

Original Paper

A Review of Toper's Translation Theory Research

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Abstract

Soviet translation theory has long held a prominent position in global translation studies, characterized by the ongoing debate between its two major schools: the literary school and the linguistic school. This paper systematically examines the literary translation perspectives, literary translation criticism, and comparative literature-based translation theories of Pavel Maksimovich Toper, a representative scholar of the Soviet literary school and a comparative literature researcher. By enriching domestic research on Soviet literary translation theories, this study aims to broaden academic horizons, integrate international theoretical achievements, and contribute to translation studies in China.

Keywords

Soviet translation theory, literary school, comparative literature, Toper's translation thought

Translation, as one of the oldest activities in cultural exchange, inevitably involves theoretical exploration alongside practice. After World War II, translation studies flourished globally, with distinct theoretical frameworks emerging in various countries. Among these, Soviet translation theory has been particularly influential. Since the 1950s, two dominant schools—the literary school and the linguistic school—shaped Soviet translation studies. Pavel Maksimovich Toper, a leading figure in the Soviet literary school, developed unique translation theories rooted in comparative literature. This paper focuses on Toper's contributions, addressing gaps in domestic research on his theoretical framework.

1. Biography of Toper

Pavel Maksimovich Toper (Павел Максимович Топер) was born in Moscow and enrolled in the Philology Department of Moscow State University in 1945, later earning a doctorate in philology. Renowned as a Russian comparative literature scholar and literary translation theorist, he served as a senior researcher at the Gorky Institute of World Literature of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Toper authored significant works on comparative literature and literary translation theory, establishing himself as a pivotal figure in the Soviet literary school.

Building on the foundations of the literary school, Toper innovatively posited that “literary translation is a form of literary creation” (Li & Zhou, 2016). He emphasized the critical role of literary translation in comparative literature, arguing that “the basis of translation studies lies in the two national languages involved in any specific translation act” (Toper, 2000). Toper viewed literary translation as a dynamic cultural force and a realm of dialectics, asserting that “authentic translation is inherently paradoxical: it must transform a foreign-language work into a fact of domestic literature while preserving its origin as a creation of another nation” (Hu, 2002). His theories reflect 21st-century trends in literary translation research, offering new perspectives by framing translation as an independent literary phenomenon that reveals profound intercultural influences. Toper’s comparative approach transcended traditional text-centric analyses, enabling cross-cultural literary comparisons and uncovering patterns in literary translation.

2. Historical Context of Toper’s Translation Theory

The Soviet translation academia has long debated issues of literary translation, crystallizing into the rivalry between the “linguistic school” and the “literary school.” The literary school, grounded in artistic principles, prioritized aesthetic equivalence over linguistic fidelity, advocating that only translations reproducing the artistic truth of the original could meet aesthetic standards (Wang, 2021).

By the mid-20th century, Soviet translation theory matured, marked by the literary school’s prominence. Gachechiladze’s *Literary Translation and Literary Communication* (1970) symbolized the school’s maturation. The 20th century, termed the “century of translation,” saw Soviet translation studies reach its zenith, fueled by interdisciplinary debates. Toper’s comparative literature-oriented research emerged within this context, inheriting and expanding the literary school’s tenets.

3. Core Tenets of Toper’s Translation Theory

3.1 Literary Translation as Artistic Creation

Toper challenged the traditional dichotomy between “literary translation” and “artistic translation.” In Soviet terminology, “artistic translation” (художественный перевод) encompassed the translation of literary works, distinct from technical or political translations. Toper asserted that artistic translation transcends linguistic communication, engaging the aesthetic function of language as the “primary element” of literature. For Toper, translation is neither replication nor adaptation but a creative act producing a “second original” with inherent aesthetic value. This process involves constrained creativity: translators must balance fidelity to the source text with subjective interpretation.

Toper categorized translation contradictions into three pairs: “translatability vs. untranslatability,” “form vs. content,” and “author vs. translator.” He advocated translatability, dismissing untranslatability as a misconception rooted in perceived difficulties. Regarding form and content, Toper prioritized content, advocating Sobolev’s principle of “reproducing imagery with imagery” to preserve the original’s holistic

artistic system. On the author-translator dynamic, he argued that the translator's agency determines the balance between the two, requiring the integration of the original's content and form into a unified whole.

3.2 Translation Literature as an Independent Phenomenon

Toper distinguished "translation literature" (translated works as a literary genre) from "literary translation" (the act of translating). He emphasized that translation literature is neither equivalent to foreign literature nor merely a derivative of it. Instead, it constitutes a unique literary form shaped by the translator's creative agency and cultural context. Toper also explored the construction of translation literature canons, noting that classics may originate from either canonical or non-canonical source texts, contingent on the translator's interpretive choices and socio-cultural factors.

3.3 Literary Translation Criticism

Toper viewed translation criticism as a distinct socio-cultural practice requiring holistic evaluation. He differentiated "translator's interpretation" (creative synthesis) from "critic's interpretation" (analytical logic). Criticizing the global "aphasia" in translation criticism—a stagnation in quality and theoretical advancement—he called for establishing universally recognized evaluation standards. Toper stressed that critics must account for their cultural biases and the translator's creative objectives when assessing translations.

4. Conclusion

The Soviet literary and linguistic schools continue to inform each other, enriching translation theory. As a synthesis of the literary school, Toper's work introduced comparative literature perspectives, framing translation as a dialectical process and affirming the translator's creative subjectivity. His seminal monograph, **Translation in the System of Comparative Literature** (2000), remains a cornerstone for studying Soviet literary translation theory, offering invaluable insights for contemporary translation research.

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