A Semiotic Approach to Literary Translation Criticism

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Abstract

Gayatri C. Spivak once mentions that the issues of humanist discourse find their expression in three interchangeable «concepts», namely, Language, World, and Consciousness. The world we are living in is invariably constituted by language and our consciousness is inexorably structured like anguage. We cannot possess Language, for we are at the same time manipulated by Language. Consequently, even Language is determined by World and Consciousness, the paradigm of Language encompasses the paradigms of World and Consciousness. Literature, featuring the undetectability or un-interpretability of truth as is opposed to the ultimate truth in other discourses, is also in the humanistic discourse. Literary translation criticism (LTC), as a theoretical criticism about literature, also consists of the three interchangeable concepts: World, Consciousness and Language. This thesis is to approach the issue of LTC from these three dimensions, while re-terming them as Contextual, Receptual and Textual dimensions respectively. World refers to the intercultural perspective of LTC, emphasizing the relativism between the contextuality in which translator and the translation exist and the selectivity of strategies the translator adopt influenced by it. Consciousness is the receptual part in LTC. It stresses the reception and processing of the aesthetic message happening in the consciousness of the reader, though the target reader's participation is foregrounded by the translator's maintenance and artistic/technical process of the original literary text. Language is the textual part of LTC. It problematizes different levels of linguistic issues from the original text to the translated literary texts. And it is in this sense that we can term this attempt as within a boarder domain of culture study for it sets the humanistic discourse paradigm as its departing point.

1. TRANSLATION CRITICISM

Translation criticism, as one strand of applied translation studies, has enjoyed the role as an essential bridge between translation theory and practice since 1972 when «translation studies» as an independent discipline was first put forward by Holmes. Although not a new field of inquiry, it interests a board range of scholars and researchers. They, much invigorated by development in textual linguistics, literary studies, discourse analysis, psychology, cognitive science, cultural studies and among others, have approached translation criticism in an ever-increasingly vigorous manner.

While they relentlessly center on the topic of equivalence, a highly significant term, if not the most disputable, the definition of equivalence and means of evaluation is an ongoing debate and there is little agreement achieved, be it «formal and dynamic» (Nida and Taber, 1982) or «linguistic, paradigmatic, stylistic or textual» (Bassnett, 2004).

What they do agree upon is that complete equivalence is unachievable, an antinomy in or maybe idiosyncrasy of translation criticism. Similarly problematic in translation criticism is the construct of theoretical framework. Multitudinous theories have been gestated, developed, purported and questioned, each claiming its own authenticity. Arguably, it is these paradoxical hallmarks in translation criticism that blaze new trails for further improvement. This article does not aim that high as to provide solutions to these problems. What it aims is to provide an alternative approach to literary translation criticism, in an attempt to spark its development.

2. LITERARY TRANSLATION AND CRITICISM

G. C. Spivak argues that the issues of humanist discourse find their expression in three interchangeable «concepts», namely, Language, World, and Consciousness. The world we are living in is invariably constituted by language and our consciousness is inexorably structured like language. We cannot possess Language, for we are at the same time manipulated by Language. Consequently, even Language is determined by World and Consciousness, the paradigm of Language encompasses the paradigms of World and Consciousness.

At the center of linguistic creation stands the language of artists, exemplifying great linguistic potentialities. And literature is the one in case for it is nothing but a pattern of potentialities to be discovered.

Literature, featuring the undetectability or un-interpretability of truth as is opposed to the ultimate truth in other discourses, is also in the humanistic discourse. Literary translation criticism thus consists of the three interchangeable concepts: World, Consciousness and Language. This thesis is to approach the issue of literary translation criticism from the Linguistic interactions with World and Consciousness, while re-terming them as Contextual and Receptual dimensions respectively, claiming that Textual equivalence is only part, if not the least considered, of the whole story. It is in this sense that the attempt can be termed as within a boarder domain of culture study for it sets the humanistic discourse paradigm as its departing point.

3. CONTEXTUAL DIMENSION

> Without a semiological direction the theorist will always tend to consider the work of art
> as a purely formal construction, or as a direct reflection of the psychological or even phy-
> siological disposition of the author, either in the distinct reality expressed by the work, or
> in the ideological, economic, social or cultural situations of a given environment… Only
> the semiological point of view will allow theoreticians to recognize the autonomous exis-
> tence and the essential dynamism of the structure of art and to understand its evolution as
> an immanent movement, but in a relationship in constant dialectic with the evolution of
> other fields of culture. (Mukařovský, 1966: 146)

According to Mukařovský, literary works involves a network of relations between the
signs within and those outside, thus avoiding a unilateral approach to texts as pure literary
objects or as direct witnesses of a reality which is external to them. An argument inherent is
the collective consciousness in sociocultural and ideological series.

> Of greater importance is the fact that to the sign-types of a period belong its social models;
> …emphasizes the particular rapport between individual and group. (Corti, 1978: 17)

The society, in its relation to literature, is a sociocultural, economic and ideological
cluster, which influences the literary system. The real existence of the human being depended
on his relation with the structure of which he was a sign. An author as well as a translator is
conditioned by that social nature, visible or invisible, whether he favors or opposes it.

Likewise Michael Foucault proposes a dialectic relationship between discourse and
power. Discourse, a tool for exercising power, is at the same time the key to it. Any sphere in
any society features its own discourse that manipulates the thoughts and actions of its members,
as well as the organizational norms.

> Production of anything —from commodities to literary texts— is no longer conceived
> as structured around individual consciousness, but rather around the age, or according
> to Foucault, the discourse of the age, which actually *creates* the individual. (Gentzler,
> 2004: 151)

Translation as a social practice, right from the time of its inception, is a project of socio-
cultural domination. After the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895, global powers set their foot
on quite a part of China, throwing the Chinese people in misery. Determined to convey the
principle of the survival of the fittest and to arouse public awareness, Yan Fu translated T. H.
Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics* with many alterations. A British translator, when translating the
much disputed Chinese novel *Jin Ping Mei*, used Latin to translate those he thought deviant
from moral ethics. He argued that by so doing those not well-educated people would not have
an access to it, in case it would be vulgarized. As the above examples have conveyed, without
foregrounding the background literary translation criticism cannot be as constructive and dia-
lectic as it claims to be.

4. RECEPTUAL DIMENSION

A literary text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but here is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not the author.

Each literary text features the attribute of being indefinite and infinite chains of signification, which is a multi-facet unfinished schematic structure with many blank spots. When readers fill the blank spots and concretize the text by incorporating their own experiences, ideas, understandings of life, the literary work is no longer an independent but a relative and interactive one. Thus the meaningful existence of the literary work depends on the involvement and interaction on the part of the reader. The reader and the text are no longer seen as separate entities, but the two sides of a coin. It is in this incorporating process that the indefinite points are filled and the aesthetic value of the literary work realized.

Translation is no minor enterprise, which involves reconstitute the thoughts, the language, and the artistic impulses of people from some other time or place accurately, in terms that make sense to the members of one's own community. The translator is supposed to nourish and foster any or all of these meanings, letting them grow from their original soil out through his words into their natural deployment, or at least into one of their possible unfoldings, similarly with the whole meaning of the original. A translator in the process plays a dual role, a reader of the original text and an «author» of the translated work. He is responsible for not only filling the blanks but also evacuates it from his mind with blanks and aesthetic constituents left seemingly untouched in the translated work.

Following is a poem «Jing Ye Si» from Li Bai, a poet in China's Tang Dynasty (618-907), and its two English translations for analysis.

<div align="center">

静夜思
床前明月光，
疑是地上霜。
举头望明月，
低头思故乡。

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The classical Chinese poem is in the form of quatrain with four five-character lines, conveying a nostalgia motif. Rhyming with [ang] in the first, second and fourth lines, the poem conveys a strong poetic appeal with terse but clear wording.

Translation 1 (by Fletcher)

> *Seeing the Moon before my couch so bright;*
> *I thought hoar frost had fallen from the night.*
> *On her clear face I gaze with lifted eyes;*
> *Then hide them full of Youth's sweet memories.*

This translation deviates itself far away from the original in regard to motif, spreading before the reader a totally different image. Therefore, rhythmical and concise as it is, a good translation it is not.

Translation 2 (by Amy Lowell)

> *In front of my bed the moonlight is very bright.*
> *I wonder if that can be frost on the floor?*
> *I lift up my head and look at the full moon, the dazzling moon.*
> *I drop my head, and think of the home of old days.*

The nostalgia motif is aptly exemplified, but the translated blank verse lacks the poetic sentiment, making the original artistic value lost in translation.

6. CONCLUSION

Over years of development, translation criticism has come to more mature. Great achievements have so far been made in this research area. Theories of other relevant areas of study have been introduced and combined with translation theory, used to guide translation practice and criticism as well. However, it is not without its own problems. Translation criticism is now witnessing a phase of theoretical construction for the want of a generally accepted model and this is especially true with literary translation criticism.

With Spivak's «World, Language and Consciousness» relation as its start point as well as theoretical backup, the essay argues literary translation criticism is approached from a 3-dimensional model, though conceptual and receptual aspects are highlighted. It however does not intend to deny the textual perspective. On the contrary, the interaction of the three interrelated dimensions is the very point the present essay is based upon. The essay holds that translation, though a concrete transfer of linguistic signs, is concurrently manipulated by the socio-cultural context and the receptiblity to target readers. And translation criticism should rule out judging a translation solely on the basis of its linguistics faults. A borromean knot of contextual, receptual and textual dimensions should be taken into consideration, which deems it necessary to build up a multi-dimensional model for literary translation criticism.

This exploration may provide us with an alternative perspective towards literary translation criticism, though this tentative study is far from being exhaustive or mature and there is still much room for further elaboration.

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