

Analysis of Translatability in the West

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Abstract: Among various issues in translation studies, the study of translatability has drawn special attention for a long time. In traditional structural view, translatability has been approached in two ways: the universalist one and the monadist one. However, some stands between the two and proposes that the translatability of a text is varied on different dimensions: issues on the cognitive and expressive level are translatable, on the cultural level are partial translatable, and on the artistic level are untranslatable. Apart from this traditional view, deconstructive theorists resist such systems of categorization and undertake a radical redrawing of translatability and lead people to rethink this issue, but its limitless interpreting and denying everything also make people bewildered and lost.

Keywords: translatability, classic approach, deconstructive approach

1. Introduction of Translatability and Untranslatability

To study translation theory, one should first make clear what “translation” is. The word “translation” is an incredible broad notion which can be understood in many different ways. Richards (1953: 250) admitted that translation “may very probably be the most complex type of event yet produced in the evolution of the cosmos”^[1]. This complex process involves many subjects, such as linguistics, literature, psychology, and the like. Jakobson (1959) once distinguished three types of translation: intralingual translation or rewording; interlingual translation or translation proper; intersemiotic translation or transmutation^[2]. According to this classification, almost all human communicative activities are some kind of translation. In addition, a large number of definitions have been offered from the linguistic aspect. Catford^[3] defines translation as “the replacement of textual material in one language (SL) by equivalent textual material in another language (TL)” However, what is equivalence? Is it possible to find out the real equivalent textual material in TL? Some others try to approach this issue in semiotic aspect, such as Lawendowski, who defines translation as “the transfer of ‘meaning’ from one set of language signs to another set of language signs”^[4]. In 1968, Nida claims “translation means translating meaning”^[5]. Then he adds that translation “consists in reproducing the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source language message, first in terms of meaning and second in terms of style” (ibid:12).

These definitions seem to have revealed the nature of translation; however, they are too general. It is hard for translators to achieve what Nida has said. For example, for the definition of “translation means translating meaning”, what does the word “meaning” mean? Leech^[6] has divided meaning into: conceptual meaning, connotative meaning, social meaning, affective meaning, reflected meaning, collocative meaning and thematic meaning. Does this mean that the translators should, if they could, transfer every meaning included in the language? Besides are there really one-to-one corresponding equivalents between two languages? Moreover, these definitions mentioned above tend to be prescriptive rather than descriptive, for that they “frequently state not only what translation is, but also what it is supposed to be”^[4]. From a different angle, taking target culture as his starting point, Toury states that “translations are facts of target culture; on occasion facts of special status, sometimes even constituting identifiable (sub)systems of their own, but of the target culture in any event”; similarly, another non-nominative definition is put forward by Vermeer, holding that “translation is the production of a functionally appropriate target text based on an existing source text, and the relationship between the two texts (source and target texts) is specified according to the skopos of the translation”^[7].

Although different facets are revealed by these definitions, all of them involved with some concept of determinable meaning that can be transferred to another system of signification. Deconstruction scholars resist such notion and hold that there is no preexisting meaning of the original before translation. Therefore, they, in Heidegger’s words, state that “Translation is viewed as action, an operation of thought, a translation of ourselves into the thought of the other language, and not a

linguistic, scientific transfer from something into the present”^[1]. More typically, translation in Derrida’s points of view “can be conceived as an action in which the movement along the surface of language is made visible, the play without calculation is made manifest.^[1]” In other words, “translation can be seen as always in the process of modifying the original text, of deferring and displacing for ever any possibility of grasping that which the original text desired to name”^[1]. In all, for deconstruct scholars, translation is not oriented to put us in contact with some sort of original meaning, but with the plurality and multidimension of languages and meanings.

In the whole study of translation, “It is clear that the question of (relative) translatability vs. (relatively) untranslatability of texts has always played a prominent role (Koller 1979) ^[8]. However, “The question of to what degree texts were translatable did not, surprisingly, fully develop as an issue in translation theory until relatively late, during the Romantic period.^[8]” That is to say, it is during the nineteenth-century that the question of a text’s translatability, partial translatability, or untranslatability first became a topic in the discussion of translation. Before that time, the discussion mainly centered on an entirely different subject, namely, the question of how a translator must proceed, or which approach he should follow in his method of translating to accord with his qualitative objectives.

As for the definition, “translatability is used to discuss the extent to which it is possible to translate either individual words and phrases or entire texts from one language to another^[4]. Or in other words, “Translatability is mostly understood as the capacity for some kind of meaning to be transferred from one language to another without undergoing radical change”^[7]. The notion has to be considered in relation to each instance of translation as “a concrete act of performance”^[9] and must be linked with the text type of ST, the purpose of translation and the translation principles followed by the translator. Wilss^[8] concludes that the translatability of a text can “be measured in terms of the degree to which it can be recontextualized in the TL, taking into account all linguistic factors”^[4].

Going against the traditional methods, deconstructionists believe that “translatability is a concept, which is based on the assumption of meaning as a presence and which had been locked for centuries in a theoretical duel with untranslatability”^[10]. In Benjamin’s words ^[11]“The question of whether a work is translatable has a dual meaning. Either: Will an adequate translator ever be found among the totality of its readers?

Or more pertinently: Does its nature lend itself to translation, and, therefore, in view of the significance of the mode, call for it?” There are, according to Benjamin, some texts, which have a quality or rather a potential within themselves: this quality is what he calls translatability. Some texts are translatable while others are not. Translatability is an inner quality of the (literary) text and goes beyond the translator’s ability to reproduce the text in another language. Translatability is the law governing translation: whether a work is translatable or not depends on its nature. If it is, then it calls for it. It does not matter whether it is translated or not, when or how or whether there actually is a translator capable of translating it.

2. Previous Studies on Translatability in the West

Whether translation is possible or not has long been a topic in translation study. But it is only in the eighteenth century that the problem begins to be discussed in a systematic manner and placed in the larger context of historical and linguistic thinking”^[12]. The issue of translatability in the West started to be considered as such in the nineteenth century, when the birth of the linguistic science encouraged the posing of theoretical questions of this nature. Until then, scholars had focused their attention mainly on translation methodology and the principles of translation. The development of theories on the nature of language and communication provided a growing medium for an analysis of the possibility or impossibility of elaborating concepts in a language different from that in which they were conceived. “Moreover, Leibniz’s philosophical approach to the nature of language began to touch on the issue of translatability. As early as 1697, in Steiner’s words^[13], “Leibniz put forward the all-important suggestion that language is not the vehicle of thought but its determining medium”. This means language internalizes thought and our particular language impels and allows us to think and feel in a unique way. This indicates Leibniz’s monadist idea; however, he was also “profoundly interested in the possibilities of a universal semantic system, immediately legible to all men” (ibid.). From then on, the discussion between monadist and universalist approach attracts more and more attention of translation scholars.

2.1 The Monadist Approach

In the nineteenth century, linguists such as Humboldt, Schlegel, Schleiermacher and Schadewaldt considered language as the outward manifestation of the spirit of people who speak this language and each language immeasurable in its own individuality. The translation theories of that age mainly signaled two possible, incompatible paths for the translator: one of them leading towards the source language/source culture and the other one, towards the target language/target culture. The links between both were, in a way, ignored, and no compromise solution, no “middle way” contemplated. Humboldt's words, from a letter to Schlegel, dated July 23, 1796, exemplify this approach to translation:

All translation seems to me simply an attempt to solve an impossible task. Every translator is doomed to be done in by one of two stumbling blocks: he will either stay too close to the original, at the cost of taste and the language of his nation, or he will adhere too closely to the characteristics peculiar to his nation, at the cost of the original. The medium between the two is not only difficult, but downright impossible^[8].

These words are regarded as the classic remarks of monadist view for that they reveal that Humboldt “considered a fusion between the SL and the TL in the sense of a functional equivalent impossible, since one of the principles characterizing individual languages is their incommensurability” (ibid). The translator must therefore opt for either a method directed toward the SL or one directed toward the TL. There is no third way. One point should be clear that these words cannot prove that Humboldt completely hold the view of untranslatability. In fact he maintains a contradiction views on the possibilities and limits of translation. He also holds that the structural differences which exist between languages are no obstacle for translation. “The reason that Humboldt proposes to explain this is that each linguistic community has a potential of expression which can generate resources for verbalizing every extra-linguistic area, even those which go beyond its own social and cultural experience. To apparent untranslatability, which results from structural incompatibilities between languages, one can respond with potential translatability, with the possibility of expressing the concepts of human experience in any human language” (ibid).

Besides Humboldt, Leo Weisgerber sought to apply the “monadic” to the actual, detailed language analysis and proposed the theory that “our understanding is under the spell of the language which it utilizes”^[13]. This view was also sustained in the early 1930s by Jost Trier, Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf. Sapir asserted in 1929 that “the ‘real world’ is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. [...] The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached.”^[13]. The different perception and mental organization of reality can be used to explain the existence of certain “gaps” between languages, which can turn translation into a very difficult process. Translators have to be aware of these gaps, in order to produce a satisfactory target text. Acceptance of the hypothesis that each language conditions the way in which its speakers perceive and interpret the world presupposes that there will be terms which are specific to each linguistic community and each linguistic community structures reality in a different way, according to its own linguistic codes.

Andre Martinet proposes in *Elements de Linguistique Generale* (1960) that human experience is incommunicable, because it is unique. The reason he adduces is that each language structures the data acquired through experience in its own individual way and, in doing so, he takes on board the implications of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Along the same line, Friedrich argues that “literary translations continue to be threatened by the boundaries that exist between languages, and thus, the art of translation will always have to cope with the reality of untranslatability from one language to another”^[12].

Some scholars working in the field of translation assume implicitly or explicitly, the existence of a basic division within untranslatability: that is between linguistic untranslatability and cultural untranslatability. This means that a dichotomy can be established between the translation difficulties that have their origin in the gap between source language and target language, and those which arise from the gap between source culture and target culture. Catford pioneered in *British Translation Studies* a rationalisation of this issue. He considered that the validity of the above differentiation between linguistic and cultural untranslatability is questionable. He proposes the following definitions in *A Linguistic Theory of Translation*:

Linguistic untranslatability: “failure to find a TL (target language) equivalent is due entirely to differences between the source language and the target language”. Some examples of this type of untranslatability would be ambiguity, plays on words, and so on. Cultural untranslatability arises “when

a situational feature, functionally relevant for the SL [source language] text, is completely absent from the culture of which the TL [target language] is a part”, for instance, the names of some institutions, and abstract concepts, amongst others. TL [target language] univalent of a given SL [source language] lexical item has a low probability of collocation with TL equivalents of items in the SL text which collocate normally with the given SL item^[3].

Anton Popovic (1976) also outlines a differentiation between linguistic and cultural untranslatability in *A Dictionary for the Analysis of Literary Translation*. He defines the former as “a situation in which the linguistic elements of the original cannot be replaced adequately in structural, linear, functional or semantic terms in consequence of a lack of denotation or connotation”^{[2]p40}. This categorization is very similar to the one proposed by Catford a decade earlier. However, the definition of cultural untranslatability which Popovic proposes is substantially different from that of Catford: “A situation where the relation of expressing the meaning, i.e. the relation between the creative subject and its linguistic expression in the original, does not find an adequate linguistic expression in the translation” (ibid.). Catford’s initial approach when studying the issue of cultural untranslatability shows a fundamentally linguistic nature, whereas Popovic’s, as Basnett indicates, implies a theory of literary communication.

2.2 *The Universalist Approach*

The scholars with this view hold that the underlying structure of language is universal and common to all men. Dissimilarities between human tongues are essentially of the surface.

The belief in linguistic universals, a notion which underlies the views of all those who, from the eighteenth century onwards, adhered to a general translatability approach to literature, would become the basis for Chomsky’s generative transformational grammar. However, Chomsky (1965) warned scholars against the applicability of his theory in the field of translation:

The existence of deep-seated formal universals [...] implies that all languages are cut to the same pattern, but does not imply that there is any point by point correspondence between particular languages. It does not, for example, imply that there must be some reasonable procedure for translating languages.^{[1]p50}

Many, however, ignored Chomsky’s cautionary words. From the 1960’s onwards, supporters of the universal translatability notion used this theory to give their views scientific foundation. Some of the most prominent twentieth-century linguists (Jakobson, Bausch, Hauge, Nida, and so on) accept the view that, in principle, everything can be expressed in any language. Those who support this view argue that the translatability of a text is guaranteed by the existence of universal syntactic and semantic categories and endorsed by the logic of experience. Nida^{[14]p2} once stated clearly: “that which unites mankind is greater than that which divides, and hence there is, even in cases of every disparate languages and cultures, a basis for communication.” And with Nida and Taber^{[5]p4}, they also pronounce: “Anything that can be said in one language can be said in another, unless the form is an essential element of the message”, thus disregarding the possibility of the existence of cultural untranslatability. This assertion is particularly relevant to the translation of literary texts, since the aesthetic function of language is of prime importance in this kind of text and, as a result, formal considerations are essential. Other scholars, on the other hand, claim that the external boundaries of translatability can be determined by the genre of the text. Steiner^{[13]p249} states: “Not everything can be translated. Theology and gnosis posit an upper limit”; and “Nonsense rhymes, poetic concrete, glossolalia are untranslatable because they are lexically non-communicative or deliberately insignificant”^[13].

There are still some political considerations which are borne in mind by some theoreticians. Kade’s words, quoted below, illustrate the main focus of this trend of thought:

The conception of untranslatability has its roots in idealistic philosophy. The denial of translatability presupposes a subjective ranking of the various languages [...]. Since a language cannot be thought of as existing independently of those who speak it, [...] we find ourselves on the surest road to a reactionary racist ideology^[8].

According to this, postulating the untranslatability of a text implies sustaining the view that some languages are not apt for expressing certain aspects of human experience. A hierarchical classification of languages according to the complexity of their resources or their sophistication would entail an implicit hierarchical organization of the speakers of the different languages. As a result, such classification would foster the notion that the superiority or inferiority of people lies with their ethnic or

national characteristics, to which languages are associated.

Based on an encoder/decoder communication model, Richards stated his belief that there is a “proper” way of decoding a text and recoding it in a different language. Thus, in Gentzler’s^[1] remarks, Richards “maintained that the literary scholar could develop rules of solving a communication problem, arrive at a perfect understanding, and correctly reformulate that particular message.”

Some theorists accept a universal translatability hypothesis, with certain reservations. In such cases, alternative forms of translation to a literal decoding-recoding process were called for. Wilss^{[8]p47} states: “To agree with the principles that texts are translatable is not to postulate the unlimited translatability of all texts in general”. He also quotes Weisgerber’s elaboration on this issue: “...the serious translator believes, in effect, that a perfect translation from one language to another is not possible” (ibid: 41), and then presents a more radical principle: “everything can be expressed in every language”, a principle which, he claims, is “widespread in modern linguistics” (ibid: 48). For him, the translatability of a text is guaranteed by the existence of universal categories in syntax, semantic, the (natural) logic of experience. Should a translation nevertheless fail to measure up to the original in terms of quality, the reason will (normally) be not an insufficiency of syntactic and lexical inventories in that particular TL (target language), but rather the limited ability of the translator in regard to text analysis? (ibid: 49)

Another point should be made clear that, in Catford’s words, “indeed, translatability here appears, intuitively, to be a cline rather than a clear-cut dichotomy. SL texts and items are more or less translatable rather than absolutely translatable or untranslatable.” (ibid: 48) Therefore the topic of different degrees of translatability is often talked about. Mounin believes that “linguistics demonstrates that translation is a dialectic process that can be accomplished with relative success”^[2]. In Mounin’s idea, translation is neither totally translatable nor untranslatable. And then he concluded that:

Personal experience in its uniqueness is untranslatable.

In theory the base units of any two languages (e.g. phonemes, monemes, etc) are not always comparable.

Communication is possible when account is taken of the respective situation of speaker and hearer, or author and translator. (ibid.)

What seems undeniable is that some texts are more easily translatable than others. In general, it can be asserted that a text with an aesthetic function will contain elements which will make its reproduction in a different language difficult, whereas a text with a merely informative function will be easier to translate. The use of language with an aesthetic function is more self-conscious and will presuppose a greater degree of elaboration than language with a merely communicative function. As a result, intentionality in the source text plays a very important role, which conditions the translator to attempt the reproduction in the target text of the elements which the original author presented intentionally. Or from another respect, some scholar believes that features on the cognitive and expressive dimension of a text are translatable, on the cultural dimension are partially translatable and on the artistic dimension are untranslatable.

2.3 The Deconstructionist Approach

Benjam is known as the pioneer of deconstructionism, which is a new current of thought. In 1923, Benjamin^[12] published an essay entitled “The Task of the Translator”, outlining his theory on the translatability of texts. For Benjamin, “the law governing the translation: its translatability” which has to be found in the original. In Benjamin’s view, the translatability of a text is independent of whether or not such text can be translated. This is the reason why he asserts: “Translatability is an essential quality of certain works, which is not to say that it is essential that they be translated; it means rather that a specific significance inherent in the original manifests itself in its translatability.” (ibid.)

From the late 1970's onwards, Andrew Benjamin, Michel Foucault, Paul de Man and Jacques Derrida called for a new approach to translation. It is claimed that the translation of a text affects the way in which that text is perceived and, therefore, there is a “re-writing” of the original through translation. Target texts cease to be considered as subsidiaries of the original, which, in turn, becomes dependent on translation. The act of translating constitutes a validation of the text that is being translated. Of various scholars, Jacques Derrida can be taken as a representative, who rejects the notion of the existence of kernels or deep structures, to follow Chomsky’s terminology, which underlies language. Thus, language itself acquires a new identity of its own, and not merely as a form of representing meaning. For Derrida, “the origin of philosophy is translation or the thesis of

translatability” (ibid.). Derrida is aware of the losses which are bound to occur when presenting the source text in the target language. For this reason, “With each naming gesture, Derrida suggests a footnote, a note in the margin, or a preface also is in order to retrieve those subtle differing supplementary meanings and tangential notes lost in the process of transcription”^{[1]p146}. His philosophy presents a stimulating approach to translation, but Derrida’s line of thought leads to the questioning of the very concept from which his theory starts: what is translation? It can be argued that translatability does not equal the possibility of explaining a text. Besides, translations are not usually academic exercises. They are produced for a readership that has certain expectations about what the target text should look like. In the case of commercial translation especially, notes and prefaces tend not to be welcomed by the readers, if nothing else, because they are distracting.

None of the theories proposed until now appears to be fully satisfactory. Nida^[15] has expressed repeatedly the need for a better differentiation in the debate on translatability versus untranslatability, since he claims that no valid conclusion can be reached starting from a simplistic, ideologically motivated system. And thus, some scholars, such as Albrecht Neubert, Shuttleworth & Cowie, Nida and Snell-Hornby, have attempted to study translation from prototype theory. Neubert (1985) made a prototypical approach to classification of original texts while Shuttleworth & Cowie made use of “prototext” in metafunctional communication theory to stand for the start point of a text’s recreation. Nida prototype. Snell-Hornby^[16] mentioned “typicality” and “prototype” when discussing about lexical meaning and structure, but his attention is mainly paid to lexical meaning without extending the interpretation of prototype.

Snell-Hornby^[16], proposed three translation strategies on the basis of PT:

From the SL variant the translator must recognize the SL original (or prototype).

He/she must know (or find out) the corresponding TL prototype.

He/she must adapt the TL prototype to recreate the SL variant.

To sum up, the consensus now seems to be that absolute untranslatability, whether linguistic or cultural, does not exist. At the same time, it is assumed that the perfect translation, one which does not entail any losses from the original is unattainable, especially when dealing with literary translation. A practical approach to translation must accept that, since not everything that appears in the source text can be reproduced in the target text, an evaluation of potential losses has to be carried out.

3. Conclusion

In all, it is accepted by all that there exist varied difficulties in the practice of translation, and that the difficulties come from the difference of the two languages concerned as well as the subjective factors such as a translator’s ability to understand the original and to express himself. The study of translatability has drawn special attention for a long time in the West. Translatability has been approached in the universalist way and the monadist way in traditional structural view. Also, some scholars stand between the two and propose that the translatability of a text is varied on different dimensions. Apart from this traditional view, deconstructive theorists resist such systems of categorization and undertake a radical redrawing of translatability and lead people to rethink this issue, but its limitless interpreting and denying everything also make people bewildered and lost.

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