

On the Philosophical Nature of “Dialogue” in the English Translation of Chinese Classics

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ABSTRACT. *This paper applies the literary dialogue theory to the study of English translation of Chinese classics. Based on the dialogue relationship between the speakers and the potential listeners, it is necessary to firstly reveal the philosophical nature of the translation of classics into English. Secondly, it shows the concrete manifestation of the philosophical essence of the English translation of classics from the synchronic, diachronic, intralingual and interlingual perspectives. Finally, the translation of Chinese classics into English emphasizes the equality, interaction and commonness of the dialogue subjects, highlights the essence of their humanistic spirit, and realizes the “harmonious coexistence” of translation.*

KEYWORDS: *English Translation of Chinese classics, Dialogue Theory, Synchronic and Diachronic, Harmonious Coexistence, Zhuangzi*

1. Introduction

The philosophy of dialogue has a long history. In the origin of Chinese and Western cultures, ancient sages advocated exploring truth and knowledge through “dialogue”. It was Bakhtin, a Russian literary theorist, who first proposed the concept of dialogue. Bakhtin (1981, 1984, 1998)^[1-3] believed that the expression of human emotion, rational thinking and even any form of existence must be based on the continuous communication of language or discourse. “Two voices are the minimum condition for life and survival”, and dialogue is everywhere, which is the essence of human existence. The long history of dialogue is embedded in the classical books and the dialogue between the speakers and the potential hearers is the outstanding expression of the philosophical connotation of cultural classics. The origin of Chinese cultural classics is that ancient philosophers shine their thoughts and enlighten later generations through “dialogue”. The contention of a hundred schools of thought in the pre-Qin Dynasty was based on dialogue, and explored the truth with the dialogue spirit of “harmony but diversity, unity but pluralism”, which revealed the brilliant philosophical thought of ancient and modern times.

This paper through the dialogue aims to link the author and the translator, reveal the philosophical essence of dialogue embedded in classics translation, explore the diachronic text meaning construction, dialectically inherit and carry forward the cultural heritage, discard its dregs and take its essence, translate it abroad and take it as a “necessary for the development of national culture and enhance national self-confidence to serve the past for the present” (Hu Daojing, 2004:10)^[4].

2. A Briefoverview of “Dialogue Theory”

Bakhtin (1998:252)^[3] pointed out that conversational communication is where the life of language really lies. It is manifested in various relations in daily life, such as agreement and opposition, affirmation and negation, question and answer, etc., which forms a purely conversational relationship. This theory of dialogue (or literary theory) is embodied in the “dialogical nature” of the text in previous studies of the novel style, which is manifested in the “double-voicedness”, that is, the speech and refutation are “integrated into one person’s speech by one mouth”. The essence of “double-voicedness” is “the clash and interchange of two consciousness, two viewpoints and two evaluations in each component of a consciousness and language, that is, the clash of different voices in each internal factor” (1998: 287)^[3]. Due to the limitation of space and avoid to the wide range of discussion, this paper only discusses the first category of the double-voicedness: the dialogical relationship between the speakers and the potential hearers.

Foreign researches on dialogue theory mainly focus on theoretical discussion. Martin Buber (1986)^[5] emphasized the equality of dialogue and believed that “existence” occurs between “I” and “You”, and an equal “I-You” relationship, or “dialogue relationship”, should be constructed. David Bohm (2004)^[6] believes that dialogue is creative and can benefit all parties involved. “In a dialogue, everyone wins”. Paul Freire (2001)^[7] applied the theory of dialogue to educational ideas. He emphasized the criticality of dialogue and urge education to shoulder the responsibility of creating people and the world again.

Chinese scholars are more likely to study specific practical problems on the basis of dialogue theory. In the field of translation studies, Peng Liyuan et al. (2005)^[8] analyzed the contextual system of translation and the dialogical nature of translation, and analyzed the role of synchronic and diachronic dialogical relations in translation in the formation and development of translation with examples. Lv Jun (2002)^[9] believes that in order to develop translation studies, it is necessary to step out of the study mode of textual centrism, and the dialogue theory based on interpretative philosophy has a very important epistemological significance for translation studies. Wang Zhijian (2009)^[10] takes the dialogue theory as the methodology and studies the multiple dialogue relationships in translation, including translators and authors, texts and readers, from the perspectives of reception aesthetics and reader response theory.

From the perspective of “dialogue theory”, this paper explores the philosophical form and methodology of the translation of Chinese cultural classics from the

dialogue relationship between the speakers and the potential hearers, and explores the corresponding translation form and concept, which has a guiding role and methodological significance in translation studies.

3. The Philosophical Essence of “Dialogue” in English Translation of the Chinese Classics

The different forms of “dialogue-monologue-dialogue” show the development track of human culture. Bakhtin’s dialogical theory and dialogical thinking are of great theoretical value to the development of Chinese ancient cultural classics and literary theory.

3.1 The conversational relationship between the speaker and the potential listener

Bakhtin’s theory of dialogue is embodied in the conversational relationship between the speakers and the potential hearers possessing collective unconsciousness. Classic books are the ideological and cultural products of a certain stage in history. To translate them to modern or future people through “dialogue”, the role of a listener is not the real person with the same context as the text speaker, but the potential listener. In other words, dialogue theory interprets textual meaning through the potential interaction between speech subjects and their virtual opposites. Any text can be regarded as the carrier of dialogue and communication, and Chinese cultural classics are no exception. Every interpretation nowadays is a derivative of virtual dialogue, and this idea of “dialogue” is deeply rooted in the thoughts of the early philosophers of China.

Translation is the interpretation and regeneration of meaning. The constant “divergence” in the concept of time and space keeps the “meaning” of translation in an unstable state of constant development. In essence, translation is a never-ending process of dialogue about understanding. The translation of classical books can be regarded as the dialogue understanding and behavior construction of the text in a specific period, which is also an in-depth analysis of its philosophical essence. That means the dynamic analysis; interpretation and reconstruction of the translated text are carried out through the dialogue network formed by the translation subject, the translation object and the translation environment. Through the network of dialogue, translation constantly extends and expands the life of the original text in both time and space, which is also the inevitable process and methodological embodiment of the translation of classical books.

3.2 Methodology of English Translation of Chinese Classics under Dialogue Philosophy

The philosophical essence of English translation of Chinese classics can be regarded as a kind of “dialogue”. The smooth and proper realization of dialogue is a necessary condition for translation, and the subject of dialogue is the speaker of the source text and the potential hearer of the target text. Therefore, the core of English

translation of Chinese classics focuses on the interaction, exchange and communication between the various translation subjects. Specifically, the philosophical nature of this dialogism can be embodied in two sets of methodologies:

The first comes to the synchronic dialogic translation and diachronic dialogic translation. The former is influenced by related and similar factors when the text is constructed through dialogue understanding in the translation of classic books, which has the characteristics of relative stability. The latter is the constant change and coordination of the various elements of the text in the historical development and evolution, so that the text itself can have a dialogue with the factors of the times, and then complete the text construction, which is dynamic in development. Based on the synchronic dialogue, this paper explores the understanding changes of “dialogue” in diachronic development and examines the differences in the understanding of translated texts. To be specific, once a work in a certain period of history (especially a work praised as a classic by later generations) is published, it will inevitably attract all kinds of comments, interpretations and even amendments in the context of that time, all of which are a “refraction” of the writer’s work. As Lefevere (2008:259)^[11] argued, writers and their works are always understood in a specific context, and they are always refracted through a specific prism, just as their works themselves can also reflect the works of their predecessors through a specific prism. Obviously, this “specific background” is not only synchronic, but also diachronic. It can be assumed that the English translation of classical books should first make a textual analysis of all the relevant “refraction” in the diachronic development of classical books, and then, relying on the relatively stable synchronic context, establish a “dialogue” connection, and then form a new “refraction” that is suitable for the current or contemporary context.

The second comes to the translation of intralingual and interlingual dialogues. The English translation of classical books is a secondary translation process, which includes two stages: intralingual translation and interlingual translation. The text of Chinese classics belongs to classical Chinese. Before its English translation, it must go through dialogue and exchanges between the native speakers and the potential hearers in the same cultural context within the language, and then build a dialogue bridge between the native speaker and the potential hearers in the intercultural context on the basis of this dialogue.

The cultural essence of Chinese classics can be translated to different cultural groups through the form of “dialogue” interpretation. That is, on the basis of intralingual translation a diachronic dialogue with the source text and the meaning of the same cultural context can be realized, and then by the transformation of the interlingual translation to achieve the different cultural context. Throughout the whole translation process has always been “the dialogue relationship between the speaker and the potential hearer”. It is worth noting that, because the culture contained in the source language classics has passed through the diachronic interpretation of the homologous culture in the language, and finally entered into the culture of different languages, in order to prevent the “refraction” of culture consciously or unconsciously, this practical process emphasizes the equality, interaction and commonality of the subjects of dialogue. Only in this way can the

humanistic essence of the objective text be reflected, the “harmonious co-existence” of translation be realized, and the purpose and tenet of English translation of classic books be manifested.

Taking *Zhuangzi* as an example. It contains philosophical thoughts and humanistic ideas that represent Chinese native religion (Taoism). As a typical representative of Chinese traditional culture, it is also the key to grasp Chinese folk culture and the aim of translation of Chinese classics. Since the classic came out, Chinese scholars, thinkers and other experts in literature and history have kept annotating, interpreting and interpreting it, which can be regarded as the intra-lingual translation of *Zhuangzi* from the synchronic and diachronic perspectives. These include “*ZhuangziNotes*” by Guo Xiang and “*Tao Te Zhen Jing Commentaries*”, “*ZhuangziAnnotations*”, “*Lao-zi Tao TeChing Annotations*” by Cheng Xuanying. In the late Qing Dynasty, these include Wang Xianqian’s “*ZhuangziVariorum*”, GuoQingfan’s “*Explanation on Zhuangzi*”, QianMu’s “*Compilation on Zhuangzi*”, Wang Shumin’s “*Zhuangzi Interpretation*”, etc. Of modern and contemporary masters include Nan Huaijin’s “*Outlook on Zhuangzi*”, LouYuLie’s “*Lao-zi Tao TeChing Interpretation*”, Chen Guying’s “*Translation and Review on Lao-zi*” and “*Modern Translation and Note on Zhuangzi*”, etc. Many versions above belong to an intralingual transformation from the original “*Zhuangzi*” to the modern edition of “*Zhuangzi*”. The process needs to consider the time difference, space changes, social culture change and other factors. Therefore, the first priority of translators today is to refer to a lot of the interpretations and commentaries, and then transform the classical Chinese version of “*Zhuangzi*” into the modern Chinese vernacular through intralingual translation.

The English translation of *Zhuangzi* is ultimately an interlingual translation process. The earliest translation is “*The Divine Classic of Nan-hua: Being the Works of Chuang Tsz, Taoist Philosopher*” by Frederic H. Balfour in 1881. Herbert A. Giles has also completed “*Chuang Tzu: Mystic, Moralist, and Social Reformer*”. James Legge in 1891 wrote “*The Writings of Kwang-Kau*”. Among them, “*The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*” by translator Burton Watson, published by Columbia University in 1986, is one of the most famous. In China, it was Feng Youlan who translated the inner chapters named as “*Chuang-tzu: A Taoist Classic*” in 1931.

It is worth noting that intralingual translation is mainly carried out by translators whose mother tongue is the source language (or because of diachronic reasons, the language appears to be greatly differentiated), while interlingual translation can be divided into two categories: one is the mother tongue affiliated to the source language, the other is the mother tongue to the target language user. While synchronic and diachronic are the two main classification criteria of linguistic studies, specific to translation studies, they are not affected by other non-space-time factors. In other words, under the perspective of dialogue theory, the starting point of the English translation of classic books is to “remove the constraint”, “reorganize sentences” and “build space” (Xu Jun 2009: 74)^[12].

First of all, the translator should get rid of the static and self-centered concept of translation, establish a dynamic and conversational concept of meaning, take the initiative to talk to the author, and eliminate the literal bondage. Then it is necessary

to renew the meaning between words by means of sentence formation to form a new whole of translation. Finally, the translator and the author through the conversation may understand the context of the text meaning, thus make oneself into the environment and space to grasp the intention of the author. During the process the translator can create a language space that is suitable for the target language readers, transfer the original meaning to make the author connect to the reader, and build two different spaces to realize the significance of horizon fusion.

4. The Co-existence of Humanistic Spirit and Subjectharmony in English Translation of Chinese classics

Chinese cultural classics are extensive and profound, and they are important heritage of human civilization. The core of them lies in their humanistic spirit, that is, “things that are relatively stable in a culture and reflect people’s common understanding and values. This is also in line with the western humanist model of looking at people and the universe, focusing on people and taking human experience as the starting point for people to understand themselves, God and nature “(Wang Hongyin 2011:4)^[13]. Therefore, it is feasible to translate Chinese classics from abroad in the aspect of humanistic spirit inheritance. As the core and essence of Bakhtin’s academic thought, dialogue theory aims to emphasize a positive, individualistic and equal participation humanistic spirit. Therefore, it is reasonable to reveal the humanistic spirit of translation of Chinese classics through dialogue thought.

Bakhtin’s theory of dialogue has always been based on human beings, believing that every discourse subject is an independent existence owning independent value, and people have equal dialogue relationship. On the other hand, the elimination of the value of either side will make it impossible to reach a dialogue. Therefore, dialogue, as a two-way behavior, is based on the real freedom and equality between the subjects of dialogue. The ideal state of dialogue should be that the two parties do not assimilate each other and communicate with each other on the same plane. This also highlights the harmony of dialogue thought. On the one hand, the translation of Chinese cultural classics is to realize the academic aspiration of Chinese scholars to introduce the quintessence of Chinese culture to the world, to make Chinese culture go global, to realize the reciprocal exchange between Chinese and Western cultures, and to promote the diversification and integration of world civilizations. On the other hand, Western scholars can explore the root of the differences between Chinese and Western cultures and understand Chinese culture through the classics and documents themselves, so as to resolve conflicts, respect and benefit each other, and promote the equal and harmonious coexistence of various cultures in the world. After all, cross-cultural communication and communication is the most effective way to connect the world and build a bridge of peace.

Intersubjectivity in translation provides cognitive support for the possibility of translation of classic books and guides translation out of the “objectivism” trap of pure language research. At the same time, the subjective initiative of intersubjectivity also has its own room to play, that is, when translators and readers perceive the original authors of classic books diachronically through

“intersubjectivity” based on their own experience, they should not arbitrarily make presumptions. Intersubjectivity gives full freedom to the translation subject, promotes the mutual communication between different civilizations and cultures, highlights the indispensable position of “human” as the subject in cognition and highlights the concern of “humanism”. But the so-called “translation is dancing with shackles”, seeking the rich and infinite co-existence of intersubjectivity in the reasonably limited interpretative space, in a sense, constitutes the dialectics of intersubjectivity co-existence in translation.

Therefore, while emphasizing the equality, interaction and commonality of dialogue subjects in English translation of classic books, this paper aims to reveal their humanistic essence and realize the “harmonious co-existence” of translation.

5. Conclusion

To keep the national cultural characteristics, people must protect their own language, especially the rich cultural classics. Bakhtin’s dialogue theory and dialogue thinking are of great theoretical value to the development of Chinese culture and literary theory. It is a new attempt to interpret the translation of cultural classics into foreign language. It is to put the classics into the subjectivity dialogue and examine the whole translation process with a new interpretation model, thus promoting the development of translation practice and providing theoretical impetus for it.

Based on “the dialogue between the speakers and the potential hearers”, it reveals that the philosophical essence of the translation of classical books should be a kind of dialogue, and the smooth and proper realization of the dialogue is the necessary condition of translation. In addition, diachronic and synchronic, intralingual and interlingual are the two operational levels of English translation of classic books, which are also the inevitable process of translation. The potential interaction, dialogue and communication between the authors, translators and readers, which is the translation subject undertaking the dialogue task, complete the construction of meaning. Playing the core role of the subject factor (especially the translator) in the translation of classic books and emphasizing the dialogue between the subjects in translation activities conform to the philosophy of “people-oriented” humanism, and also to the principle of “harmonious translation”.

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