

Original Paper

A Study on Benjamin's Theory of Translation

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Abstract

Walter Benjamin is one of the most creative and important critics of the early 20th century, and his work "The Task of Translation" stands as one of the most influential translation theories. It has greatly influenced the traditional notions of faithfulness and the "original language first" principle, laying the theoretical foundation for deconstructionist translation theory.

Keywords

Walter Benjamin, translation theory, the task of translation

Walter Benjamin is a renowned German ideologist, philosopher, and literary theory critic in the first half of the 20th century. His thought is deeply rooted in the theological tradition of Judaism and influenced by Marxism, surrealism, and other intellectual currents, making his style unique. His translation theory is abstracted from his direct experience in the practice of translating poetry and novels, providing not only theoretical enlightenment but also guiding principles for the practice of translating literary works (Wang, 2009). "The Task of the Translator", originally written by Benjamin in 1923 as a preface to his translation of Charles Baudelaire's "Tableaux Parisiens," contains the seeds of deconstructionist translation theory and is one of the most important articles in the field. Paul de Man believed that it has circulated widely and its influence has transcended academia. If you do not speak about it, you will only be an unknown in the field (De, 1986). It discusses the philosophical nature of translation and puts forward many ideas that challenge traditional views of translation, a topic that still receives the attention of modern critics.

1. An overview of Benjamin's Primary Translation Theories

1.1 Disregarding the Audience's Role

The traditional concept of translation asserts that a translation should remain faithful to the original work, accurately conveying its meaning and information. The aim is to enable readers to comprehend

the content of the original text and the author's intentions. However, at the outset of this passage, Benjamin states, "In the appreciation of a work of art or an art form, consideration of the receiver never proves fruitful. ... but in none of its works is it concerned with his response. No poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the listener (Benjamin, 2000)." He argues that taking the reader into account transforms the act of translation into a mere transmission of information, which does not capture the essence of a literary work. Such a translation can only convey the non-essential content.

However, in real-world practice, translators are not exclusively bound by literary works. For informational or explanatory texts like news articles or introductions, the translator's primary focus should remain on faithfully and accurately conveying the original text's information. This ensures that the reader fully comprehends the translated text, minimizing any potential omissions.

1.2 Translatability and Untranslatability

Translatability and untranslatability have been subjects of long-standing debate in the history of translation. According to Benjamin, translation is a mode. To understand it as a mode, one must return to the original work, as it contains the law governing translation: its translatability. The question of whether a work is translatable carries a dual meaning. It can be seen as: Will an adequate translator ever emerge among its readers? Or, more importantly: Does the nature of the work lend itself to translation and, in consideration of the significance of this mode, demand it? In principle, the first question can only be resolved contingently; the second, however, is apodictic.

Translatability is an essential quality of certain works, which is not to say that it is essential that they can be translated; it means rather that a specific significance inherent in the original manifests itself in its translatability (Benjamin, 2000). It can be asserted that the task of translation is clear, obligatory, and must be undertaken, as God, during the time of "creation", assigned this task under a unique circumstance that must be fulfilled—a debt to be repaid. This exceptional situation is illustrated in the well-known story of the Tower of Babel (Chen, 2003). The story is found in the Old Testament of the Bible, in the Book of Genesis, chapter 11. It tells that at that time, all the people on Earth spoke the same language. They collaborated to build a tall tower that reached into the sky, known as the Tower of Babel, in an attempt to get closer to God. God, seeing this, considered their endeavor as an act of pride and arrogance. To hinder their progress, He caused the people to start speaking different languages, leading to confusion and an inability to understand each other. This ultimately resulted in people dispersing to different regions, forming diverse cultures and languages. This story symbolizes the origin of human differentiation and diversity, as well as the linguistic differences among different nations. From the story it can be seen that firstly, the dispersion of tribes and languages on earth is destined to cause confusion of languages, and therefore the need for mutual translations, without which people will not be able to understand and communicate with each other. However, due to the multiplicity of languages, it's impossible to have a pure and perfect translation. This creates an obstacle to human understanding and communication (Chen, 2003). Perhaps God's purpose in "confusing" the

language is to prevent people from achieving complete mutual understanding, and incomplete understanding inevitably leads to incomplete translation. Therefore, translation is a task that can never be fully completed, just as text is an endless process of meaning.

1.3 The Translation is the “Afterlife” of the Original

It is plausible that no translation, however good it may be, can have any significance as regards the original. Yet, by virtue of its translatability the original is closely connected with the translation; in fact, this connection is all the closer since it is no longer of importance to the original. Just as the manifestations of life are intimately connected with the phenomenon of life without being of importance to it, a translation issues from the original—not so much from its life as from its afterlife (Benjamin, 2000). Since a translation follows the original, and given that the significant works of world literature often do not find their ideal translators at the time of their creation, the act of translation marks a stage in their continued existence. Translation is not a mere reproduction or copy of the original work’s content and meaning. The original and its translation are not in a “master and servant” relationship, as traditionally described in translation theory; instead, they are equals that complement each other. Translations that are more than transmissions of subject matter come into being when in the course of its survival a work has reached the age of its fame. Contrary, therefore, to the claims of bad translators, such translations do not so much serve the work as owe their existence to it. The life of the originals attains in them to its ever-renewed latest and most abundant flowering (Benjamin, 2000).

1.4 The Introduction of Pure Language

The function of translation is not merely to convey the message or content of the original text but rather to explore the possibilities of language, with the ultimate goal of achieving harmony between the two languages, in pursuit of “pure language”, which is Benjamin’s most central concept. According to him, all suprahistorical kinship of languages rests in the intention underlying each language as a whole—an intention, however, which no single language can attain by itself but which is realized only by the totality of their intentions supplementing each other: pure language. While all individual elements of foreign languages—words, sentences, structure—are mutually exclusive, these languages supplement one another in their intentions. Without distinguishing the intended object from the mode of intention, no firm grasp of this basic law of a philosophy of language can be achieved (Benjamin, 2000). Only by understanding the timelessness of the work and the continual renewal of language can the translator approach “pure language” with greater fidelity and harmonize the original text with the translated text, coming infinitely close to faithfulness. This concept may seem contradictory, but it is, in fact, a historical philosophical perspective that profoundly grasps the essential characteristics of translation and aligns closely with the real-world practice of translation.

According to Benjamin’s viewpoint, the ultimate essence of translation is the pursuit of complementarity and integration between languages, leading to the quest for “pure language”. Evidently, this task cannot be completed in a single effort but requires the collaborative endeavors of different translators across various time periods. This precisely illustrates the prevalence of multiple

retranslations of literary works over different eras. Only through unceasingly delving into the original text's connotations and continuously translating literary masterpieces can translators draw infinitely close to the original work (Hu, 2018). In practice, many literary translations represent retranslations of these masterpieces. They build upon previous translations, incorporating the strengths of these older versions while also adding the translator's own interpretations and expressions to offer readers a fresh experience. In this sense, most retranslations of literary works exemplify Benjamin's philosophical viewpoint and the goal of pursuing "pure language".

1.5 Fidelity and Freedom

The traditional concepts in any discussion of translations are fidelity and license—the freedom of faithful reproduction and, in its service, fidelity to the word. These ideas seem to be no longer serviceable to a theory that looks for other things in a translation than reproduction of meaning (Benjamin, 2000). What can fidelity truly achieve in conveying meaning? Fidelity in the translation of individual words can seldom fully capture the meaning they hold in the original text. Poetic sense extends beyond mere meaning, drawing from the connotations embedded in the chosen words.

Of necessity, therefore, the demand for literalness, whose justification is obvious, whose legitimate ground is quite obscure, must be understood in a more meaningful context. Fragments of a vessel which are to be glued together must match one another in the smallest details, although they need not be like one another. In the same way a translation, instead of resembling the meaning of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's mode of signification, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel (Benjamin, 2000). For this reason, translation should refrain from focusing solely on communication or conveying sense. The original text is significant to the translator only inasmuch as it has already spared them the effort of assembling and expressing what needs to be conveyed.

Fidelity and freedom in translation have traditionally been regarded as conflicting tendencies. This deeper interpretation of the one apparently does not serve to reconcile the two; in fact, it seems to deny the other all justification. For what is meant by freedom but that the rendering of the sense is no longer to be regarded as all-important? Only if the sense of a linguistic creation may be equated with the information it conveys does some ultimate, decisive element remain beyond all communication (Benjamin, 2000). In the pursuit of "pure language", a free translation tests itself based on its own language. The translator's task is to unleash the pure language of their own language, which is under the influence of another, and to free the language that is confined within a work through their re-creation of that work.

2. The Task of the Translator

The understanding of Benjamin's perspective on translation is intrinsically tied to his broader theoretical system. If one attempts to interpret his views on translation outside this context, without considering his mystical inclinations in the philosophy of language, it may lead to various

misinterpretations and misunderstandings (Cao, 2012). Nevertheless, “The Task”, rooted in the concept of “pure language”, remains instructive for both the practical application and theoretical exploration of translation. It encapsulates Benjamin’s unique poetics of translation and encourages us to reconsider the essence of translation and the responsibilities of translators.

The task of the translator consists in finding that intended effect upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original (Benjamin, 2000). In this context, “the echo of the original” signifies faithfulness not to the content of the original text, but to its form, style, and inner meaning or spirit. According to Benjamin, the translator’s engagement is not with the content of the original text, but rather with the relationship between the two languages. Their task goes beyond expressing opinions, conveying content, or simply communicating meaning; it aims to illustrate an affinity between languages and promote the realization of the collection of all complementary meanings across various languages—what Benjamin refers to as “pure language” (He, 2014). Consequently, the translator leverages the differences between languages to unearth the ideas concealed in the original work, which might not be expressible in the original language. Only by immersing themselves in the continuous renewal of language can the translator elevate the original work to a higher and purer non-linguistic realm.

In addition, the translator’s task is to faithfully convey the essence of the original, presenting its ideological and cultural nuances through translation. The translator’s understanding of the original directly influences the translated text. However, cultural differences can lead to deviations, impacting the quality of the translation. Faced with the challenges of language and culture, translators may fail to analyze the original correctly or struggle to express themselves effectively. Fluency and beauty may sometimes lead to a departure from the original’s purpose. Translators must enhance their literary cultivation, aesthetic taste, and grasp of the work’s connotations while improving their foreign language skills to overcome these challenges.

Apart from faithfully conveying the essence of the original, a translation must be comprehensible to readers to fulfill its communicative purpose and maintain its value. Translators bear the responsibility not only of translating but also of bridging cultures, fostering communication, and contributing to global integration. Naida, a renowned American translator, emphasizes the importance of cultural familiarity, stating that true success in translation requires a deeper understanding of two cultures than mastery of two languages alone. Translators need to anticipate potential challenges for readers, considering how to convey the author’s intentions effectively. This involves familiarity with the original language’s characteristics and culture, as well as understanding the geography, customs, and cultural history of the country where the original language is spoken. Active engagement in interpreting the original work and, if necessary, conveying the author’s thoughts through annotations, ensures that readers comprehend foreign cultures without erasing linguistic and cultural differences.

3. Evaluation and Influence

Benjamin's profound contemplation of literary translation is encapsulated in his unique metaphors and conceptions, providing profound and inspiring insights for translation criticism, worthy of our in-depth exploration. The deconstructionist translation theory, grounded in his ideas, posits that meaning is fixed at the moment of creation, and any translation's meaning becomes a "variation" that cannot revert to the original state after departing from its local context at that time—following the process of variation (Hu, 2018). In the realm of translation criticism, we should not anticipate a singular and definite interpretation of the original text. It is unjust to critique the original text outside a specific historical context. There exists no eternal translation. As long as the translator, based on their efforts to articulate their understanding of the author's intentions, grasps the entirety and achieves harmony with the original text, they fulfill the noble mission bestowed by history—to realize Benjamin's goals of "pure language".

Benjamin's theory of translation carries a layer of mysticism influenced by certain religious thoughts, making it not entirely consistent with the deconstructionist theory of translation. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the article "The Task of the Translator" contains unique insights that harbor the seeds of deconstructionist translation thought. These insights have provided considerable inspiration for subsequent deconstructionist translation theorists. The deconstruction school of translation has continued to elaborate on the theoretical system constructed by Benjamin in the early 1920s, supplementing and refining the deconstructionist theory of translation. This evolution has solidified it as an undeniable trend in contemporary Western translation theories. Thus, it can be asserted that Benjamin's 1923 work is the true source of deconstructionist translation theory. While evaluations of Benjamin's translation theory in "The Task of the Translator" may be divided and mixed, it must be acknowledged that it "represents a trend in translation research, and its historical and practical significance is worthy of study and exploration from various perspectives" (Tan, 1991).

The issue of translation that Benjamin delved into is not confined solely to the realm of literature; it extends to a broader perspective of artistic and cultural communication, particularly concerning the challenges of classical communication. Benjamin's theory of translation provides insights into the considerable distances involved in moving from one's mother tongue to a foreign language, from national literature to world literature, and from national art to world art. Translation, as a crucial avenue for classical dissemination, not only gains essential elucidation through Benjamin's discourse but also serves as a reminder that we must continually recognize a cultural historical reality: without dissemination, the achievements of civilizations across time cannot be passed on; without translation, the spatial dissemination of national arts across borders, cultures, and transcultural boundaries becomes an insurmountable challenge (Weng, 2013). The reciprocal integration between diverse peoples, countries, and cultures not only greatly benefits from understanding and drawing upon each other's cultural and artistic classics but also imposes higher demands on the practice of translation.

Yet, Benjamin's theory of translation introduces contradictions, particularly concerning the

transmission of classics. In the era of economic globalization, facing what seems like a “borderless” cultural market, this issue becomes more intertwined with questions of standards and the development of national art within the context of globalization. In this globalized landscape, a nation that loses its independence and subjectivity finds it challenging to engage in borderless peer-to-peer exchanges (Weng, 2013). The ability to participate effectively requires a nation to find its unique voice and strengthen it. Only by doing so can it ensure that others not only hear its voice but are also willing to listen.

4. Conclusion

Walter Benjamin, a German thinker and literary critic, stands as a pivotal figure in the realm of deconstructivism translation. His profound insights, encapsulated in the seminal essay “The Task of the Translator” and mirrored in his series of literary translations, firmly establish Benjamin as a pioneer and guiding force in the theory and practice of deconstructionist translation (Wang, 2009). His emphasis on the multiplicity and diversity inherent in translations challenges conventional beliefs, introducing novel concepts and methodologies to the field. Benjamin’s theories offer profound insights into translation studies, shaping the trajectory of translation practices and providing a robust foundation for subsequent deconstructivism translation theories.

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