

Hermeneutics and Translation Theory

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Abstract: Translation theory was once strictly confined within the scope of linguistics for translation was merely referred to as a conversion of languages, from the source language into the target language. Nevertheless, when research is carried further and deeper, meaning is found not only associated with the language or the text but also with the author and the reader, which form the tripartite in understanding of the appropriate meaning of any text. This paper starts with the discussion of the relationship of hermeneutics and literary translation and then goes on to propose that a perfect theory of translation should be an overall concern of all the three aforementioned factors.

Key words: hermeneutics; translation; meaning; semiotics; reception theory.

Why is hermeneutics relevant to translation? Because there is no translation without understanding and interpreting texts, which is the initial step in any kinds of translation including literary translation of course. Inappropriate interpretation inevitably results in inadequate translations, if not absolutely wrong translations. But how do we understand?

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics, briefly, can be defined as the science and methodology of interpreting texts. The philosophical background on which hermeneutics is based is demonstrated by the forerunners in this area such as Gadamer. According to Gadamer, words, that is, talk, conversation, dialogue, question and answer, produce worlds. In contrast to a traditional, Aristotelian view of language where spoken words represent mental images and written words are symbols for spoken words, Gadamerian perspective on linguistics emphasizes a fundamental unity between language and human existence. Interpretation can never be divorced from language or objectified. Because language comes to humans with meaning, interpretations and understandings of the world can never be prejudice-free. As human beings, one cannot step outside of language and look at language or the world from some objective standpoint. Language is not a tool which human beings manipulate to represent a meaning-full world; rather, language forms human reality. (quoted from Bullock, 1997)

Another important figure in this sphere is Schleiermacher whose concept of understanding includes empathy as well as intuitive linguistic analysis. He believed that understanding is not merely the decoding of encoded information, interpretation is built upon understanding, and it has a grammatical, as well as a psychological

moment. The grammatical thrust places the text within a particular literature (or language) and reciprocally uses the text to redefine the character of that literature. The psychological thrust is more naive and linear. In it, the interpreter reconstructs and explicates the subject's motives and implicit assumptions. Thus Schleiermacher claimed that a successful interpreter could understand the author as well, as or even better than, the author understood himself because the interpretation highlights hidden motives and strategies. (quoted from the web: www.ai.mit.edu)

Dilthey, initially a follower of Schleiermacher, went further. He began to emphasize that texts and actions were as much products of their times as expressions of individuals, and their meanings were consequently constrained by both an orientation to values of their period and a place in the web of their authors' plans and experiences. Therefore meanings are delineated by the author's world-view reflecting a historical period and social context. Understanding (*verstehen*), the basis for methodological hermeneutics, involves tracing a circle from text to the author's biography and immediate historical circumstances and back again. Interpretation, or the systematic application of understanding to the text, reconstructs the world in which the text was produced and places the text in that world. (*ibid*)

Modern ideas on hermeneutics hold that the writer may be an editor or a redactor and that he may have used sources. In considering this aspect of discourse one must take into account the writer's purpose in writing as well as his cultural milieu. Secondly, one must consider the narrator in the writing who is usually different from the writer. Sometimes he is a real person, sometimes fictional. One must determine his purpose in speaking and his cultural milieu, taking into consideration the fact that he may be omnipresent and omniscient. One must also take into consideration the narratee within the story and how he hears. But even then one is not finished. One must reckon with the person or persons to whom the writing is addressed; the reader, not always the same as the one to whom the writing is addressed; and later readers. Thirdly, one must consider the setting of writing, the genre (whether poetry, narrative, prophecy, etc.), the figures of speech; the devices used, and, finally, the plot. (Hanko, 1991)

Following the above ideas, we realize that understanding and interpreting the meaning of a discourse involves actually three factors: the author (writer), the text (or speech) and the reader.

My Understanding of Translation

Translation, according to Nida (1984) consists in reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style. The Chinese *cihai* (unabridged dictionary) defines translation as: expressing in another language the meaning carried in the original language (my translation from Chinese). Here meaning is apparently in the limelight of translation, which is why adequate understanding and interpretation is always an iron criterion in judging whether a piece of translation succeeds or fails. Style is another indispensable factor involved in translation but cannot be treated in

this paper for it is not directly relevant to the present topic.

I believe however meaning is never concrete and tangible as many may claim and translation of meaning can only achieve a sort of approximation instead of exactness as is believed by some scholars working in the field. I reckon that when the translated meaning produces the same or a similar response in the target reader or listener as it does the original reader, the translation is successful by my standard. Newmark (1982) says that it is preferable to handle the issue in terms of equivalence of intended effects, thus linking judgments about what the translator seeks to achieve to judgments about the intended meaning of the ST speaker/writer. In other words I do not seek to reproduce the exactness of the original but always bear in my mind the rule of having the same effect on the target reader. This assertion is grounded on the fact that it is believed by many that translation is itself an end, serving a certain purpose. When it comes to a different point of view-translation is also a medium, or a process, I have something different to say. Simply put, translation involves decoding of the original discourse and encoding of the target discourse, both done by the translator or interpreter. During this process, absolute faithfulness or accuracy is but an illusion, or best, an impossible idealistic pursuit. To achieve the maximum effect or impact of the original discourse and to avoid failure of communication, accommodations are made for a variety of reasons.

In a word, translation in my opinion is both a process and a product. Research therefore ought to include all factors and elements concerned about them both.

The Three Factors All Considered

In the following discussion I will concentrate on the development of translation theory on the hermeneutic basis.

The Author

Centering on the author, there has been a lot of followers who preach that in literary translation a thorough study of the author's life experience, historical and social background is of paramount necessity for any translator to ensure interpretation of the author's meaning or intention is most adequate. There have been many articles and theses on evaluation of a literary work, digging quite in depth those factors about the author to make sure the interpretation of the work is the closest. For example, in translating Shakespeare into Chinese many would draw heavily from history. "The 16th century in England was a period of the breaking up of feudal relations and the establishing of the foundations of capitalism."(Wu, 1996: p71) "Together with the development of bourgeois relationships and formation of the English national state this period is marked by a flourishing of national culture known as the Renaissance" which originally indicated "a revival of classical arts and sciences after the dark ages of medieval obscurantism." Shakespeare as a humanist held his chief interest not in ecclesiastical knowledge, but in man, his environment and doings and "bravely fought for the emancipation of man from the tyranny of the church and religious dogmas."

(ibid, p72-73) He was a dramatist, poet, actor and proprietor and he produced 37 plays, two narrative poems and 154 sonnets. All these peripheral facts hinted meaning penned by Shakespeare and under his pen the medieval story assumed new meaning and significance.

This trend of determining meaning in a certain work or of the a certain author was of high popularity in China and still is, to some extent. In judging translation, therefore, the more abundant materials one has, the more say he has and the more he is convincing.

Such an approach of course is quite valuable and truthful, but only partially truthful for there is another factor to be considered---the text.

The Text

The stress on text results in the supreme status of the structuralism and later deconstruction in translation theory. This school accuses the abovementioned group of staying far away from the essential element and foundation of interpreting the meaning of the original. They hold that as soon as the author has finished the writing the meaning is fixed in the text and any 'guess' away from the text should be abandoned completely. Thus when two translations are compared the grammar, diction and sentence structures are valued above anything else. To support themselves, semiotics is loaned to argue against the 'author regime'. Academically Semiotics can be defined broadly as a domain of investigation that explores the nature and function of signs as well as the systems and processes underlying signification, expression, representation, and communication. (Perron, 1997) Literary semiotics can be seen as a branch of the general science of signs that studies a particular group of texts within verbal texts in general. Starting with the definition of "semiosis" as a process in which signs function as vehicles, interpretants, and interpreters, Morris determines three areas of complementary investigation: syntactics, which studies the relation of sign-vehicles within sign systems; semantics, the relation of signs to objects they represent; and pragmatics, the relation of signs to interpreters. Hence, if one considers literary texts in terms of semiosis, they can be defined as syncretic sign systems encompassing a syntactic dimension that can be analyzed on the phonological level (e.g., the specific sound patterns organizing the text) and on the level of narrative syntax; the semantic level (the content elements of the text); and the pragmatic or communicative context (addresser and addressee). In short, the first two dimensions stress the structural features of texts and are concerned with their expression and content forms, whereas the other dimension stresses the signifying process and concentrates on analyzing their generative processes and interrelations with other texts. (ibid) Armed with this theory, the 'text regime' holds their battleground rather strongly.

Here the process of interpretation seems to end satisfactorily, yet the last step is indispensable, the involvement of the reader. Text ought not be treated as a closed

formal network. Without the reader the meaning is not communicated. And if communication fails what follows naturally is the failure of translation.

The Reader

This aspect does not attract attention until quite recently. Owing to the above schools the interpretation of a certain work used to be looked on as fixed and established by authority who have done thorough research about the author and the detailed analysis of the text at hand. So any different interpretation tends to be strongly attacked, denying the fact that naturally different readers may well have different interpretations. To argue with persuasiveness, reception theory is introduced in translation theory which is defined as the "approach to literature that concerns itself first and foremost with one or more readers' actualization of the text." (Lernout, 1994) The most significant figure concerning this theory is Hans Robert Jauss and he is heavily quoted. The 'reader regime' comes into prominence.

Jauss's work in the late seventies, gathered in his *Asthetische Erfahrung und literarische Hermeneutik* in 1982 (the first part was issued in 1977 and translated into English as *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics* in 1982), moved toward a more hermeneutical interest in the aesthetic experience itself. Jauss distinguishes three basic experiences: a productive aesthetic praxis (poiesis), a receptive praxis (aisthesis), and a communicative praxis (katharsis), and he claims that a detailed study of these three elements can help literary history steer a course between an exclusively aesthetic and an exclusively sociological perspective. Central in this new phase of Jauss's thinking is the third, communicative aesthetic praxis, which is defined as "the enjoyment of the affects as stirred by speech or poetry which can bring about both a change in belief and the liberation of his mind in the listener or the spectator" (92). Important here is both the active part of the recipient of the aesthetic object and the two opposites this definition avoids: the unmediated losing oneself in the object and the sentimental self-indulgence by the subject in itself. The aesthetic experience can have three functions in society: it can create norms, simply pass on existing norms, or refuse to conform to the existing norms. (ibid) With this as a point of departure, Chinese translation circles, especially those of the middle-age generation, set out a campaign of retranslation of the classical works which used to be considered too steep and high a mountain to climb.

Re-translation of the same work is now being done by quite a few translators, who boldly do the translation in accordance with their own interpretation and with originality and creativity without fear of being ferociously attacked by the so-called authority. In addition, literary translation itself I firmly believe is more an artistic endeavor than a mechanic linguistic conversion as art is always individual and immune to the so-called 'scientific deconstruction'.

The three factors each have its followers and advocates in the Chinese translation circles today and the disputes and arguments still go on. I, a Taoist philosophical

follower, believe the 'oneness' which in this present case means the organic combination of the three aspects, complementary to one another.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it is hoped to manifest that proper understanding of a literary discourse is the first and foremost step of any translation and to understand it correctly the three factors, namely, the author, the text and the reader must all be counted in so that meaning is best determined and a perfect piece of translation is produced.

Notes: As I am blind to German, I am not sure if my quotations are correctly spelt. I apologize for any mistakes, though the German terms are but copied exactly from the sources I have cited.

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