

Original Paper

The Role of Literary Theory in Literary Translation

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Abstract

In literary translation, the way quality of translation is judged shows some special features. The translator's understanding of the source language text and his creative reconstruction of the target language text place the whole process of translation under the influence of literary theories. With a case analysis of three different translation versions of John Keats' Ode on a Grecian Urn, this paper argues that based on the given features of literary translation, the relationships between the translator and the text, and the creative role of the translator in the process of translation, literary theory plays an essential role in literary translation.

Keywords

literary theory, literary translation, translator, process of translation, Ode on a Grecian Urn

1. Introduction

Translation as an activity came into being long ago when people found it necessary to communicate among different tongues and cultures. While there can never be such a thing as “perfect translation”, for perfect equivalence does not exist even between individual words in the same language, the quality of translation can be evaluated. Following this, the issue that looms is “What makes good translation?” It is my aim in this paper to discuss one of the many factors that influence the quality of translation—the role of literary theory.

I intend to approach the present issue by first of all discussing the terminology and establishing a relationship between translation and literary theory. Then I would confine my discussion and focus mainly on literary translation, based on the nature and division of translation. To explicate my point, I would then go into details to discuss the role of literary theory in literary translation by analyzing the whole process of translation. In the last part of the essay, the original and several translated versions of an English poem will be studied to demonstrate my point.

2. Translation and Literary Theory

Translation is generally understood as a process that involves “the rendering of a Source Language (SL) text into the Target Language (TL) so as to ensure that (1) the surface meaning of the two will be approximately similar and (2) the structures of the SL will be preserved as closely as possible but not so closely that the TL structures will be seriously distorted” (Bassnett, 1991, p. 2). Upon accepting such a definition, I would thus agree that translation is in essence a social activity that deals with meaning and structure of certain texts in certain languages. In that sense, I would suggest, translation is inherently theory-based, although it is something very practical in itself.

Theory and life, as Eagleton points out, should not be considered positioned at polarities. All parts of social life, he argues, are “in some sense theoretical” (Eagleton, 1990, p. 4). Eagleton’s point is justifiable because every single aspect of everyday life, simple and natural as it may appear, involves certain types of theoretical propositions about the world. Theory, which Lentricchia and McLaughlin (1995, p. 1) propose as “a shared commitment to understanding how language and other systems of signs provide frameworks which determine how we read, and more generally, how we make sense of experience, construct our own identity, produce meaning in the world”, constitutes the entire system of human thoughts and behavior. Thus, theory is inescapable, and translation in turn is underpinned by theory.

Translation incorporates a broad array of genres. A significant disparity lies, just to give one example, between the translations of the working directions for an electron microscope and the early philosophical works in Greek. However, apart from the difference in the nature of what gets translated, all translations deal with texts in different languages.

Structuralist linguists propose that language is a system of signs with signifiers and signified being the binary components. Viewed in this sense, all translators working on texts engage in receiving and sending signs. The meaning of texts being translated is therefore a semiotic fact as every word of the texts is reduced to signs.

Translation, as a kind of communication, is the process of decoding a text in SL, drawing the signs from the original text, transmitting the signs and re-encoding them in TL. Wills (1982, p. 3) refers to this as a three-phase model for the translation process. In terms of the process of decoding and re-encoding, the genre of the text being translated is no longer significant.

No matter what kind of text the translator is rendering, be it scientific-technical or literary-artistic, he/she is working on language. Language, in the view of Saussurian theorists, underlies the way we understand the world and even what we are able to perceive. And the meanings of texts can be established only by analyzing the function of each element within a self-contained cultural code. Therefore all texts are in a sense literary and cultural. As Barthes (in Wolfrey, 1999, p. 5) points out, “Language is the *being* of literature”.

Let me now come back to theory. By stating that all translation needs theory since all translation is working with language, I do not intend to blur the boundary of theory from a linguistic perspective and theory within the scope of literary studies. The fact is, in 20th century literary studies and translation studies, much of the theoretical work drew significantly upon Saussurian theories of language. In this regard, there is great overlap between translation and literary studies, which has consequently resulted in an important role of literary theory in translation.

Since all texts, being decoded and re-encoded as signs in translation, can be considered a kind of literature structurally, and since literary theory is “an umbrella term which gathers together conveniently and for the purpose of identification or definition various texts concerned with the study of literature and culture” (Wolfrey, 2001, p. 2), there is a link between translation and literary theory, with the latter playing a certain role in the former. A translator, therefore, will need literary theory to fulfill his task in a satisfactory way.

3. Translation and Literary Translation

Having shown the logical relationship between translation and literary theory and before approaching this issue at greater length, I would now like to confine the topic a little bit. Even though all kinds of translation need literary theory, the level of their requirement seems also to vary significantly. A translator of a manual of a newly developed piece of machinery, for example, will not find literary theory as imperative for him/her as for a translator of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. The reason is that for him/her, the influence of literary theory on his/her translating is indirect, or more on a sub-conscious level, as the rendering of this particular type of texts cannot be modified in accordance with the literary and cultural setting of the target language. Therefore, to further explicate the role of literary theory in translation, it is worthwhile to narrow down the vast topic and focus mainly on the certain type of translation that is the most closely linked with literary theory.

To narrow our scope down, we then have to categorize translation based on the nature of different genres. The categorization of literary and non-literary translation seems to be too general and focus more on the purpose of translation rather than its nature. Thus, here I would like to introduce Samuelsson-Brown’s classification (1998, p. 3). Under this classification, translation is divided into four categories: literary translation, scientific and technical translation, commercial/business translation and interpretation. The type I would deal with in the rest of my essay is the first category.

The term “literary theory” often leads people into thinking about rendering the great works of literature from one language into another. However literary translation covers a wider scope than that. The Copyright Act refers to literary works without placing limitations on either style or quality. In this perspective, literary works incorporate all kinds of books, plays, poems, short stories and writings, including such items as a collection of jokes, the script of a documentary, a travel guide and an opera libretto (Davies, 1957, p. 32).

4. Literary Translation and Literary Theory

Literary translation is a kind of rewriting. On discussing the role of literary theory in literary studies and studies of literary translation, Lefevere (1985, p. 219) states:

Rather, literary theory would try to explain how both the writing and rewriting of literature are subject to certain constraints, and how the interaction of writing and rewriting is ultimately responsible, not just for the canonization of specific authors or specific works and the rejection of others, but also for the evolution of a given literature...

This is true, but how do we understand “constraints?” In the first place, the language of literature is normally different from non-literary language. Widdowson summarizes the differences in terms of discourse and text. He argues that discursively, the sender/addressor or receiver/addressee may not be the same person in literature as it is the case in non-literary discourse. Textually, literature often includes instances of language usage that deviates from normal grammatical rules. Literary works can therefore be characterized as a “separate and self-contained” whole (Widdowson, 1975).

The translation of literary texts consequently requires the translator to approach the text not only on the textual level, but more on a contextual level. Instead of simply searching for meanings denoted by the text, a literary translator has to move further to issues of how the original text was structured and how the original author’s idea was encoded. In fact, the whole process of literary translation is itself a literary activity, an activity of creative production and reproduction of a unified semantic block in another language. In this sense, literary translation is both “translation” and “recreation” and more than those, a transcreation.

Sharing the same terminology with other divisions of translation, literary translation follows some basics rules of all types of translation. In literary translation, for example, grammatical and syntactic accuracy are fundamentally important as grammatical incorrectness inherently undermines the value and readability of the target language text. However, in no sense is literary translation the same as classroom translation activity in foreign language learning to demonstrate foreign language competence. Literary translation has its distinctive features, which justifies its special requirements.

As we touch upon the issue of judging the merits of translation, more problems loom large. Let us presume the source language text is accurate and competent, then the translator would face different options as to how to render the text into the target language. Some theorists like Nabokov still believe in a literal, word-for-word translation, as he states in his essay:

The person who desires to turn a literary masterpiece into another language has only one duty to perform, and this is to reproduce with absolute exactitude the whole text, and nothing but the text. The term ‘literal translation’ is tautological since anything but that is not truly a translation but an imitation, an adaptation, or a parody (Nabokov in Schulte & Biguenet, 1992, p. 31).

I would argue, however, that a truly “literal” translation with at most a slight linguistic adjustment when necessary for literary texts is not possible in practice. The major difference between literary translation and other forms of translation is that the former is more symbolical and allegorical. Accordingly, more effort should be devoted to connotation in translating the text. In other words, good translation of literary writings should go beyond “accuracy” and reach the contextual level. But again this may arouse great controversies. To what extent is a translator entitled to read into the original writer and draw out the connotations? How can he/she ensure that adequate interpretation has been made to provide the reader with effective access to the original writer’s intention whereas at the same time he/she remains not too “visible?” These complicated issues have been approached by different translation theorists, which I do not intend to go into details in the present essay. While I believe that the fact literary translation is artistic does not allow infinite license in translation, I would argue that it is always difficult for a translator to maintain this delicate balance since translators tend to read “something” into the original text and translation is never free from subjectivity. My point is, then, for a literary translator, it is important not to stay on the linguistic level of the original text and, to go beyond the restraints of the outer textual form; he/she needs literary theory. The theory a translator adopts colors his/her interpretation, regardless of the way and level of interpretation.

In that sense, to cope with literary translation, a translator then, in Dryden’s view, “ought to process himself entirely and perfectly comprehend the genius and sense of his author, the nature of the subject, and the terms of the art of subject treated of” (Dryden in Schulte & Biguenet, 1992, p. 134).

A similar opinion can be found in Schleiermacher, as he argues:

The translator must therefore take as his aim to give his reader the same image and the same delight which the reading of the work in the original language would afford any reader educated in such a way that we call him, in the better sense of the word, the lover and expert (“Leibhaber und Kenner/amateur et connaisseur”), the type of reader who is familiar with the language while it yet always remains foreign to him (Schleiermacher in Lefevere, 1977, p. 76).

The key words here are “same image” and “same delight”. The implication is that after decoding the original text and encoding a new text in the target language, after all the semiotic transferences, what should get translated is not “it”, but the way it has been expressed.

When we analyze Dryden’s view and Schleiermacher’s view together, we may notice that the two theorists approach the issue from two different ways. Dryden emphasizes the translator’s role while Schleiermacher stresses the role of the reader in translation. A text cannot speak for itself, and it needs a reader as well as a writer, or rewriter. In translation, readers are just as important as the translator himself/herself. As reading is not the passive assimilation of textual information, comprehension of every text would require the reader to go beyond which is explicitly expressed or “re-expressed” so as to make sense of it. In addition, readers tend to read their previous knowledge, experience, attitude and

expectations into the translated text, as how they would read the original text. The translator therefore has to consider to what extent and in what way the text can be received by the reader in the target language. Let me suggest that when a literary translator communicates between two different languages, he/she should have a fairly particularized communicant in mind. How, then, is his/her communicant in the target language similar or different from the communicant of the original author in the source language? The literary translator will need a theoretical framework to bridge the gap between the original author in the source language and the readers in the target language.

5. Translating a Poem of Paradoxes—A Case Study

Having approached the present topic from a theoretical perspective, next I would like to propose a case study to illustrate my point. Here I would discuss one of the canons in English poetry—Keats’ *Ode on a Grecian Urn* together with several Chinese translations of the poem. My purpose is to demonstrate what effect certain textual analysis based on literary theory can have on the rendering of a text.

Ode on a Grecian Urn is one of the five great odes by John Keats as well as one among his most talked about poems. This poem is based on a series of paradoxes and opposites: the discrepancy between the urn with its frozen images and the dynamic life portrayed on the urn, the human and changeable versus the immortal and permanent, participation versus observation and life versus art.

In *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, Keats seems to suggest that the process of living and dying, to know life in all its joy and sorrow, is more eternal than actual immortality in a frozen emotion. Such an attitude can be best comprehended through analyzing the life experiences of the poet.

From what we can find about Keats’ life, we get the idea that throughout his life, Keats experienced the paradox of life and living. The eldest son of young parents, displaced by his first two brothers at the ages of sixteen months and four, Keats “used to say”, according to his friend Joseph Severn, “that his great misfortune had been that from his infancy he had no mother” (Gittings, 1968, p. 25). When Keats was seven, his one-and-a-half-year-old third brother died, followed by his father’s accidental death a year later, his mother’s rash marriage and the death of his grandfather, who was the supporter of the children. Four years later, distressed and sick, his mother rejoined the children but abandoned Keats forever the next year. In the years that follow, the death of Keats’ grandmother and brother George kept the experience of loss continually before him. As he wrote in a letter in 1819, “I have never known any unalloy’d Happiness for many days together, the death or sickness of someone has always spoiled my hours” (Rollins, 1958, p. 123).

The above analysis using a particular approach of literary theory proves to be very helpful when a translator attempts to render *Ode on a Grecian Urn* into another language. What I look at in this essay are three different Chinese versions of translation, all of which are by eminent Chinese translators and are widely received by Chinese reader. The three translators are Dayu Sun (1999), Zhilin Bian (1996) and Liangzheng Zha (in Zou, 1983). It is particularly interesting to notice that all of the three people are

not only important translators of English poetry, but important poets in Chinese modern literature as well.

I would like to discuss three stanzas, Stanzas one, two and five, and in particular, two metaphors (bride and foster-child), one irony (bold lover cannot kiss) and one phrase (tease out). While I believe there are always loss and gains in translation, particular literary translation and evaluation of it is always subjective, my point here is to demonstrate what effect understanding the theoretical aims of a literary text may have on translation.

In the first stanza, Keats starts slowly by asking questions arising from thought and raising abstract concept such as time and act. The poet's comparison of the urn to "a still unravish'd bride of quietness" functions at a number of levels. It prepares for Stanza two and for the violence of lines 8-10 of this stanza. Sun's translation of this metaphor is "含苞未放的静谧的新娘" (silent and calm bride still in the bud); Bian translates it into "'平静的'还未曾失身的新娘" (bride of tranquility still retaining her virginity), whereas in Zha's version, this is rendered into "委身'寂静'的,完美的处子" (perfect virgin that has devoted herself to silence). Note how the three translators, when working on the same metaphor, deal with the strong physical word "unravish'd" in such different ways as to translate it into "in the bud", "retaining her virginity" and "perfect" and what different effects these translations have respectively on the readers.

In the second line, Keats refers to the urn as "foster-child of silence and slow time". The urn exists in the real world, which is mutable or subject to time and change, yet the urn and the life it presents are unchanging. The poet again discards a sensual relationship—the urn is not the issue of "silence and slow time", but their "foster-child". Therefore, the metaphor suggests the urn's remoteness from what Keats considers impure and distressing in the human world. Sun's equivalence "沉寂和缓慢的时光的螟蛉小女" (little bollworm daughter of silence and slow time), I would argue, does not totally convey the implication of the metaphor, as the phrase "little bollworm daughter" may not be interpreted by a reader as similar to "foster-child". Bian and Zha's treat it differently as "'沉默'和'悠久'抱养的女孩" (daughter adopted by silence and long ages) and "受过了'沉默'和'悠久'的抚育" (fostered by silence and long ages).

In Stanza two, Keats portrays the ideal life on the urn as one without disappointment and suffering. The lover cannot get closer to his maiden since they are both the frozen figures in a motionless pattern, but he can rest assured that the passion and beauty will remain unchanged. But isn't it an irony in the fact that the superior passion depicted on the urn is unfulfillable, that satisfaction is impossible? This is very similar to the question raised by Freudian psychoanalysts "What price am I paying to be that?" Sun translates line 7 and 8 into "放纵的情郎,你终究不能吻到她,虽然快接触那樱唇—可是莫伤怀" (Undisciplined beau, you cannot kiss her eventually, though you are about to touch her lips—but do not feel disheartened); Bian's translation is "勇敢的钟情汉,你永远亲不了嘴,虽然离目标不远了—也不用悲哀" (Brave man deep in love, you can never kiss, though you are not far from the goal—but

there's no need to grieve). In my estimation, the strength of the repetition of "forever" in the original is in some way lost in both versions, which does not retard the flow and suggest the unchanging stance of the lover as the original does. Note that Zha's renders it into "卤莽的恋人，你永远、永远吻不上，虽然能够接近了—但不必心酸" (Reckless lover, you can never, never kiss, though you are close enough – but there's no need to grieve), which in that sense, is closer to the effect of the original. As for the next part of the irony, all the three translations carry the eternity of beauty and advantage of frozen time. Sun translates it into "她不会消亡，虽然你吻不到那春华，因你将永远热恋着，她永远如仙姝" (She will not disappear, though you cannot kiss her spring-like beauty. Because you will forever be in love, and she will ever be a fair maiden). Bian renders it into "她消失不了，虽然你的不到艳福，你永远会爱，她也永远会娇美" (She cannot disappear, though you will not have your bliss. You will forever love, and she will forever remain beautiful). Zha's version is "他不会老，虽然你不能如愿以偿，你将永远爱下去 她也永远秀丽"(She will not age, though you won't have what you wish. You will forever love, and she forever pretty).

In the last stanza, the poet returns from the figures on the urn and observes the urn as a whole and remembers his vision. Though he is an observer, he did participate and experience the life experienced on the urn and comments, perhaps ambiguously, that the urn "doth tease us out of thought". The use of "tease out" reminds us of the Lacanian concept of "mirror stage", in which the child begins to be aware of the mother as an object distinct from itself and thus realizes the sense of oneness with the mother is illusory. The urn, in that sense, draws us from the real world into an ideal world, where, if there was neither imperfection nor change, there was also no real life or fulfilment. Keats seems to suggest that the urn is an escape, however temporary, from the pains and problems of real life.

However, the phrase "tease out" is a puzzle since in Chinese there is no single phrase that conveys the rich implication totally. Sun's equivalent "逗得我们神飞" (teases us and provokes the flying of our thoughts) is significantly different from Zha's translation "使人超越思想" (gets people to transcend their thoughts). Bian renders the phrase into "引我们越出了尘虑" (draws us out of earthly thoughts), which, I would suggest, retains the sense of "draw with force".

Having analyzed a few examples in translating *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, it can be argued that when rendering a literary text, the translator will bear certain literary theories in mind, which in turn serves as a guide in his/her choice of words in the target language. The conscious or unconscious employment of literary theory improves the quality of translation.

6. Conclusion

Let me summarize. Translation is a social activity, which deals with communication between different languages. The nature of translation determines that it is inherently theory-based and cannot escape the intervention of literary theory. In particular, literary translation, as a genre of translation, needs literary theory. The translator's role as both a reader and rewriter opens up wide scope for the participation of

literary theory in the whole process of translation. The necessity of literary theory in literary translation thus lies in the very fact that the translator needs it to help him/her interpret the text and then reconstruct it on a textual level. Theoretically and practically it can be argued that literary theory plays an essential role in bringing forth good quality translation.

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