

Research on the Subject of Literary Translation

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Abstract: The question of “who are the subjects of literary translation” is one of the controversial issues in literary translation studies. The study of the paper, on the basis of reader response theory or reception theory, and deconstruction, etc., theoretically reveals that the translator is the only subject of literary translation rather than the author and/or the reader.

1. Introduction

A controversial topic of literary translation has once again come to the fore: who is the subject of literary translation? Is it claimed that "the subject of literary translation is also human, i.e., writer, translator and reader"?^[1] or summarized that "①the translator is the subject of translation, ②the writer and the translator are the subjects of translation, ③the translator and the reader are the subjects of translation, ④the writer, the translator and the reader are all the subjects of translation"?^[2] Or is it asserted that "the translator is the only subject of literary translation"?^[3] Who is the subject of literary translation? Is it the author? The reader? Translator? Or all three together? Or just the translator? The paper aims to explore the subject of literary translation.

2. The Real Subject of Literary Translation

The subject is the one who takes a certain objective existence as an object, actively issues and is recognizing and practicing the objective object; the subject of literary translation is generally supposed to be concerned about the author, the reader, and the translator. Who is the real subject of the literary translation?

2.1. The Author Is NOT the Subject of Literary Translation

The view of the author as the subject of literary translation is inextricably linked to the traditional notion of the author's dominance in literature and translation. For a long time, the author has occupied a central position in (literary) translation, and the translator has been in the shadow of the author. Douglas Robinson even figuratively described the author as the subject of literary translation in the Literature of the Literary Period. Douglas Robinson even imaginatively called most translators before the Renaissance "channelers": dead authors were still like discarnate spirits who spoke their voices through the body of the translator, who was like a medium. The translator, as if a medium or mediator, must overcome linguistic, cultural, and temporal barriers to convey the spirit, voice, meaning, or intention of the original author to new readers^[4].

The notion of the author as master and the translator as servant has a long history and has had a lasting impact on subsequent (literary) translation studies. From Cicero and Horace, the representatives of Western classical translation theory, to the medieval translation of the Bible, up to Chapman and Doré, the representatives of Renaissance translators, the idea of "translation copying-imitation (of the original text)" has been repeated. The traditional notion of the author as the master and the translator as the servant has allowed Translation studies and translators have been marginalized for a long time, and as Theo Hermans argues, "the traditional approach to the study of literary translation begins with the assumption that translation is not only second-hand, but also inferior, and therefore unworthy of attention. From the very beginning, translation studies

has taken for granted the supremacy of the original text, and so it has been left with no choice but to highlight the outstanding quality of the original by emphasizing the errors and flaws of the translation. Needless to say, the result is a thousand and one original-centered studies, which always make the original text the absolute standard and touchstone, and so become repetitive, predictable, and prescriptive—the underlying norm is the a priori utopian notion of translation: translation has to reproduce the original text, the whole original text, and only the original text."^[5] The Italian-American scholar Lawrence Venuti, in a more graphic manner, regards this author-centered translation that reproduces the original text as the translator's "invisibility", i.e., the traces of the translator are invisible, and the translation seems to be transparent, which is not a translation, but a reproduction of the original text. It is not a translation, but a reproduction of the original work ^[6].

Obviously, the view of the author as the subject of literary translation is inseparable from the traditional concept of translation. Douglas Robinson refers to the traditional period of mystical historical construction as the prerational stage, in which translation is regarded as spirit-channeling, divine inspiration, or prophecy, in which the translator is completely subordinated to external forces. In the pre-rational stage, the author is regarded as the most important external force and the subject of literary translation: the author is the invisible soul, the translator is only a borrowed shell, "the author is the supreme subject, who designs the original text and permanently displays his or her own intentions in the original text; the translator "occupies" the author's intention and copies the target text ^[5].

In the period when the traditional concept of translation prevailed or in the pre-rational stage defined by Robinson, the author and the translator were often in different time and space: the author was dead while the translator was alive. Could the dead author really let the living translator "execute" his intention and thus copy or imitate the original text? In an age of rationalism, such a question begs the question, "How can we claim to know what Dante's and Homer's thoughts thousands of years ago if we cannot even figure out what our own spouses were thinking? Rationally speaking, it is a complete fallacy to claim to be able to get to the heart of the author's intentions..... Translators are not psychics, capable of knowing the author's intentions; translators merely utilize biographical or historical sources to carefully interpret the text and thereby effectively speculate on the author's intentions." ^[5] Robinson goes on to criticize the notion that the intent of a dead author in the pre-rational stage can be fully communicated through the translator as the "intentional fallacy".

Whether the dead author's intention can be carried out 100% by the translator should be questioned, and the traditional concept of translation in which the author is the master and the translator is the servant is also unscientific. Of course, it is not desirable to deny the author's role in literary translation unilaterally. The author's role in the following two kinds of literary translation is very prominent: First, the original author combines the two identities of author and translator into one, and the author herself translates her own literary works into another language.

To summarize, whether from the traditional concept of translation or from the concept of translation after the cultural turn, the author is not the subject of literary translation; on the contrary, the author is often the antecedent object of literary translation, and the correct interpretation of the meaning of a literary work and the proper speculation of the author's intention depend to a certain extent on the interactive communication with the author. However, once a literary work is fixed in words and circulated and accepted in the cultural context of the target language, the author's influence on the translated work diminishes, and although "the translated text is born from the original text and is connected to the original text in blood", "the translator constantly abandons the original language as 'muscle' and transcends the linguistic form". Although "the translation is born out of the original language and is connected to the original text", "the translator constantly abandons the 'body' of the original language and transcends the linguistic form" ^[7], so that the translation is mutated in the context of the other culture and realizes the continuation of the original's "afterlife" life.

2.2. The Reader Is NOT the Subject of Literary Translation

The view that the reader is the subject of literary translation is closely related to the rise of reader response theory and reception theory in the 1960s and 1970s. While the traditional conception of a work is regarded as a ready-made structure of meaning, reader response criticism and reception theory shift from the traditional conception to the readers' thinking process and reaction to read the text, and consider that the meaning of the text is "generated" or "created" by each reader. Therefore, as far as the meaning of the work is concerned, different readers will have a different perception of the meaning of the text. Accordingly, in terms of the meaning of a work, different readers interpret the text differently.

Wolfgang Iser, a representative figure of reader-response criticism, claimed that literary texts are the product of the author's intentional behavior, and that the literary text partially controls the reader's response, but there are always gaps and indeterminate elements in the literary text, which require the reader's creative participation in the interpretation of the literary text. These require the reader's creative participation in the interpretation of the literary text. For this reason, Iser divides readers into "implied readers" and "actual readers", the former being the intended readers expected by the writers and summoned by the literary text, and the "implied reader" is a kind of possible reader and can even be said to be a potential structural factor of the literary text, which implies the diversity of text interpretation. The implied reader is, quite literally, another alias for the distinctive intentional structure of a literary text, whereas the "real reader" is the thousands of individual readers living in a given space and time and reading a literary text, whose individual accumulated experience deeply influences the interpretation and reaction of the literary text.^[8]

American scholars of reader-response criticism, represented by Stanley Fish, opposed the text-centered view of New Criticism, shifted the focus of their research to the response of readers outside the text, and advocated affective stylistics: Stanley Fish believed in the early days that reading activity was the cumulative process of the experience of individual readers with literary literacy, and that the meaning of a literary text was the result of the experience of the individual reader. Early Stanley Fish believed that reading activity was the accumulation process of individual reader's experience with literary literacy, the meaning of literary text was the result of individual reader's reading experience, and reader's misinterpretation is also a part of reader's reading experience; later, Stanley Fish put forward the concept of interpretive communities (interpretive communities), which is a group of members who adopt a common reading strategy, and based on the common reading strategy members of the group are able to "create" a reading experience. Based on the common reading strategy, members of the community can "create" common features on the surface of all texts and deduce the same authorial intent from the text, and the value or meaning of any literary text is closely related to a particular interpretive community.

Like reader-response criticism, reception theory is concerned with the reception of texts by readers; however, the main focus of reception theory is not on the responses of individual readers at a given time, but on the interpretive or critical responses of groups of readers over a long period of time. However, according to Hans Robert Jauss, a representative of reception theory, although a text has no "objective meaning," it contains many features that can be described objectively. The response of a particular reader constitutes his/her interpretation of the meaning and aesthetic features of the text, and the reader's response is the result of a dialogue or fusion between the reader's horizon of expectations and the text itself.

Reception theory has two aspects. In terms of reception-aesthetic, the meaning and aesthetic characteristics of any text are hidden and potential, and can only be recognized by readers through their long-term accumulated experience; in terms of reception-history, the history of literature is not a reflection of meaning and value. In terms of reception-history, literary history is not an account of various works whose meanings and values have been solidified; literary history always needs to be rewritten, because as the horizon of readers' expectations changes in different eras, the way literary history interprets and evaluates the selected texts will also change.^[9]

In short, reader-response criticism and reception theory breaks through the limitation of considering literary works as self-enclosed objective entities, emphasizes individual or group

readers' response to and interpretation of the meaning and value of a literary text, and highlights readers' initiative and creativity in the process of dialoguing with literary texts. The prominence of the reader's subjectivity transforms the traditional three-dimensional literary schema, which is composed of three elements: the world, the work, and the author, into a more comprehensive three-dimensional literary schema, which is composed of four elements: the world, the work, the author, and the reader.

Obviously, in the literary schema composed of four elements: the world, the work, the author, and the reader, the subjective role of the reader is indisputable, and the reader always makes use of his/her own pre-structure, constantly listening to the author and the work, taking the initiative to participate in the meaning construction of the text, achieving the fusion of the reader's vision with that of the author and the work, and realizing the dialogue of the reader with the author and the work. However, the subjectivity of readers is only manifested in the understanding and interpretation of works, so that readers can realize double encounters in reading, i.e., deciphering and dialoguing of literary texts, so that readers and authors can encounter each other, and conforming to the world with isomorphism and realization.

In a nutshell, readers, especially interpretive readers, often represent and embody the literary paradigm and ideology of a certain class, and to a certain extent shape the fate of literary works. However, in the process of literary translation, readers are not directly involved in the translation and creation of literary works, and most readers are confronted with the object of translated literary works rather than the original works; the subjectivity of readers is mainly manifested in the comprehension, interpretation, and appreciation of the translated literary works, and readers do not directly carry out the translation of the literary works unless the identity of the readers is transformed to that of the translators; in addition, readers are often the posterior objects that the subject of literary translation must consider, especially when the subject of literary translation retranslates the literary work, the reaction and criticism of readers (interpretive group) to the original translated literary work can provide reference for the translation strategies and methods that the subject of literary translation will adopt in the process of literary translation.

2.3. The Translator Is the Real Subject of Literary Translation

The study of the subject of literary translation has shifted from the author and the reader to the translator as an inevitable result of the rise of deconstruction. In the 1950s and 1960s, structuralism was prevalent in European and American literary criticism circles. Structuralism believed that language was the primary means of meaning, and that through certain rules, language constructed its own system to express meaning, so that meaning could be obtained by decoding the structural code of the text. From the mid-1960s, deconstructionist scholars such as Derrida, Foucault, Paul de Man, Roland Barthes, and Lawrence Venuti questioned and criticized the structuralist view. Deconstructionist scholars argued that texts contained a variety of meanings, and therefore, textual meanings were not fixed but infinitely possible; as Derrida argued, texts had no fixed identities or fixed incarnations, and each act of reading was distinct from the next [¹⁰].

Literary criticism before deconstructionism, such as New Criticism, Structuralism, Reader Acceptance Theory, etc., centered on the text or the reader to find the meaning of the literary text or the meaning of the code of different symbolic systems, and the meaning of the text was regarded as fixed, and the translator could only "copy" the original work in the same way, and he was also regarded as the author's slave, and the role and position of the translator in literary and translation criticism had long been ignored.

Deconstructionism goes beyond the traditional logocentrism, phonocentrism, and transcendental signified of Western philosophy, and proposes the concepts of complementation and *différance*. The concepts of complementation and *différance* are proposed, which subvert the traditional cognition that textual meaning is single and stable, and revolutionize the uncertainty of textual meaning and the infinite possibility of meaning interpretation. Textual meaning is not clear, static and eternal, but illusive, dynamic and temporary; the textual reading process is dynamic, contextualized and evolving, and different reading processes will inevitably bring about differences in the interpretation

of textual meaning. Therefore, the traditional search for the so-called "correct" textual meaning or author's intention becomes out of fashion, and the greatest pleasure of text (re)reading lies in the constant search for different ways of interpreting textual meanings ^[11]. In the case of translation (especially literary translation), the translator's subjective role must be manifested, and the translator should not follow the same steps and be subject to the same orders. The translator should not follow the orders of the author, the work and the readers, but rather, he/she dialogues with the author, the work and the readers on an equal footing, and actively plays the role of an intermediary in the communication between the author, the original work, the translation, and the readers of the translation. He/she also constantly deconstructs the old context and constructs new cultural and social contexts, and carries out new interpretations or even creates new works of the original work, so as to make the readers communicate with the author and the original work across time and space in new cultural and social contexts. Thus, the prominence of the translator's subject position enriches the literary schema described above and reveals more comprehensively the intrinsic relationship of literary translation, where "the translator not only gives the work a new look so that it can engage in yet another round of cultural exchange with the readers, but also perpetuates the life of the original work in another culture."^[12]

Deconstructionism dissolves the traditional view of translation fidelity, highlights the central position of the translator, and opens up a new horizon for the study of the subject of literary translation. As far as literary translation is concerned, the subject of translation of literary works must be a human being, and neither the author nor the reader, who involves human beings in literary translation, is the subject of literary translation; therefore, the subject of literary translation can only be the translator.

3. Conclusion

As the subject of literary translation, the translator's subjectivity is mainly manifested in the translation of literary works in the target language, which not only maximizes the literary nature of the original work, but also fully embodies the translator's initiative and creativity. On the basis of a full interpretation of the original work, the translator adopts new language and literary forms to recreate the image of the original work in the translated language. Although the process of literary translation is bound by the objectivity of the original work and the social norms of the translated language, the production of translation is essentially a process full of subjectivity and creativity. This is mainly manifested in four aspects: the subjectivity of the translator as a reader in interpreting the original work, the subjectivity of the translator in adopting specific translation strategies, the creativity shown by the translator in dealing with linguistic and cultural differences, and the creativity of literary translations in reproducing the original work's special structural meaning system.

In conclusion, the person who takes the literary work as an object, who actively issues and is practicing translation of the literary work is the translator, not the author or the reader. In other words, the translator is the only subject of literary translation.

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