Original Paper

The Evolution of Western Bible Translation Thoughts (Note 1)

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Abstract

With a history of over 2,000 years, Bible translation is an indispensable part of the whole history of translation. The translation thoughts, principles, and skills proposed by Bible translators are an essential chapter of the world translation theory. The paper firstly overviews the Bible translation practice diachronically. Afterward, it sorts out the Bible translation thoughts put forward by western translators including the translation view, readers' response, as well as translator's subjectivity. In this way, the understanding of western Bible translation theories in China is enhanced.

Keywords

Bible Translation Theories, Dynamic Development, Translation Thoughts

1. Introduction

The history of Bible translation is ambitious and enduring. From the 3rd century B.C. to the present day, people have never stopped translating the Bible over 2, 200 years. With a long history, the practice of Bible translation in the West breeds abundant Bible translation thoughts, which not only interact with general translation theories but also become the foundation of general translation theories. Through a diachronic investigation of Bible translation, this paper seeks to explore the Bible translation practice in the west thoroughly by analyzing the Bible translation theories proposed by those famous Bible translation theorists and their influence.

2. The Development of Western Bible Translation Thoughts

The long history of Bible translation practice has given birth to rich Bible translation theories. Due to the differences in historical background and translation epistemology, the translation principles followed and advocated by Bible translators in different periods and the translation thoughts embodied in their translation practice are either consistent with each other or, to some extent, different from each other. Thus, like general translation theories, the Bible translation theories not only presents a dynamic process of development but also forms a unique translation view, as well as an understanding of the

role of translators and readers, which provides useful reference and profound inspiration for translation studies. This part does not aim to comprehensively conduct diachronic research of translation thoughts or translators. Instead, the focus is the representative Bible translation thoughts in each period with a select few of translators as proof.

Bible translation thoughts in the West can be divided into four stages.

"The first stage: God's Inspirational Principle (from the third century B.C. to the Middle Ages);

The second stage: Humanistic Translation Thoughts (during the Renaissance period);

The third stage: George Campbell's three Bible translation principles (in the eighteenth century);

The Fourth stage: Nida's dynamic equivalence (in the Contemporary period)" (Ren, 2007, p. 62).

2.1 From the Third Century B.C. to the Middle Ages: God's Inspirational Principle

The earliest description of God's Inspirational Principle is found in the writings of Philo Judaeus (about 20 B.C. - 50 B.C.), a famous Jewish philosopher in the first century A.C.. It is generally understood to mean that "the translator is inspired" and "the wording of the translation is revealed to him by God" (Schwarz, 1954, p.165). The reason for the adoption of this principle is "no human being can understand the full meaning of God's Word. Accordingly, no human endeavor can express what was originally revealed to man" (Schwarz, 1954, p. 165).

The *Septuagint*, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, is described as the first major translation in western culture which, in Philo's view, is a result of God's revelation. The seventy-two translators worked separately without communicating and yet produced a completely identical text. Philo asserts that "the translator follows 'an invisible prompter', suggesting that he is only God's instrument and his personality plays no part" (Schwarz, 1954, p. 165). Being guided by "the Holy Spirit to the 'perfect' version" (Douglas, 2006, p. 13), the translating mode of "listening - writing" is employed, which implies that the translators merely act as intermediaries between God and the targeted readers through recording the words dictated to them by God. Since the inspiration is the premise for translation, only theologians and prophets are qualified to engage in the work. In order to preserve the truth, the literal or sometimes even dead rendering is used. Therefore, the authenticity of this version was accepted, and God's Inspirational Principle became the criterion for Bible translation on succeeding centuries.

In the Middle Ages, people gradually noticed discrepancies between the Greek translation version and the original Hebrew text; thus, the Hebrew text and its translation version cannot be identical. This discovery led to a heated discussion about God's Inspirational Principle between St. Augustine and St. Jerome.

By comparing the *Septuagint* to the original Hebrew, St. Jerome (about 340 - 420), the most well-known translator and theologian, was aware of the fact that there were divergences between the Hebrew and the Greek versions which challenged the identity between them. This view lays basis for his own translation of Holy Scripture, known as the Latin *Vulgate*. He agreed with Philo and maintained the divine inspiration for the rendering of Bible. Hence the sacred biblical texts necessitated

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a word-for-word translation method that forbode any changes in the dictation, syntax and spirits of the original. He also outlined his sense-for-sense approach to the translation of secular literary texts, for which translators can convey the original author's intention in a way that is easy to be understood in order to better unify "the words and their sense" (Fang, 2013, p. 159). This distinction between the word-for-word and sense-for-sense translation can be regarded as the origin of the debate over literal and free approach which demonstrates that Jerome starts to differentiate between various text types.

Following Philo's opinion, St. Augustine strongly advocated God's Inspirational principle. Augustine (2004) viewed the Bible translation from a theological perspective, believing that the aim of reading the Bible is to "know God's will" (Augustine, 2004, p. 47). The Bible translation is only a means to understand God's will, through which men can listen to God's Inspiration and approach to God's wisdom. Although the Bible is translated into diverse languages, the will of God is eternal. With the everlasting power of God's will, the discrepancies between the Hebrew and Greek texts are proofs of the divine origin of the *Septuagint* which surpasses the original text.

2.2 During the Renaissance: Humanistic Translation Thoughts

In the late Middle Ages, with church's control over people's thoughts growing increasingly intense, any Bible translations diverged from the Latin version were seen as heresy. The God's Inspirational Principle governed Bible translation until challenged by European Humanist Movement of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The humanists sought liberation from the power of the church. Humanism was infused into Bible translation which formed humanistic translation thoughts. Translators returned to the original Hebrew in terms of text selection. As for the translation style, based on the respect towards and inclusiveness of all national languages, they equally treat the source text and the target text, and fully explore the nationality and creativity of different languages. Translators also reinforced vernacular languages through which they made the texts available to a wider public. Taking place literal translation approach, free translation approach gradually played a crucial role which in turn boosted the development of rich national languages.

Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536), as an erudite Dutch humanist thinker and theologian, was famous for his Greek-Latin New Testament in 1516. Erasmus advanced that no translation can transcend the original, thus every interpretation must start with the study of the work in its original language. This view is controversial to those God's Inspiration advocators with St. Augustine as a representative, upholding that the Hebrew Bible is surpassed by the Greek version which should be regarded as the source text for translation. Translators' understanding of the original text is the criteria for translation instead of the explanation of prophets and priests, or the authority of the *Vulgate* proved by the Vatican because what we should respect is "truth" rather than "authority" (Tan, 2004, p. 61). Attacking the domination of Bible translation by the theologians, Erasmus believed that rich language knowledge is a prerequisite for rendering rather than God's inspiration and strived for translators' freedom to interpret the Bible.

The 16th century saw the challenges to the authority of the Roman Catholic Church. The campaign was

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headed by Martin Luther (1483-1546) whose translation of the New Testament (1522) and later the Old Testament (1534) were critically influential to Germany. In the Reformation, Luther claimed that the Bible was "the only source of divinely revealed knowledge" (Reu, 1944, p. 23) through which he emphasized that the Bible rendering should be highly faithful to the original text. Linguistically, he agrees with St. Jerome in criticizing the literal translation method for it may produce rigid and sometimes even incomprehensible translation. He "breaks through the shackles of the original text and combines the detail-oriented translation method with the fluency-oriented translation method to produce the most fluent translation that can best express the precise meaning of the original text" (Bainton, 1993, p. 305). To achieve this, his application of vernacular language was crucial as he says that "We must ask for advice, in terms of the Bible translation, from mothers at home, children on the street and common men in the market. We must observe the ways they speak, draw upon their vernacular language, and conduct our translating accordingly. That way, they will understand it and recognize that we are speaking German to them". (Roland, 1992, p. 45) In this way, humanists contributed to the development of national language.

Though not directly involved in the Bible translation, French Bible scholar William Fulke (1538-1589) put forward his unique opinions on the Bible translation theories. In *Defense of the Sincere and True Translation of the Holy Scriptures into the English Tongue* (1589), he bluntly pointed out that Bible translation had nothing to do with translators' beliefs. This view liberates Bible translation from the narrow theological tradition and reveals a distinctive humanist atmosphere, challenging religious authorities such as St. Augustine. Fulke also insisted that Bible translation must respect language habits. "How priests use language is not a rule that Bible translators must follow. Translators usually can use the language according to the practical usage of the common people rather than the way of the ancient Apostles" (Tan, 2004, p. 81). In addition, for the English translation of the Bible, Fulke opposed the excessive use of foreign words and advocated to explore the potential of English expression through using the English words and phrases following English habits.

During the Renaissance, European national languages achieved development and formed their unique morphology and syntax. Bible translators advocated national languages and reduced the limitation of Latin. The free translation method became the mainstream of this period, which effectively conveyed the meaning of the original text and protected national languages. It demonstrates that social needs are the fundamental reason for the emergence and development of translation thoughts, whereas the translation thoughts reflect social changes behind the translation.

2.3 In the 18th Century: The Three Bible Translation Principles

At the end of the 18th century, a breakthrough has been made in the development of Bible translation theory. It was no longer confined to scattered viewpoints and methods, but comprehensive, scientific and systematic monographs on Bible translation began to emerge. The first theorist who brought this breakthrough is George Campbell (1719-1796). As a British Bible translator and theorist, he published *A Translation of the Four Gospels with Notes* in 1789. In the introduction part to the book, he proposes

the three principles of Bible translation, including "to give a just representation of the sense of the original; to convey into his version, as much as possible, in consistency with the genius of the language which he writes，the author's spirit and manner; to take care, that the version has, at least, so far the quality of an original performance, as to appear natural and easy". (Kelly, 1979, p. 210).

"To give a just representation of the sense of the original" explains the purpose of translation, and emphasizes that faithfulness to the original text is the primary criterion for Bible translation. Translators cannot deviate from thoughts of the original text because of the pursuit of style, nor can they sacrifice the original connotation for the sake of smoothness in translation. "To convey the author's spirit and manner" analyzes the process and skills of translation, and points out that the translator has a certain freedom in the process of translation. Still, the premise is to convey the idea of the original work better. The translator must be proficient in the original language and familiar with the subject matter to be translated, and use his judgment to choose the expression most consistent with the original author's thinking patterns and writing style. At the same time, the translator has the freedom to add or subtract the original text, but the added or subtracted content shall not violate the thought and form of the original text. He also points out that simplicity is an important trait of Hebrew, so the translator should use simple language to reproduce the original style accurately. The third principle requires that the target text should have both the soul and fluency of the original text and break away from the traditional two-part translation theory of literal translation method and free translation method. The translation should take the length of both literal translation method and free translation method, and not only accurately convey the meaning of the source language, but also use the natural form of the receptor language.

2.4 In Contemporary Period: Dynamic Equivalence

In contemporary western translation studies, Bible translation have formed an independent research system. Not only is there *The Bible Dictionary* (1987), but also scholarly journals dedicated to the exchange of ideas among scholars of Bible translation such as *Bible Translator* established by the International Bible Society in 1952. A new scientific approach to translation studies was introduced by Eugene Nida (1914-2011). Developing from the practical work and integrating concepts from linguistics, Nida's translation theories have exerted a profound influence on Bible translation practice and brought useful references and inspiration to contemporary general translation studies.

Central to Nida's concepts is dynamic equivalence. It is defined from the perspective that "the degree to which the receptors of the target language react to it in the same manner as the receptors of the source language" (Nida & Taber 2004, p. 24). The goal of dynamic equivalence is to reproduce "in the receptor language the closet natural equivalent of the source-language message" (Nida & Taber 2004, p. 12). Thus, dynamic equivalence is strongly oriented towards the receptor whose response determines the adjustments of forms and content of target language in order to achieve naturalness. Focusing on the education and reform functions of the Bible, Nida aims to disseminate religious thoughts. Bible translation therefore must pay attention to readers' response, and pursue the communicative effect.

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Meaning must be given priority, for it is the content of the message which is of prime importance for Bible translating. That means certain departures from the formal structure of the original are not only legitimate but may be highly desirable.

Nida's translation theories have distinctive characteristics of Bible study and have guided multiple versions of Bible translation. At the same time, by integrating numerous fields and disciplines, they transcend the field of Bible studies to a certain extent, and illuminates contemporary translation studies.

3. Shift of Bible Translation Focus: from the Text, the Translator to the Reader

In the eyes of Bible scholars and translators, Bible translation is not only essential and feasible but also a "never-ending task". It is "the duty of all believers" to "translate" Bible doctrines into daily life. (Metzger, 1990, p. 170) In the process of the dynamic development of Western Bible translation, the translators hold the belief that "translating Bible is translating the Word of God" (John, 1974, p. 14), namely, "Bible=God's Word". Naturally, "being faithful to the original text" which refers to mechanical convey of the original text is in the central position during translation. Under this guidance, Bible translation theories have experienced three phrases including the view of "faithfulness", "translator's subjectivity" and "reader's response".

3.1 The Concept of Faithfulness

According to the Bible, "All scripture is given by inspiration of God". (Timothy, 2003, p.16) Bible is the "revelation of God", the "Word of God", the "text inspired by God", and the "sacred original text" of the world on the other side. (Ren Dongsheng, 2010, p.71) Therefore, Bible is "the sacred text constituted by the holy words" which has become the text view followed by the Bible translator which determines that the translation view of "faithfulness" runs through the entire process of Bible translation. However, the translator's understanding of the standard of "faithfulness" has been continuously changing. Thus, the concept of "faithfulness" has developed dynamically.

At first, Bible translators regarded the Bible as the Word of God, and "translation is mere dictation and transcription of the divine language". (Ren Dongsheng, 2010, p.71) Philo Judaeus concludes that Bible translation needs "God's Inspiration" and advocates "listening-writing" translation mode so that the mechanical "literal translation" method dominates early Bible translation. St. Augustine inherits and develops Philo's translation thoughts. He not only advocates to follow God's Inspiration Principle but also strongly believes the "mythology" in the Bible, which are regarded as the reasons why Bible translators should adopt the "word-for-word" translation principle. St. Jerome opposes Philo's literal translation method based on "listening-writing", proposes the flexible free translation principle, which gets rid of the mechanical fidelity to the original Bible text. However, he believes in the "God's wisdom" conveyed by the Bible, and therefore still insists on God's Inspirational Principle.

During the Renaissance, humanism gave birth to different views on translation. Erasmus, Luther, Fulke and other Bible scholars explicitly propose that Bible translation has nothing to do with translators' belief which breaks the limits of God's Inspiration Principle. Bible translation still centers on

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faithfulness, but the understanding of the criteria for fidelity has changed. Bible translation theorists advocate that we should respect the original text, instead of listening to the interpretation of the Bible by theological authorities. In terms of the translation principle, Jerome develops the principle of free translation, taking into account the meaning, style, and effect of the original text. Campbell's three translation principles require the translation methods to take the length of both literal translation and free translation, which breaks the boundary between literal translation and free translation. However, the fidelity to the original text is still the primary criterion of Bible translation.

3.2 Translators' Subjectivity

Translators' subjectivity is reflected in the choice of translation strategies, means, and language forms. In other words, it is about the question that "whether the translators should mechanically follow the original religious text (like the Bible) or be free to add their ideas". (Xie, 2003, p. 110) "The translator's translation operation procedure is largely subject to the authoritative Bible translation version and the protestant discourse system. Translators with different cultural identities will produce religious or literary translation versions due to the differences in their historical context, translation purposes, translation principles, and methods, as well as the reader groups". (Ren & Men, 2012, pp. 54-55) For a long time, Bible translators have been regarded as "invisible", and the "appearance" of translators has gone through a long process.

Philo believes that the translator of the bible must be a devout theologian or Christian, emphasizing the importance of belief and defining the Bible translation as religious. At the same time, translators should adopt the "listening-writing" mode to ensure the accuracy of the translation and convey the wisdom of God. These restrictions make translators must obey the Bible interpretation by the authority of theology and unable to do translation according to their understanding. In other words, during this period, Bible translators have no subjective consciousness.

St. Jerome proposes that translation relies on the translator's language proficiency and correct understanding of the original text, which transfers the focus of translation from the original version to the translators themselves, marking the beginning of the Bible translators' subjectivity. Based on this, Jerome raises his biblical text view, translation principles, and requirements for the translators. Although the emphasis on the translator's ability weakens the religious nature of Bible translation, the statement that "even the word order in Bible is full of a kind of metaphysical meaning" still reveals the text view "Bible=God's words in man's language". Given this, Jerome further proposes the flexible free translation principle, requiring translators to "transplant the style of the original text according to the characteristics of the target language", instead of sticking to the vocabulary and sentence structure of the original text. Based on a full understanding of the original text, translators can make appropriate changes or rearrangements.

"The humanists emphasize the linguistic freedom of translators in translating Bible", which fully displays the translators' subjectivity. (Chen, 2006, p. 51). The translator points out bluntly that Bible translation has nothing to do with translators' belief, which breaks God's Inspirational Principle. Bible

translators explore the potential of national languages, adopts the words of ordinary people, and introduces the structure and vocabulary of a foreign language to enrich the national language. Thus, translators in the Renascence Period understand the Bible in the historical context to bring their initiative into play in Bible translation practice.

3.3 Reader-Response Awareness

"When people talk about translation, they tend to talk more about the author, the text, the translator, the translation version, and they tend to ignore and even marginalize the reader. In fact, both the author and the translator have their target readers no matter in creating or translating". (Luo, 2011, p. 122) However, the most significant difference between Bible translation and translation of other fields, especially literary works, lies in its nature of "divine words and human language", so Bible translators must think about how to seek a balance between the author and the reader.

Erasmus claims in the preface of his New Testament translation that the Bible should be open to ordinary people, regardless of their age, gender, profession, status, and nationality. Thus, translators should follow the translation principle that is easy to understand by and acceptable to readers. Luther "inherits Erasmus's thoughts, insists on populism, and translates it into the language acceptable to women and children", thus producing the most famous German Bible. (Su, 2017, p. 163) This fully shows that "at that time, the Bible translators have realized the communicative function of translation, and if there were no receptors, the translation would be unnecessary". (Chen, 2006, p.51). Therefore, readers play an essential role in the formulation of the translation intention, selection of translation strategies and even the whole process of translation, to ensure the broader spread of religious doctrines.

Nida believes that the essence of the Bible is "God's Word in man's language". (Nida, 1952, p. 1) This religious text view naturally takes spreading the doctrine of the Bible as the fundamental purpose of the translation. Therefore, translation is primarily based on the communicative function, reflecting a strong sense of readers' response. The translation should pay attention to the acceptance of readers, pursuing the effect of communication, and following the principles of "sense first", "functional equivalence" and the same "readers' response".

In this part, the history of western Bible translation has been traced through summarizing the translation thoughts put forward by western translators. It sorts out the dynamic development process of faithful translation view, translators' subjectivity, and readers' response consciousness, and clarifies their theoretical value in translation studies. The "God's Inspirational principle" establishes the text view of "Bible = God's Word", which emphasizes the religious nature of the Bible. It is the beginning of the "faithfulness" employed by western Bible translators and marks a significant difference between Bible translation and other secular translation in the history of western translation. While insisting on faithfulness as the premise of Bible translation, Jerome proposes the flexible principle of free translation, which reflects his understanding of the translators' subjectivity. Erasmus suggests that Bible translation should be accepted by readers, which is the beginning of the readers' response consciousness. Nida emphasizes that translation should pay attention to the acceptance of readers and

pursue the effect of communication, thus establishing a communicative approach to Bible translation.

In short, from the third century B.C. to the present, Bible translation thoughts have experienced the evolution of the three emphases: "the faithfulness to the original text", "the consciousness translators' subjectivity" and "reader-response awareness". It reflects the western Bible translation theorists' multi-dimensional thinking about Bible translation practice, which has become an essential part of overall translation studies.

4. Conclusion

As pointed by Susan Bassnett (2001), "it is from Bible translation and the theoretical statements of contemporary translators such as Eugene Nida, that much of the basis of Translation Studies derives today". (Bassnett, 2001, p. 389) The history of Bible translation is an indispensable part of the whole history of translation. The translation thoughts, principles, and skills proposed by Bible translators are an essential chapter of the world translation theory. This paper traces the Bible translation history, excavate, and sort out the Bible translation thoughts put forward by western translators, and clarify its theoretical value in the study of translation. In this way, the author hopes to enhance the understanding of western Bible translation theories in China.

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