



Research Paper

A Comparative Study of the Union Bible and the New Chinese Version From the Perspective of Skopos Theory

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Abstract

The Bible is a common canon of Christianity and Judaism, giving birth to Western culture. It is valuable and plays an extremely important role in many ways. Not only did it have an impact on Western culture, but also it had an impact on China since the introduction of the Bible. Regardless of the translation between languages, the translation of the Bible has undergone a shift from "discourse-centered" to "reader-centered." This paper aims to compare and analyze the Union and New Chinese Versions of the Bible from Skopos theory, with a view to selecting the appropriate versions of the Bible for different audiences.

Key words: Skopos theory, The Union Bible, New Chinese Version

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I. Introduction

As early as the eighth century, the Bible was introduced to China, marking its long journey of translation into Chinese. Over the course of over one thousand years, various versions of the Bible have emerged, and its influence on Chinese culture cannot be underestimated. Despite the emergence of various versions, very few people are aware of the development of *the Bible* in China, and the understanding of it among the Chinese people is quite limited." *The Bible* is the most published, widely distributed book in the world, as well as translated into the most languages and versions. Meanwhile, the study of *the Bible* has become a discipline in the study of human culture (Wen Yong, 1992)."^[1]

The Bible has a long history of Chinese translation and many editions, among which the most influential is the publication in 1919 of the New and Old Testament Texts (hereinafter referred to as the Union Version), which records a new level in the Chinese translation of *the Bible*. As time goes by, more and more scholars are dedicated to the study and retranslation of *the Bible*. In 1992, dozens of Chinese biblical scholars jointly completed the translation of the New International Version of the Bible. In the study of the Bible, both the Union Version and the New Chinese Version, most scholars approach their research from the perspectives of Newmark's semantic communicative translation, literature, the cultures involved in *the Bible*, and dynamic equivalence, with few scholars conducting comparative analyses of the translations of different versions of the Bible from the perspective of Skopos theory.

II. Skopos Theory

In the 1970s, the German functionalist translation theory emerged. It was founded by the renowned German functionalist scholars, Selina Rys and Hans Vermeer, and further summarized and supplemented by Christian Nord and others. The rise of the functionalist approach broke the traditional constraints of structuralism's "equivalence theory," becoming the core idea of functional translation theory (Mai Hui Feng, 2011).^[2] Translation act with aims like the role of communication and interaction. Translation can assist people of different languages in linguistic exchange and communication. In using different languages, translation can convey their meanings to each other, facilitating the flow and understanding of information. It also helps individuals understand different cultures, thoughts, values, customs, and traditions. These are all the purposes of translation.

In the process of translation, we should adhere to the three major principles of the Skopos theory. This paper will analyze the Chinese Union Version and the New Chinese Version from the perspective of these three principles. They are skopos rule, coherence rule and fidelity rule.

The first major principle is Skopos rule, which includes the fundamental purpose of the translator and

the communicative purpose of the translation, that is, the communicative purpose that the translation generates for its readers. The Skopos rule is the primary rule that all translation activities must follow, advocating for the communicative purpose of the translation process and the translated text.

The second major principle is coherence rule, which means that the translation should be acceptable to the readers of the translated text, and there should be interlingual consistency between the original text and the translation. The third major principle is Fidelity rule, which states that the translator must remain loyal to the original author and coordinate the target language with the author's intentions (Lian Lingmin, 2011).^[3] Skopos theory is not simply a focus on the equivalence between the original text and the target text, but a transition from discourse-centric to reader-centric.

The Skopos theory holds that the translator, during the translation process, combines the purpose of the translation with the specific circumstances of the target audience, focusing on a particular group of recipients, so that the target text serves a certain function within the target language environment (Zhang Jinlan, 2004).^[4]

The same original text often has different versions for different audiences; for example, children's literature is usually more accessible and easier to understand. "In order to convey the same meaning, different methods must be employed in different situations and for different people to achieve the most ideal effect. Translation is a form of communication activity, and it must also be adapted to the time, selecting appropriate strategies to seek the most ideal outcome (Jia Wenbo, 2002)."

III. The selection of version

The Bible, also known as the "Old and New Testament," is divided into two parts: *the Old Testament* and *the New Testament*, which are regarded as religious classics by followers of Jesus Christ. *the Old Testament* being the first part refers to the Hebrew Bible of Judaism inherited by Christianity, which was written in Arabic. Its content includes four sections: law, narrative works, poetry, and prophetic books. *The New Testament* is written in Greek which consists of the Gospel of Matthew, the Gospel of Mark, the Gospel of Luke, the Gospel of John, the Book of Church History, 21 Epistles of the Apostles, and the Book of Revelation. *The Bible* has influenced the world through translations into various languages. It has over 1,400 versions in different languages, among which *the New Testament* has been translated into 1,848 languages and dialects (Liu Congru, 2006).^[6]

Historically, Christianity began to spread to China during the Tang and Yuan dynasties, at which time it was respectively known as 'Jing jiao' and 'Yelikewen', bringing with it early versions of *the Bible*. There are numerous versions of *the Bible*. For instance, from the late Ming to the early Qing dynasty, missionaries led by Matteo Ricci began to translate the popular Latin version of the Bible which is what we are familiar with as the "Ming and Qing version." In addition, there are many other versions, such as the Morrison and Marthmans' version (the two Ma versions), the Guo Shili version, the Wei version, the Erzhi version, the Union version, the Si Gao version, and the New International version. There are many versions, and this paper selects the Union and the New Chinese version.

In 1890, various European and American missionary societies held a missionary conference in Shanghai, where different denominational organizations decided to jointly translate and publish a unified version of the Bible, known as the Union Version. The plan was to translate and publish versions in classical Chinese, simplified classical Chinese, and Mandarin, with the relationship among the three being "one Bible, three translations," in order to meet the needs of readers with different educational backgrounds. The conference also established three committees, each responsible for the translation of three versions, while determining that the texts for the Mandarin and the combined translation are based on the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament of the "English Revised Version" and the "Authorized Version," with the English "Authorized Version" and "English Revised Version" being important references. Additionally, previous widely circulated Mandarin translations, including Dr. John Yang's "New Testament" and Bishop Schereschewsky's "Old Testament," should also be referenced. (Chen Xiaojuan)^[7] On the contrary, the numerous versions are detrimental to the dissemination and evangelism of the Bible. Therefore, with the support of the British and Foreign Bible Society, the American Bible Society, and the Scottish Bible Society, and through the joint efforts of Chinese and Western scholars, the 1919 edition of *the Bible* in Chinese was published. The emergence of the New Chinese version is closely related to changes in language and vocabulary due to the evolution of the times, the elimination or alteration of certain words, new archaeological discoveries related to the Bible, biblical textual criticism, and the development of linguistics, among other factors.

The translation of the *New Bible* is based on the basic text—the Old Testament and adopts the Stigger Hebrew Bible published by the German Bible Society in 1977. And the New Testament is the second edition of the Greek New Testament published by the United Bible Society in 1968, which is the most authoritative original Bible version at that time, in addition to other ancient manuscripts such as Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic, as well as some Chinese and English translations (Chinese translation: Union Version, Sigao Ben, Lu Zhenzhong Translation, Old and New Library Translation, Shallow Literary and Scientific Translation; English translations: New American Standard Bible (NASB), The Revised Standard Version (RSV), The Jerusalem Bible (JB), The

Translator's Testament (TT), The New International Bible (NIB) (Chen Shaofen, 2017).”^[8]The era in which the Chinese Union Version and the New Chinese Version were produced differs by just over half a century; however, many events occurred during this period, including changes in the Chinese language, new archaeological discoveries related to the Bible, and variations in the original texts, which led to differences between these two versions of the Bible. Both versions have similarities and differences, thus this article selects the Union Version and the New Chinese Version as the subjects of study.

IV. Analysis and Comparison

4.1 The Translation Principles of the Union Version

Chinese and Western scholars collaborated to translate the Bible into the Chinese Union Version. The translation committee established the following principles for translation: "(1) The translation must be in a language that is universally understood across the country, and regional dialects should not be used; (2) The translation must be simple, so that people from all walks of life can understand it when read aloud in the church pulpit; (3) The sentences in the translation must be faithful to the original text while also maintaining the elegance and tone of the Chinese language; (4) Metaphors in the original text should be translated as directly as possible, rather than through paraphrasing (Fu Jingmin, 2008)."^[9]From the point of view of the principles of translation, the translation simply shows that the audience of *the Bible* is no longer a single class of scholars, but a much broader missionary audience.

4.2 The translation principles of the New Chinese Version

"Within the framework of Skopos theory, translation means producing a text in the target context for the target purpose and the target recipient within the target language (Zhang Jinlan, 2004)."^[4] Translation is an act with a purpose, and the new version is intended for non-Christian audiences, and it is especially important to better disseminate the new translation. Therefore, the Translation Committee established its translation principles as follows: "(1) The translation should accurately express the meaning of the original text, and try to translate according to the word order of the original text without violating the expression and pragmatic habits of Chinese. (2) The translated text shall be translated according to the literal meaning of the original text, and if the literal meaning of the original text is difficult to express, it shall be translated according to the correct meaning of the original text, and the part shall be translated literally in the notes. (3) Where the meaning of the text is ambiguous or can easily mislead the reader, be careful to add to it to show or explain the meaning of the text. (4) The translation should be in accordance with the original genre as much as possible.

The wording of the same volume and author should be uniform as much as possible, and if other words are used for reasons such as smooth translation, they should be explained in the notes. Special words such as inclusion, pun and play, should be expressed in the translation as much as possible, and if not, should also be explained in the notes. (6) The translation should be based on standard Chinese, so as to make it easy for junior high school readers to understand. (Deng Jie, 2012).^[10]

4.3 The Analysis and comparison of two versions

Example 1: Genesis 42: 2

New International Version: ‘And he said, behold, I have heard that there is no corn in Egypt ;get you down thither ,and buy for us from thence ; that we may live , and not die.’ Error! Reference source not found.

The Union version: “我听见埃及有粮，你们可以下去，从哪里为我们余些来，使我们可以存活，不至于死。” Error! Reference source not found.

The Chinese Version: 他又说：“我听说埃及有粮食，你们下到哪里去，给我们买些粮食，使我们可以活下去，不至于饿死。” Error! Reference source not found.

Example 2: Genesis 42: 6

New International Version: ‘And Joseph was the governor over the land, and he it was that sold to all the people of the land: and Joseph’s brethren came ,and bowed down themselves before him with their faces to the earth.’ Error! Reference source not found.

The Union Version: “当时治理埃及地的是约翰。糶粮给那地众民的就是他。约瑟的哥哥们来了，脸伏于地，向他下拜。” Error! Reference source not found.

The Chinese Version: “当时治理埃及及地的官长是约瑟，卖粮给那地所有的人民的就是他。所以，约瑟的哥哥们来俯伏在地向他下拜。” Error! Reference source not found.

Example 3: Leviticus 11:30

New International Version: ‘the gecko, the monitor lizard, the wall lizard, the skink and the chameleon.’ Error! Reference source not found.

The Union Version: “壁虎、龙子、守宫、蛇医、蝥蜒。” Error! Reference source not found.

The Chinese Version: “以及壁虎、龙子、守宫、蛇医、变色龙。” Error! Reference source not found.

From examples 1–3, we can see that the New Chinese version is much easier to understand. In the Union Version, ‘sold’, ‘buy’, and ‘chameleon’ are translated as ‘卖’, ‘买’, and ‘蝥蜒’, respectively, while in the New Chinese version they are translated as ‘卖’, ‘买’, and ‘变色龙’. ‘卖’ refers to the sale of grain, while ‘买’ refers to the purchase of grain, and ‘蝥蜒’ refers to the gecko. Given historical context, the period in which the Chinese Union Version was produced advocated for vernacular language; however, vernacular language had not yet become widespread. The reader-centered approach of the Chinese Union Version, which is a mix of classical and vernacular Chinese, made it highly readable at that time. However, with the development of the times and the popularization of vernacular Chinese, it may be difficult for modern readers to understand without a new translation. The first law of Skopos Theory is to emphasize the communicative function of translation, the purpose of the translator. The purpose of the translator is to be reader-centered, disseminating *the Bible*, shifting from a discourse-centered approach to a reader-centered one. The communicative function of translation is to ensure that the reader has the same experience as the original text’s reader, which involves not just the conversion of language and text, but also understanding and conveying the intent, emotions, effects, and cultural characteristics of the source language.

Examples 1 to 3 all adopt a literal translation, which can maximally express the tone, emotion, and cultural characteristics of the original text. Both the Chinese Union Version and the New Translation Version adhere to the principle of fidelity. The translation is acceptable to the readers. The Bible has always been regarded as the language of God, unchanging throughout the ages. Translating such a serious religious work as the Bible, fidelity has consistently been viewed as the foremost standard (Zhang Jinlan, 2004). As a modern reader, the author prefers the New Translation, which uses language that is closer to everyday life, more accessible, and easier for people to understand, making it suitable for a broader range of readers.

Example 4: Judges 19: 22

New International Version: ‘Now as they were making their hearts merry, behold, the men of the city, certain sons of Belial, beset the house round about, and beat at the door, and spake to the master of the house, the old man, saying, bring forth the man that came into thine house, that we may know him.’ Error! Reference source not found.

The Union Version: “他们心里正欢畅的时候，城中的匪徒围住房子，连连叩门，对房主老人说，你把那进你家的人带出来，我们要与他交合。” Error! Reference source not found.

The New Chinese Version: “他们心里正畅快的时候，忽然城里有些无赖之徒，围绕房子，不住地敲门，对老房主说：“把进你家的那个人带出来，我们要与他交合。” Error! Reference source not found.

Comparing the two versions, we can see that the words used in the Union version is more literary. For example, In the Union version translates ‘叩门’ as knocking, while the New Translation translates it as ‘敲门’. ‘叩门’ is more formal than ‘敲门’. ‘敲门’ is a colloquial word. More formal terms are more appropriate for Christians, while the new translations are more appropriate for the general public and non-Christians. The purpose of translation is to express the same meaning, in different occasions and to different people, so various ways are needed to achieve the most ideal effect. Translation is an activity of communication, and it is also necessary to choose the appropriate strategy according to the time and seek the most ideal effect. (Zhou Zhaoxiang, 1998).”^[14]

Example 5: John’s gospel 2:15

New International Version: ‘So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple area, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables.’ Error! Reference source not found.

The Union Version: “耶稣就拿绳子作成鞭子、把牛羊都赶出殿去。倒出兑换银钱之人的银钱、推翻他们

的桌子。” Error! Reference source not found.

The New Chinese Version: “就用绳索做了一条鞭子，把众人连牛带羊都从外院赶出去，倒掉兑换银钱的人的钱，推翻他们的桌子。” Error! Reference source not found.

Here we see a difference between the Union Version and the New Chinese Version, where the phrase 'drove all from the temple area, both sheep and cattle' drove out the sheep and cattle, while the New Chinese Version translates it as driving out the people, even the sheep and the cattle. In the author's opinion, the New Chinese Version is better translated, the content is more accurate, and the semantics are avoided. It conforms to the third principle of teleology, and not only faithfully to the original author's intention, but also harmonizes the relationship between the translated language and the author.

The third principle of Skopos Theory, the translator should ensure the consistency of the information, Take 'drove all from the temple area, both sheep and cattle' as an example the Union Version do not achieve the consistency of the information. If the information is consistent, it is not possible to add, delete, or change the meaning of the original text at will.

Example 6: John's gospel 5: 22

New International Version: ‘But I say unto you, That whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgement: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire.’ Error! Reference source not found.

The Union Version: “只是我告诉你们，凡向弟兄动怒的，难免受审判。凡骂弟兄是拉加的，难免公会的审判。凡骂弟兄是魔利的，难免地狱的火。” Error! Reference source not found.

The New Chinese Version: “可是我告诉你们，凡是向弟兄发怒的，必被判罪。人若说弟兄是‘拉加’，必被公议会审判；人若说弟兄是‘魔利’，必难逃地狱的火。” Error! Reference source not found.

'魔利' and '拉加' in Aramaic mean 'fool' and 'worthless person' respectively. The Union Version and the New Chinese version exhibit a remarkable similarity, both employing a transliteration method while translating them as '魔利' and '拉加'. This transliteration approach allows the Bible to retain the original phonetic qualities of the language during its translation process. Through transliteration, the reader can feel similar sounds, making it easier to understand and remember the words. As we all know, Bible translation has a history of more than 1,400 years, and different versions of translations have different traditions for transliterating proper nouns. Through transliteration, these translation traditions can be preserved, allowing readers to better understand and contrast different versions of the Bible. From the point of view of purpose, the transliteration adopted in the conjunctive version and the new translation is first of all related to teleology, and both play a great role in cross-cultural communication. The use of transliteration methods is teleologically oriented to ensure that the translated text effectively conveys information while preserving the phonological sense of the original text. Catchy vocabulary is easy for people to remember

V. Conclusion

This paper finds that the New Chinese Version of the Bible is more suitable for readers who are newly introduced to the Bible by comparing the King James Version and the New Translation. The New Version is directly translated from the original Greek text, making it simple and easy to understand. Additionally, with new archaeological discoveries related to the Bible and changes in language, the New Translation is more appropriate for contemporary readers.

The text is straightforward and uses vernacular language, indicating that the translation of the Bible has gradually shifted from being discourse-centered to being reader-centered. It considers the reader's feelings as one of the factors in translation, rather than pursuing a word-for-word correspondence. This greatly enhances the acceptance of the Bible among Chinese readers and is beneficial for the cultural dissemination of the Bible. Skopos theory is not simply the pursuit of equivalence, but emphasizes the communicative role of the translated text for the reader. In contrast, the Union version is more suitable for long-term believers who have been using this version for a long time, who are interested in ancient cultures, and who have a certain Christian cultural background. The Bible is a magic book that covers many aspects and contains lessons that we can learn from. Translating the Bible is the first step in learning from Western culture. There are many versions of the Bible, and readers can choose according to their needs.

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