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Linguistic processes in translation: Eye-tracking reveals differential effects of phrase order and lexical choice

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Abstract: What are the processes underlying the judgments of translation? And what is the role of language proficiency? This study addresses these questions by examining how Chinese-English bilinguals evaluate poetry translations. Participants were shown haikus in Chinese and the corresponding English translations and were asked to rate the translation quality. The English translations ranged from literal to free style and differed in two source text factors — phrase order and lexical choice. Results indicated an interaction between translation style and language proficiency, with the high proficiency bilinguals giving free translations higher ratings. Furthermore, the analyses of eye movements revealed that, (a) in contrast to low proficiency bilinguals, high proficiency bilinguals tended to integrate discourse information regardless of intra-text re-ordering, and (b) among the good quality translations, the phrase order effect was more prominent than the lexical effect. These findings suggest the interplaying roles of language proficiency and linguistic factors in translation.