

Dramatic Effect and Word Order in Translation: Some Examples from *Hamlet*

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ABSTRACT

When translating from English into Chinese, it is often necessary to alter the word order of the original so as to comply with the Chinese syntactical requirements. In literature, however, word order (including longer units such as clauses) may be of great significance to the work. In poetry, for example, to preserve the sequence of images or logical connections, the translation may have to follow closely the word order of the original. Since drama is an art of timing, it is crucial *when* certain information is revealed, for it often dictates the expression and gesture of the actor, contributes to characterization, or controls the interaction between characters. When Hamlet discusses the art of the theater with the players, he stresses the importance of suiting "the action to the word, the word to the action." In translating a playscript, the connection between the two must indeed give us pause. This paper tries to illustrate the importance of following the original word order and thereby preserving the dramatic effect; certain passages from *Hamlet* will be examined along with their Chinese translations by such distinguished translators as Zhu Shenghao, Liang Shih-ch'iu, and Bian Zhilin.

KEY WORDS

Shakespeare
translation
dramatic effect
Zhu Shenghao (朱生豪)

Hamlet
word order
Liang Shih-ch'iu (梁實秋)
Bian Zhilin (卞之琳)

The syntactical differences between Chinese and English often make it necessary to change word order when we translate from one to the other.¹ An obvious case is the adverbial clause: in English it may either precede or follow the main clause; in Chinese it usually comes before. If the adverbial clause begins the sentence in English, it presents no problem in translation; if, however, it appears at the end, more often than not it has to be moved up to the front in the Chinese version. To be sure, there are cases where either position will do. For instance, the sentence “Remember to turn off the light before you go” may be rendered as

走之前要記得關燈。

But if word order is to be emphasized, it may also be rendered as

記得關了燈再走。

On the other hand, the sentence “Take out the garbage when you go out” may only be rendered as

出門的時候把垃圾拿出去。

Similarly, a sentence like “I used to go swimming in that stream when I was little” has to be translated as

我小時候常去那條小溪游泳。

Such changes are necessitated by the syntactical requirement of the Chinese language.

In literature, word order may be so important that the slightest change results in very different readings. In poetry, for example, where the connection between images or the logic in the argumentation may dictate word order, the translator has to think twice before he decides to make any change. Drama, of course, is not poetry, but, being an art of timing, it probably makes stricter demand on word order: for *when* certain information is revealed often prescribes the expression and gesture of the actor, contributes to characterization, or controls the interaction between characters. When Hamlet discusses the art of the theater with the players, he stresses the importance of suiting "the action to the word, the word to the action." In translating a playscript, the connection between the two must indeed give us pause. This paper tries to illustrate the importance of following the original word order and thereby preserving the dramatic effect; certain passages from *Hamlet* will be examined along with their Chinese renditions by such distinguished translators as Zhu Shenghao (as revised by Wu Xinghua), Liang Shih-ch'iu, and Bian Zhilin.²

I. Characterization

Example: 1. 2.1-16³

[King] *Though* yet of Hamlet our dear brother's death
 The memory be green, and that it us befitted
 To bear our hearts in grief, and our whole king-
 dom
 To be contracted in one brow of woe,
Yet so far hath discretion fought with nature 5
 That we with wisest sorrow think on him
 Together with remembrance of ourselves.
Therefore **our sometime sister**, now our queen,
 Th'imperial jointress to this warlike state,
Have we, as 'twere with a defeated joy, 10

With an auspicious and a dropping eye,
 With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage,
 In equal scale weighing delight and dole,
Taken to wife. Nor have we **herein** barr'd
 Your better wisdoms, which have freely gone 15
 With this affair along. For all, our thanks
 (emphasis mine)

Zhu-Wu's version (quotations from the Chinese all begin with line 8, "Therefore. . ."):

. . . 所以，在一種悲喜交集的情緒之下，讓幸福和憂鬱分據了我的兩眼，殯葬的挽歌和結婚的笙樂同時並奏，用盛大的喜樂抵銷沉重的不幸，我已經和我舊日的長嫂，當今的王后，這一個多事之國的共同的統治者，結為夫婦；這一次婚姻事先曾經徵求各位的意見，多承你們誠意的贊助，這是我必須向大家致謝的。(Wu 11 [Chu 8-9])

Liang's version:

. . . 所以我從前的嫂子，如今的王后，這承繼王位的女人，我現在把他娶做妻子，這實在不能算是一件十分完美的喜事，一隻眼喜氣洋洋，一隻眼淚水汪汪，像是殯葬時享受歡樂，也像是結婚時奏唱悼歌，真是悲喜交集，難分輕重。關於這件事我也不曾拒絕你們隨時進的忠言勸告。我多謝大家。(25)

Bian's version:

. . . 因此，仿佛抱苦中作樂的心情，
 仿佛一只眼含笑，一只眼流淚，
 仿佛使殯喪同喜慶歌哭相和
 使悲喜成半斤八兩，彼此相應，
 我已同昔日的長嫂，當今的新后，

承襲我邦家大業的先王德配，
 結為夫婦；事先也多方聽取了
 各位的高見，多承一致擁護，
 一切順利；為此，特申謝意。(13-14)

Discussion:

Claudius' opening speech during his first appearance is revealing of his character. Judged from the content, it is also the first speech he makes to his ministers since his marriage with Gertrude, his erstwhile sister-in-law. Well prepared, he weighs every word and utters it with great care. His first difficulty seems to be the introduction of his newly-wed Queen. He justifies the marriage by resorting to the "Though— Yet—Therefore" logic: simply put, "Though the former King my brother is dead, yet we must not forget ourselves, and therefore I married my sister-in-law." The "Though" part lasts four lines, "Yet" part three, and "Therefore" part six and a half.

On one hand, Claudius seems to be himself embarrassed by the great hurry with which he married his former sister-in-law. The information on the marriage has to be withheld or deferred for as long as possible; great pains are taken not to disclose it immediately. We notice that the one simple sentence introduced by "Therefore" is inverted—"our sometime sister . . . have we . . . taken to wife," making "wife" the last word in a lengthy sentence padded with insertions of appositions and modifiers. On the other hand, the inverted periodic sentence, with all its rhetorical and logical balance, lends such weight and dignity to Claudius' speech as befit his new status as King. Once the "ordeal" is over, Claudius quickly implicates all present with "Nor have we herein barr'd / Your better wisdoms . . .": if there is anything wrong with the marriage, they are equally to blame. And in comparison with the preceding long sentences, the pithy half-line "For all, our thanks" gives the weighty matter an extremely joyous and light-hearted ending.

In the movie rendition directed by Laurence Olivier, King Claudius (Basil Sydney), as if to muster some Dutch courage, finishes

a cup before he speaks. During the speech, his ministers, their heads low, keep silent and exchange one or two knowing glances at each other. When the King finishes, everyone applauds at the signal given by Polonius. In the BBC version directed by Rodney Bennet, Claudius (Patrick Stewart) looks much more sober and majestic. Standing before the thrones, he gazes at Gertrude and Hamlet who is behind her. To the applause of the court, he is about to begin his speech when, at the sight of Gertrude (and perhaps Hamlet?), he hesitates—for just one second or so, but clearly evincing uneasiness. He soon composes himself and starts to speak. When he comes to “now our queen” (l. 8), the audience on stage all turn to look at Gertrude; with “With mirth . . .” (l. 12) he slowly makes toward her; with “Taken to wife” he takes her hand; and after “For all, our thanks,” they both go the throne amidst general applause. The entire process looks like a condensed form of the marriage ceremony, involving everyone present. The King here shows himself not only in total control, but resolute and dignified.

In translating this passage, it is necessary to keep the inversion of the original so that “Taken to wife” comes last; it is also advisable to retain the many parenthetical insertions so as to paint a Claudius with his inner sense of guilt and embarrassment and outward show of pomp and ceremony. Both Zhu-Wu and Bian move most of the parenthetical insertions up to the front, thus preserving the periodic feature of the original. Liang, on the contrary, translates the main clause first and relegates the modifiers to the end, thus making Claudius an honest, straightforward character. Besides, the word “herein,” now separated from “Taken to wife” by a string of modifiers, does not perform its transitional function. The audience / reader may not even be clear what it refers to. Furthermore, since all three translators have so rearranged the word order of the sentence’s basic structure (“our sometime sister . . . have we . . . taken to wife”) that it is condensed into one or two lines only, preserving at most the two appositions (“our queen, / Th’imperial jointress to this warlike state”), they have seriously damaged the forcefulness of the original.⁴

II. Interactions Between Characters

Example: 2.2.40-55

- [Pol.] Th'ambassadors from Norway, my good lord, (A)
Are joyfully return'd
- [King] Thou still hast been the father of good news.
- [Pol.] Have I, my lord? I assure my good liege
I hold my duty as I hold my soul, 5
Both to my God and to my gracious King;
And I do think—or else this brain of mine (B)
Hunts not the trail of policy so sure
As it hath us'd to do—**that I have found**
The very cause of **Hamlet's lunacy.** 10
- [King] O speak of **that: that** do I long to hear.
- [Pol] Give first admittance to th'ambassadors. (A)
My news shall be the fruit to that great feast. (B1)
- [King] Thyself do grace to them and bring them in. (A1)
[Exit Polonius]
He tells me, my dear Gertrude, he hath found (B1) 15
The head and source of all your son's distemper.
(emphasis mine)

Zhu-Wu's version (all quotations of the Chinese versions cover ll. 7-10, Part B only):

- 【波】... 此外，除非我的腦筋在觀察問題上不如過去那樣有把握了，不然我肯定相信我已經發現了哈姆萊特發瘋的原因。
- 【王】啊！你說吧，我急著要聽呢。(Wu 39-40 [Zhu 34])

Liang's version:

- 【波】... 我自信我已經探得哈姆雷特太子發瘋

的真緣故了，否則便是我的頭腦沒能像往常那樣的百發百中。

【王】 啊，說出來；我很想聽。(64)

Bian's version:

【波】 除非我這副腦筋忽然不靈了，
不及往常那樣的善觀風色，
那樣的有把握，我以為我已經發現了
哈姆雷特忽然變瘋瘋癲癲的原因。

【王】 噢，你就講出來吧！我正想聽聽。(54)

Discussion:

There are two topics in this conversation: Polonius tells the King that (A) the ambassadors have returned from Norway and that (B) he has found the cause of Hamlet's distemper. It is worth noticing how the conversation makes use of insertions: Polonius introduces topic B in the midst of topic A, and as soon as the King shows interest in topic B, he returns to topic A. According to Polonius, B is secondary, being "fruit," while A is primary, being "great feast": the A—B—A structure bears witness to this. Yet, both Polonius and the audience in the theater realize that the King is more concerned about B. In fact, Polonius interrupts himself by bringing in topic B precisely because his astuteness tells him where the King's interest lies; and, having successfully aroused the latter's interest, he now keeps him in suspense—the more to show his brain still "hunts the trail of policy" with sureness: the B1—A1—B1 structure bears witness to this. The passage not only allows us a further glimpse into the personality of Polonius, but also calls our attention to the worried King, who nervously and eagerly awaits Polonius' pronouncement of his "discovery." It is clear from the quote that the complacent Polonius loves flattery, while the King, new on the throne, cannot choose but oblige him. If we take a close look at topic B, we can see that Polonius, skilled in rhetoric, delays the disclosure of the more important information by inserting a

clause which also serves to remind the King of his astuteness. In the BBC version, Polonius, who has been walking alongside the King, comes to a halt at “And I do think”; the King also stops; they gaze at each other, the King looking genuinely interested and attentive.⁵

Liang translates the main clause first and tags the inserted portion at the end. On the surface the semantic meaning of the sentence is all there; in fact, however, the secrecy and suspense of Polonius’ speech is gone. We note, also, that the King follows with “O speak of that: that do I long to hear,” where the second part is a reversed sentence. The pronoun “that,” which refers to the cause of Hamlet’s lunacy, not only is uttered twice, but occupies the central position of the line: that the King admits it *is* his central concern at the moment is a measure of the success of the senior counselor. In Liang’s translation, with the word order now reversed, the King’s reply becomes confusing: What is “that” that the King longs to hear? Does it refer to Polonius’ becoming less astute than before? In comparison, Zhu-Wu and Bian in their versions keep the periodic structure without preserving the insertion. They fail to reproduce the dramatic effect of disruption and delay.⁶

III. Narrative Skill and Dramatic Tension

Example: 2.2.473-488

... For lo, his sword,
 Which was declining on the milky head
 Of reverend Priam, seem’d i’th’ air to stick;
 So, as a painted tyrant, **Pyrrhus stood,**
And like a neutral to his will and matter, 5
Did nothing.

But *as* we often see against some storm
 A silence in the heavens, the rack stand still,
 The bold winds speechless, and the orb below
 As hush as death, anon the dreadful thunder 10

Doth rend the region; *so* after Pyrrhus' pause
 Aroused vengeance sets him new awork,
 And never did the Cyclops' hammer fall
 On Mars's armour, forg'd for proof eterne,
 With less remorse than **Pyrrhus' bleeding sword** 15
Now falls on Priam.

(emphasis mine)

Zhu-Wu's version (from l. 11, ". . . so after Pyrrhus' pause"; ditto for the other two versions):

經過暫時的休止，殺人的暴念
 重新激起了皮洛斯的精神；
 庫克羅普斯為戰神鑄造甲冑，
 那巨力的錘擊，還不及皮洛斯
 流血的劍向普里阿摩斯身上劈下
 那樣凶狠無情。(Wu 56-57 [Zhu 49])

Liang's version:

. . . 所以皮魯斯寧靜一下之後，敵愾愈發激憤了，鮮血
 淋漓的寶刀照直的砍在浦愛阿母頭上，當初獨眼巨神揮
 起鐵鎚給馬爾斯鍊護金甲，都沒有這一擊來得兇惡。
 (83)

Bian's version:

. . . 披勒斯一停頓以後，
 殺心也就激起他重新動作；
 塞克羅披斯錘打戰神的鎧甲
 管保它萬世都結實，落手無情，
 也不及此刻披勒斯掄起血花劍
 狠命的直劈了普賴姆！(73)

Discussion:

Here the First Player, at the request of Prince Hamlet, recites “a passionate speech” taken from a play. Although the play has rarely been performed—“not above once,” according to Hamlet, for “’twas caviar to the general”—both the player and the prince seem quite familiar with it. To a large extent, the speech is dramatically significant because it depicts an action that parallels the main plot: Pyrrhus’ revenge bears great resemblance to Hamlet’s own situation. Not only is the number of avenging sons in the play increased by one, but both princes, in their attempt to avenge their fathers, go through a clearly observable period of indecision. Standing out prominently in the quote are two half-lines: one signifies hesitation (l. 6, “Did nothing”); the other, action (l. 16, “Now falls on Priam”). Is it because Hamlet, perhaps subconsciously, senses his similarity to Pyrrhus and would like to follow the latter’s example that he now asks the First Player to recite the passage? In any case, after the recitation Hamlet feels deeply disappointed at—even disgusted with—himself. He accuses himself of not having taken any action—“not for a king.” He then comes up with the idea of the “mousetrap.”

In the BBC version, the First Player, who does not carry the sword while reciting the passage, is extremely expressive with dramatic gestures and voice. But the passage is essentially story-telling; in other words, it depends for its theatricality on narrative skills. In the lengthy description of the scene at Ilium, a Homeric simile is employed to depict the temporary pause of Pyrrhus—extending from “as . . .” in l. 7, through “so . . .” in l. 11, to the climax of “Now falls on Priam” in l. 17. These ten lines guide the imagination of the audience in constructing a mental tableau, which signifies the temporary hesitation of the avenger. When the sword, which has been held high, finally falls, it falls with a bang. The “non-theatrical” performance derives its theatricality from the pause—a silence before the storm.⁷

Hence it is incumbent on the translator to also suit the action to the word in his translation: the effect of the abrupt suspension of the killing and the equally abrupt resumption of the act must be reproduced. Zhu-Wu changes the word order slightly, and allows the

要做到高貴，究竟該忍氣吞聲
來容受狂暴的命運矢石交攻呢，
還是該挺身反抗無邊的苦惱，
掃它個乾淨？死，就是睡眠——
就這樣，……

.....
..... 死，就是睡眠；
睡眠，也許要做夢，……

.....
誰甘心忍受人世的鞭撻和嘲弄，
忍受壓迫者虐待、傲慢者凌辱，
忍受失戀的痛苦、法庭的拖延、
衙門的橫暴，做埋頭苦幹的大才、
受作威作福的小人一腳踢出去，
如果他只消自己來使一下尖刀
就可以得到解脫啊？誰甘心挑擔子，
拖著疲累的生命，呻吟，流汗，
要不是怕一死就 (82-83)

Discussion:

Hamlet's soliloquy on life and death is deservedly famous for its profundity. As Harold Jenkins points out, it is dramatically significant because it "[enables] us to see Hamlet's situation in its most universal aspect" (485).⁸ "The soliloquy," Jenkins goes on to demonstrate, "holds in skilful balance the opposites of life and death, the desire for death and the fear of death, the pains of death and the pains of life" (487). Hamlet's reasoning is this: since to live means to suffer, life is less desirable than death; yet since death may entail the horror of the unknown, life remains the only choice. This dilemma of human existence is presented with clarity. In the form of a topic sentence, the first line of the quote indicates what puzzles the speaker. The next four lines—whether A (= to be, to suffer) or B (= not to be; to die, to sleep)—continue to elaborate on the question (Jenkins 277n, 490). Later, two rhetorical questions are introduced in clear parallelism:

“For who would . . . when . . . ?” (ll. 15-21) and “Who would . . . But that . . .” (ll. 21ff.). There is great logical coherence in the soliloquy.

In performance, the words are suited to action: often the “bodkin” is bared, and then dropped—helplessly and feebly. Laurence Olivier, who plays Hamlet in his own movie version, makes the speech more the prince’s contemplation on suicide. He takes out the dagger at “And by opposing end them” (l. 5), and, as if entranced by the wonderful relief promised by death, he closes his eyes as the soliloquy continues in his own voice for five lines. When he comes to the second “To sleep” (l. 10) and is about to commit suicide, he is startled by the thought of “perchance to dream.” He finally lets the dagger fall from the top of the castle to the roaring sea below. In the BBC version, Derek Jacobi waits until l. 20 before he swiftly bares his bodkin and immediately points it toward his throat. Two lines later, when his thought turns to “But that . . .,” he turns the dagger outward and starts to play with it.⁹

In translating this soliloquy, then, attention must be paid to the logical coherence and the orchestration between word and action. In the original, the second sentence begins with a question-marker “Whether,” which follows on the heel of the “question” of the previous sentence; as has been pointed out, it is an extension of the question. Zhu-Wu and Liang, who reverse the word order, separate “end them” and “To die,” which in the original refer to the same thing (Jenkins 278n, 490-91), and disrupts the train of thought. In contrast, Bian carefully preserves the logic of the soliloquy. As to the two rhetorical questions, both Zhu-Wu and Bian keep the parallel structure intact; Liang reverses the order of the first question. The change may be minor in terms of syntactical emphasis, but since, as in Olivier’s movie, it requires an early unsheathing of the dagger long before the rationale of death is mulled over, the dramatic effect is weakened.¹⁰

V. Concluding Remarks

The discussion above may give the impression that this writer insists on the translator following the word order of the original. At

the outset of this paper, however, it is pointed out that, due to the linguistic differences between Chinese and English, changes in word order is unavoidable in translation. “Overly formalistic adherence to the syntax and word order of the original,” as Zhou observes, “is often the bane of stiff, Westernized translations” (385, my translation). But the translator of a literary work will do well to keep his eyes peeled for the effect that results from the way its ideas or images are arranged and, in his translation, endeavor to preserve that effect. This is especially true of the translation of playscripts, where word order may contribute to characterization, interaction among characters, narrative skill, and logical coherence. Shakespeare’s plays, being both poetry and drama, requires of the translator even greater attention to semantic as well as syntactic order. While it is not the intention of this paper to grade the Chinese versions of *Hamlet* by the three outstanding translators, it does appear that, judged by the examples given above, Bian Zhilin deserves high marks for his meticulous work—a fact that has much to do with his respect for the word order of the original.¹¹

NOTES

¹ An earlier draft of this paper was presented to the Translation Seminar of the 6th World Shakespeare Congress, 7-14 April 1996, Los Angeles. A Chinese version of the same, under the title of 〈戲劇效果與譯文的字序——以《哈姆雷》為例〉[Dramatic Effect and the Word Order of Translation—Take *Hamlet* as an Example] was presented to 翻譯學術會議——外文中譯研究與探討 [Translation Conference—English-Chinese Translating Study], held at The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 3-5 April 1996.

² Zhou Zhaoxiang has made a comprehensive investigation into the various Chinese renditions of *Hamlet*. See his *Han-yi Ha-mu-lei-te yen-jiu* [A Study of the Chinese Translations of *Hamlet*].

Zhu Shenghao’s version, *Han-mu-lai-tuo*, first published in 1947, was revised by Wu Xinghua and reissued as *Ha-mu-lai-te* in *Sha-shi-bi-ya quan-ji*, vol. 9 (1978). I have used this latter edition, hereafter referred to as Zhu-Wu, which does not differ significantly from Zhu’s

original version as far as the passages discussed in this paper are concerned, and which is more readily available. This version and Bian's, originally set in simplified Chinese characters, are here converted to the regular characters for convenience's sake.

³ The English text used throughout this paper is that of the Arden edition by Harold Jenkins.

⁴ Zhou Zhaoxiang cites this passage as example to show that Bian's version "reads smoothly and idiomatically" because of the transposition, "whereas Cao Wei-feng's (曹未風) version, which rigidly adheres to the line order of the original and breaks the 'Our sometime sister' sentence in two, separating [its parts] by four lines, would confuse the audience when read on stage" (419; my translation).

The true problem with Cao's version, however, lies in its "rigidity"; it is not necessarily related to his adherence to the original line order. The passage may, for instance, be translated as follows, still keeping the dramatic effect discussed here:

因此朕昔日之嫂，今日之后，
吾國邦家大業的繼承者，
朕已經——彷彿以受挫的快樂，
用一隻幸福，另一隻流淚的眼，
在喪葬時歡樂，在婚禮中哀悼，
欣然與黯然不分軒輊的狀況下——
娶為妻子。這件事朕也不是沒有
廣徵眾卿的高見，獲得了
一致贊同。凡此種種，謹謝。

⁵ This portion is omitted in Olivier's movie.

⁶ These four lines may be rendered as follows:

而且我相信——除非我這腦筋
在處理國家大事方面的把握
已經不如從前——我已經找到
哈姆雷瘋癲的確實原因。

