all reflect the faithfulness and accuracy of the free translation under the theory of functional equivalence, and accurately express the connotation of the original poem. Above all, the translator has adopted literal translation when translating the above verse. In order to achieve the requirement of the theory of functional equivalence, which enabled the target readers to have the same experience as the original readers. This was the most fundamental purpose of using the literal translation here.

Keywords: Du Fu poems, functional equivalence theory, translation strategies, Kenneth Rexroth

1. Introduction

1.1 Kenneth Rexroth and His Translation

Kenneth Rexroth was a poet who started a new era in the history of American literature in the twentieth century and was also known as the "father of the San Francisco literary revival" (Zhang, 2004). As a young man, he moved to Bohemia, Chicago, where he joined poets and scholars from all over the United States, opening his eyes to the outside world. During this time, he began to write and translate poetry from Greece, Japan, Spain, France, and other countries. He also became interested in Chinese poetry. Influenced by the English translator of Chinese poetry-Wittenberg, Kenneth Rexroth translated many classical Chinese poems, met many Chinese students, and began to study Chinese poetry in earnest, with a particular interest in Du Fu, about whom he gave his opinion on various occasions. Later, he moved to San Francisco and continued his journey of poetry.

Kenneth Rexroth was both a poet and a translator, and this double identity was found in his translation activities: his aesthetic cultivation, cultural consciousness and creative ability as a poet offered the possibility of active interpretation of foreign texts, while at the same time, as a translator, he was limited by the incommensurability of the two languages and cultures behind the texts and by the expectations and acceptance of local readers. These two identities constantly reinforced and constrained each other in the translation activity, forcing Rexroth to seek appropriate translation strategies. Rexroth once claimed that translating poetry was "simply for his own pleasure over the years, not as a show of scholarly ability or mastery of the complex subject of sinology" (Achilles, 1958).

1.2 Kenneth Rexroth's Translation of Du Fu Poems

Among the American poetry movements, Impressionism and the San Francisco Renaissance were the most inclusive movements. Kenneth Rexroth's *One Hundred poems from the Chinese* was inspired by these two movements. Impressionists became interested in Chinese poetry mainly because of Pound's famous publication *Cathay*. Thus many American poets at that time used this book as a source of inspiration for their work, and Rexroth was one of them. The reason why Chinese culture became so popular was that the bitter experience of the First World War in Europe shook the religious beliefs of Europeans and Americans. They began to doubt the superiority of Western culture and chose to look for truth from Chinese culture.

The second wave of massive absorption from Chinese Poetry in America was between 1950th and 1960th. In the

late 1960s, when hippies culture draw inspiration from Eastern culture, this can be described as a widespread phenomenon, which was generally referred as a counterculture movement. At the same time, the United States was more open and tolerant toward the foreign culture because President Kennedy called on people to be pioneers of the new frontier, exploring the unknown opportunities and dangers. So Rexroth began to put many ideals of eastern poetry into his own poetry.

Rexroth first acquired Chinese culture through Witter Bynner, who led him to some famous sinologists and helped him learn Chinese (Li & Zhang, 2017). At that time, Li Bai was considered as the greatest poet in the Western society, but Rexroth discovered the appeal of Du Fu and reversed the prejudices long held by Western scholars.

As a famous translator, he was able to grasp the meaning of the original poems. What's more, he also tried to re-examine the rhythm and meaning of Du Fu's poetry from the perspective of a modern American poet. The image of Du Fu preferred by Rexroth was a poet whose political and feudal ideology moved both Chinese and western people. The love and care for humanity were also important reasons for Rexroth to translate Du Fu. He holds Du Fu in high esteem as the greatest non-epic, non-dramatic poet and he also regarded Du Fu as wise and capricious like Homer. He stated, "I immersed myself in Du Fu poetry for 30 years, and he made me a more perfect man, a more perceptive being, a better poet" (Kenneth Rexroth, 1956–1971)

2. Literature Review

2.1 Previous Study on Kenneth Rexroth's Translation of Tu Fu Poems

The topic hasn't yet attracted much attention so far. Zhao and Geng (2021) believed that Rexroth's ecological philosophy had influenced his selection of Du Fu poems and translation methods in his English translation. Thus, his translation showed great concern in the era of ecological crisis. Zhao and Geng believed Chinese characteristic ecological culture exchange with Western ecological thought and mutual appreciation can make Chinese culture better accepted. In addition, studying Du Fu's poetry from the perspective of ecological translation provides new perspectives to deal with the Sino-US relationship.

2.2 Kenneth Rexroth's Translation from Functional Equivalence

In 1969, the American linguist Eugene Nida proposed the theory of functional equivalence—"When translator translates books or poems, instead of seeking a rigid correspondence of textual surfaces, the message of the source language is reproduced in the most appropriate, natural and reciprocal language, from semantic to stylistic" (Zong, 2010, p. 198). Nida's theory emphasizes on content rather than form, and seeks to make the readers experience the source language. And the goal of poetry translation is to make the target language readers have the same understanding and experience as the source language ones, and to make the audience of different nationalities resonate with the same poem.

Du Fu poetry is an important part of Chinese poetry because of its emotional complexity and its simple, concise language. Therefore, the translation of Du Fu poetry must be able to convey the meaning of the original text while catering to the interests and tastes of the Western readers. For some colloquial expressions or special images, translators often fail to find equivalent expressions, which requires translators to understand the cultural differences behind the source and target languages and flexibly adopt various translation strategies to achieve functional equivalence. Because the theory of functional equivalence demands that in linguistic, literary and cultural contexts, the final feelings of readers of the original text and the translated text should be largely agreed upon. So under the guidance of functional equivalence theory, the translator can give full play to his or her understanding of the text and achieve the correspondence between the content of the language and the text, without the need for rigid word-by-word translation, which limits the translator's translation and loses the flexibility. Thus I try to analyze Kenneth Rexroth's translations of Du Fu poems from the perspective of Nida's functional equivalence theory to find out whether the true Du Fu has been translated by Kenneth Rexroth.

3. Functional Equivalence Theory

3.1 Definition of Functional Equivalence Theory

Nida proposed the definition as "the degree to which the receptors of the message in the receptor language respond to it substantially the same manner as the receptors in the source language" (Na, 2021). With the idea of functional equivalence, the translators should shift focus from the form of the language to the response of the target reader. Nida argued that in order to make the response of the target readers and the original readers approximately the same, the translator could reconstruct the original text according to the pragmatic habits and cultural background of the target language. This shift showed that Nida paid great attention to cross-cultural communication.

Nida distinguished between realistic functional meaning, in which the reader of the translated text can imagine

how the reader of the original text appreciates and understands the specified and ideal meanings of the original text, and ideal functional meaning, in which the reader of the translated text appreciates and understands the specified meanings of the original text in the same way as the reader of the original text. The translator has to achieve the maximum functional meaning of the original text. Although it is quite difficult for translators to achieve the maximum and ideal functional meaning, this theory can provide us with reference and translation practice and the search for the ideal state of translation.

3.2 Challenges of Translating Ancient Poems

When translating the ancient Chinese poems, translators should follow the principle of faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance. Chinese translator Xu (1987) proposed three beauty theory, that is, for ancient poems to have the characteristics of beauty of sound, shape and meaning. However, because of these characteristics, it often sets up certain obstacles and difficulties to the translators in the process.

Firstly, the ancient Chinese poems carry the beauty of syllables, neat antithesis and rhyming words, while in English there are rhyming words, but it is difficult to find exact corresponding words. However, from the perspective of functional equivalence, in order to pursue the equivalence of the original text, translators need to choose a flexible way, such as making certain additions or subtractions from the original poem, instead of making the number of words and rhymes correspond rigidly to the original text.

Secondly, the ancient Chinese poems are simple and concise, and the poet can often describe what he sees and feels in a few lines, while creating a unique linguistic environment in his words. In the process of conveying the meaning of the original text, the translator often has difficulties. If they only pursue the equivalence of meaning, they can only translate the poems according to their superficial meaning, but such translation will create obstacles to the readers' understanding.

Finally, imagery is an object that incorporates the poet's thoughts and feelings, and is a concrete image endowed with special meaning and literary significance. Ancient Chinese poems include specific scenery or objects of the times, which are often difficult for later generations to imagine or understand. When translating imagery, it is also difficult for the translator to portray such a situation through English to foreign readers with different cultural backgrounds. Thus, about the imageries of people and things in ancient poetry, the poet often omits the subject persona in order to create atmosphere, in which translators need to reduce confusion by adding the subject. This point requires the translator to have a deep understanding of the text and the emotion conveyed.

The above three points are the most difficult problems in our translation of ancient Chinese poems. And, functional equivalence proposed by Nida emphasizes more the equivalence of meaning, while the form is secondary. In the process of translation, we give priority to conveying the meaning of the source text first, and then find the most natural and relevant equivalence in the target language as far as possible.

4. Translation Strategies under Functional Equivalence Theory

One Hundred poems from Chinese includes 35 poems of Du Fu, most of which are not well-known in China, for example *Overlooking The Desert*, *Clear After Rain*, *To Pi Su Yao*, *Loneliness* and so on. Rexroth chose these poems mainly because he wanted to avoid political factors, and he also attempted to translate poems according to their original language. Because of the differences between Chinese and English, English readers have difficulty to learn the authentic meaning of Chinese. Therefore, in the translation of poems, the theory of functional equivalence can be used as a guide to maximize the meaning of the source poems and to achieve meaning equivalence as much as possible, by using free translation, literal translation and combination of addition and subtraction.

4.1 Free Translation

The term "free translation" refers to a translation method that maintains the content of the original text without adhering to its form. In addition, it discards linguistic forms and rhetorical techniques and mainly conveys the central idea and the spirit of the source language.

The significance of translation is to break the original language form and reproduce the meaning of the original text by using the expression of the translation (Chen, 2022, p. 147). Language is an important carrier of culture. In order to ensure the accuracy and appropriateness of the translation, it is necessary to consider the history of the English-speaking countries comprehensively before translating the sentences related to cultural background.

The translation is guided by functional equivalence theory to meet the requirements of linguistic conventions, and to comply with the principle of fidelity of functional equivalence theory so that readers can easily accept it. Besides, translation should emphasize on the relative independence of the cultural system of the target language and the

cultural system of the original language. Here is an example.

<i>SNOW STORM</i>	对雪
<i>Tumult, weeping, many new ghosts.</i>	战哭多新鬼，
<i>Heartbroken, aging, alone, I sing To myself.</i>	愁吟独老翁。

This poem was written during the An Shi Rebellion when Du Fu was detained by the rebels and heard of the new defeat of the Tang army, and he looked sadly at the falling snow in the sky and felt the biting cold. He had deep concern for the fate of the nation and the loved ones, he felt so sad. “战哭” refers to the soldiers who cried on the battlefields. “新鬼” here refers to the ghost of the dead soldiers. In both English and Chinese poetry, words are often omitted or replaced in order to avoid repetition.

“Tumult” refers to war because war is often accompanied by riots, and people’s life unsettled. The word is simple and concise through which readers may have visual imagination. The Chinese “老翁” means “old man” while in the poem it refers to Du Fu himself, but in the western literature, the poets seldom use this word because people are not used to distinguish people by age. So the translator chose to use “I” and “myself” to represent “old man”, and Rexroth did this in order to be more in tune with the linguistic characteristics of western poetry which usually uses the first person to express people’s feelings. A famous love poem by Wordsworth *I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud*, his first sentence “I wandered lonely as a cloud...” Wordsworth compared himself to a cloud with “I” to express his loneliness and isolation. “愁” here is interpreted as “heartbroken”. The reason why Rexroth used this word was that Du Fu in the face of the turbulent situation and the frequent wars and he had deep patriotic feelings toward his country. Consequently, the author felt heartbroken.

When translating the ancient poems, due to the differences between Chinese and Western cultures, free translation are often applied. However, the translation is not arbitrary and should not be used without considering the original meaning. The purpose of free translation is to accurately express the original meaning of the author. But it is worth mention that “a good control of the degree is necessary to grasp the original meaning of the poem more accurately.” (Valdeón & Youbin, 2020, p. 28)

4.2 Literal Translation

Literal translation is actually a word-by-word translation method that conveys the sense of the original text while keeping the form and syntactic structure basically unchanged. In the process of daily English translation, one of the most used translation methods is literal translation, because English and Chinese are more similar in terms of vocabulary and syntax, and literal translation is more acceptable and easier to understand, so that people can understand the meaning of the sentence directly and clearly (Li, 2019, p. 17).

Metaphors are widely used in Chinese and Western literary works. When translating metaphors, translators should be guided by Nida’s theory of functional equivalence which advocated translators to use literal translation to analyze the connection and similarity between the subject matters. Besides, translators should reasonably preserve important cultural information and appropriately process branch information, so that the recipients of the translated text and the recipients of the original text can understand and comprehend the text in an almost identical way (Liu, 2020, p. 130).

Literal translation focuses on the fidelity of the original text, avoiding the loss of fidelity to the original text due to the excessive pursuit of beautiful and fluent metaphorical translation. Here is an example from Du Fu’s poem *Loneliness*.

<i>LONELINESS</i>	独立
<i>Where the dew sparkles in the grass,</i>	草露易多湿，
<i>The spider's web waits for its prey.</i>	蛛丝仍未收。
<i>The processes of nature resemble the business of men.</i>	天机近人事，
<i>I stand alone with ten thousand sorrows.</i>	独立万端忧。

In this poem, Du Fu was demoted because he was involved in an accused crime. Facing the false accusations of the bad people and the Emperor’s inability to distinguish people, the poet felt so depressed that he had no choice but to convey emotions through poetry. Here, from the last line of the poem, we can feel the poet’s sorrow and his inability to deal with the current situation. In ancient Chinese poetry, spiders’ web was often used to express the poet’s sorrow, and here Rexroth tried to keep the original image. Due to different culture, in western society, the spider’s web is not associated with sorrow. But Rexroth did not include any notes which might cause confusion.

Above all, the translator has adopted literal translation when translating the above verse. in order to achieve the requirement of the theory of functional equivalence, which enabled the target readers to have the same experience as the original readers. This was the most fundamental purpose of using the literal translation here.

4.3 The Combination of Literal Translation and Free Translation

In poetry, the meaning of metaphorical imagery in Chinese and English may vary greatly depending on cultural and geographical factors. Translators must not only be precise about the meaning of metaphorical imagery in Chinese poetry, but also about the corresponding imagery in Western culture. Different peoples have different cultural traditions and customs. In Chinese poems, poets often use metaphors to express their admiration and love for nature, and sometimes they use metaphors to depict things places or historical events more vividly. How to translate metaphors into English is also a very difficult question for translators to answer.

In the face of the above situation, translators usually use a combination of literal translation and free translation. An effective combination of the two translation method is necessary to ensure the accuracy and acceptability of the translation. *The Willow* is a typical one.

<i>THE WILLOW</i>	绝句漫兴九首·其一
<i>My neighbor's willow sways its frail Branches,</i>	隔户杨柳弱袅袅，
<i>graceful as a girl of fifteen.</i>	恰似十五女儿腰。

This poem was written during the period that Du Fu lived in Chengdu in the second year after An Shi Rebellion. Given that some metaphors have strong national and cultural characteristics, the translator chose to use the combination of literal translation and free translation to deal with the metaphorical technique. In this poem, the author tried to compare willow to the waist of the girl. In ancient Chinese culture, a girl is at her most beautiful and attractive time at the age of fifteen. The willow's branches are so slender, when the wind blows, the willows swing in the wind just like a young girl dancing. In traditional opinions, beautiful things are equated with a particular part of the beautiful girl, just like girl's eyes, hair and so on. So Rexroth chose to use literal translation, he compared "frail branches" to "a girl of fifteen".

When literal translation is not enough to convey the meaning of a text, free translation becomes very important. It's difficult to find equivalent words in English to describe the slender and beautiful posture of the willow tree, so Rexroth chose to use free translation to highlight the beauty of the willow tree. He used "willow sways its frail branches" which not only preserved the essence of the original poem, but also enabled the target readers to fully understand the meaning of the original text.

4.4 Additive and Subtractive Translations

Different countries have different cultural backgrounds, which makes it difficult for translators to translate the original text in a way that corresponds exactly to the original novel, so most translators will make necessary deletions and additions in the process of translating novels. The method of additive and subtractive translation is to add or subtract parts from the source language according to the context, so as to make the translation more consistent with the expression habits of the target language, and to make the translation more meaningful and equal to the meaning of the source language. In the process of addition and subtraction, it is important to remember the sentence—Give words without adding meaning, and subtract words without deleting meaning. (Ma, 2014, p. 65) This is well reflected in Du Fu's *BANQUET AT THE TSO FAMILY MANOR*.

<i>BANQUET AT THE TSO FAMILY MANOR</i>	夜宴左氏庄
<i>As we write the candles burn short.</i>	检书烧烛短，
<i>Our wits grow sharp as swords while The wine goes round.</i>	看剑引杯长。
<i>When the poem Contest is ended, someone Sings a song of the South.</i>	诗罢闻吴咏，
<i>And I think of my little boat, And long to be on my way.</i>	扁舟意不忘。

This poem was an early work by Du Fu. This poem belongs to the night banquet poetry. At that time, Du Fu was

around 20 years old when he first visited the Wu-Yue district. At that time, Du Fu was full of enthusiasm and ambitions. When the author heard someone chanting poetry in dialect, he remembered his previous pleasant experience and then wrote this poem.

“检书” here means reading or browsing, but the translator used “write” to create a poetic scene of Chinese people write calligraphy at night. Obviously, the author used the subtractive translation method here, trying to omit “reading books” so as to show that the poet could not wait to write when he heard Wu-yue dialect.

“扁舟” was a noun in Du Fu’s poems, while Rexroth chose to add the verb “think of” to make the sentence more complete and fluent. He used “I think of my little boat” here in order to add a meaningful color to the article. The first-person prospect reflects the author’s emotions when he looked at little boat and he hoped that this little boat could bring back him to the past. The translator used the additional verb here to make the sentence more complete and in line with the original text, otherwise the reader would not get what the poet meant.

5. The influence of Kenneth Rexroth Translation of Du Fu Poems

5.1 Influence on His Subsequent Work

Rexroth insisted that he has benefited from Du Fu poems more than 30 years. He considered Du Fu as the world’s “greatest non-epic, non-dramatic poet, in some ways superior to Shakespeare or Homer” (Xu, 2021, p. 70). He founded that the culture that nurtured Du Fu was the finest in human history. Also he thought although Du Fu did not have any religious beliefs, he was concerned with the fate and the condition of the common people, which moved many readers. Rexroth’s admiration for Du Fu led him to conclude with these words: “I have been immersed in his poetry for 30 years. I am convinced that he has made me a noble man, an ethical agent.” (Kenneth Rexroth, 1970, p. 50)

When Rexroth translated Du Fu’s poetry, he chose things carefully in order to interest Western readers and gave them a good image of the poet he held in high esteem. When he finished his translation of Du Fu’s poem *To Wei Pa, a retired scholar*, it caused a stir in American society at that time. The main theme of the poem was about friendship and the joys of reunion. When he translated the poem, Rexroth chose to use the Western first person narrative, which could better reflect the introspective emotions of the Chinese. This poem’s depiction of children would increase one’s love for family. Rexroth’s translation of this poem had an unexpected artistic effect and made readers appreciate the charm of the ancient Chinese poem.

Rexroth’s precise translation of Du Fu’s poetry and the emotions of the poem itself were welcomed by American readers and attracted more people to read Chinese poetry.

5.2 Influence on the Later Translation of Du Fu Poems

Kenneth Rexroth was led by Byner to translate Du Fu’s poetry, which led to the study of the great Chinese poet Du Fu in Western American society. He also played an important role in the understanding of Du Fu’s poetry for those who came after him, and laid an important foundation for the translation of Du Fu’s poetry for the later translators.

David Young, a renowned poet and translator, with a special focus on creative research and translation of poetry. Under the influence of Kenneth Rexroth, he also began to translate Du Fu’s poetry and published an anthology of Du Fu’s poetry in English translation (*Out on the Autumn River Selected Poems of Du Fu*). Unlike Rexroth, David preferred to translate Du Fu’s masterpieces, for example *For Li Po* (赠李白), *Rain On a Spring Night* (春夜喜雨) and so on. But he also paid great attention to the images in the poems just like Rexroth. In the poem *Rain On a Spring Night*, the author also tried to analyze poems from the theory of functional equivalence. Kenneth Rexroth pioneered the translation of Du Fu’s poetry, providing certain ideas for future translation and researches.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, Nida’s functional equivalence theory can provide some theoretical guidance for the English translation of Du Fu poetry. From the perspective of functional equivalence, the use of free translation is to make translators follow the fidelity of functional equivalence theory and make the poetry translation more in line with the characteristics of Western poetry without changing the original meaning. The use of literal translation is to make the target readers can understand the original text better. Besides, the combination of both translation strategies can make the original text fluent and acceptable, and the target readers and the original readers can have the same response. Also, the use of additive and subtractive translation is commonly seen in Rexroth’s translations, because through this translation strategy, he made the original text more concise by deleting or adding words. The translation techniques summarized by the four dimensions of the functional equivalence theory have certain significance for the later translation of Du Fu’s poems.

But it should be noted that the above translation techniques are not applicable to all Du Fu poetry due to the differences in subject matters and imagery. More importantly, because of diversity in history, geography and consciousness between China and America, and the differences in language composition and expression habits, so not every Du Fu's poems can be translated appropriately under the theory of functional equivalence, and whether to emphasize formal equivalence or content equivalence is not clearly defined by Nida. In view of the special characteristics of Du Fu's poems, translators should analyze the specific situation and not fall into dogmatism and empiricism.

In the subsequent English translations of Du Fu's poetry, translators can address the confusion and misunderstandings brought by cross-culturalism through notes or markings. It's also worthy of further study by scholars, so as to provide more effective theoretical guidance for the practice of Chinese and Western cultural exchange.

As Du Fu's poems are the distinguished representative of the ancient Chinese culture, it is the responsibility of translators to export it to the foreign countries and promote the world's understanding of the splendid culture of the ancient China. From the perspective of translators, the theory of functional equivalence is in line with the characteristics of flexible translation of poems, which does not pursue the one-to one equivalence of the source language. It's also more suitable for translator's second processing and creation according to the original language, which fits the western language expression habits and logical thinking, thus promotes Du Fu's poems to go global.

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