The Subjectivity of the Translator and Socio-cultural Norms

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Abstract

This thesis attempts to probe into the dialectical relationship between the subjectivity of the translator and socio-cultural norms. The socio-cultural norms inevitably regulate the translator's translating activity, as acceptability of the translated text is the primary concern of most translators. However, this does not mean that the subjectivity of the translator is suppressed. The translator, in the wider socio-cultural context, assumes the subjective role in the translation process. The descriptive nature of these norms provides the great possibility for the translator to exert his subjectivity, which can be realized by the translator's active manipulations on the source text. This point is well illustrated in the practical translation as the translator's behaviour is constrained by a list of socio-cultural norms such as politics, ideology, ethics, morality and religion.

Keywords: Translator, Subjectivity, Socio-cultural Norms

1. Introduction

For a long time, both Chinese and western traditional translation theorists looked at the source text as the "absolute standard" in the evaluation of a translated work. Translation was merely regarded as a linguistic operation, with faithfulness or equivalence remaining its key criterion. But "Linguistics alone will not help us. Translation is not merely and not even primarily a linguistic process" (Nord, 2001: 10). In fact, "translation is not made in a vacuum" (Bassnett & Lefevere, 2001: 14). "It takes place in concrete, definite situations that involve members of different cultures" (Snell-Hornby, 2001: 40), and it is inevitably constrained by both the source and target cultures.

Since the late 1970s, with the development of cultural studies in the western academic world, a great number of translation theorists have made a research on translation theory from different cultural perspectives. They believe that some difficult issues cannot be resolved before translation studies have been put in the wider context of cultural studies. Borrowing ideas from the Russian Formalism of the 1920s, Itamar Even-Zohar developed polysystem theory in the 1970s. It shifts the focus of translation away from heated debate about faithfulness towards a study the translator's role in the translation process. It takes a dynamic, functional, descriptive, and target-oriented approach to translation, and fills the gap that opened up in the 1970s between linguistics and literary studies. As it is, it provides a successful platform that Norm Theory can be built on. Gideon Toury inherited polysystem theory and pioneered the concept of norms in the 1990s. He believes that the translator plays a social and cultural role and fulfills a function allotted by a society. He expects to use socio-cultural constraints to account for the regularities and preferences that translators show in their translation process. He calls these constraints norms. He defines norms as "the translation of general values or ideas shared by a community — as to what is right and wrong, adequate and inadequate — into performance instructions appropriate for and applicable to particular situations, specifying what is prescribed and forbidden as well as what is tolerated and permitted in a certain behavioral dimension." (2001: 55)

The theory gradually developed from this concept is called Norm Theory in translation by Theo Hermans (2004: 79). He distinguishes three kinds of translation norms: preliminary norms, operational norms and initial norms. "These norms are socio-cultural constraints specific to a culture, society and history" (Munday, 2001: 115), and "affect the entire process of translation, including source-text selection" (Hermans, 2004: 76).

But what kind of role does the translator play in the entire translation process, as translation itself is a norm-governed activity? Does it mean that the subjectivity of the translator is suppressed since there is a series of socio-cultural norms governing the translator's behavior in the entire translation process? In the past two decades, translation theorists and scholars have seldom touched upon this unduly developed field. Thus, it is of prime importance to make a research on the subjectivity of the translator constrained by the socio-cultural norms in the whole translation process.

2. The Descriptive Nature of Norms

In recent years, a number of translation scholars have attempted to explore some of the theoretical aspects of the concept of norms. Among them, many scholars hold that the norms are basically descriptive in nature.

Chesterman classifies that "Like translation theory, Norm Theory too has been split into the two categories: prescriptive approaches and descriptive ones" (1997: 54). But at the same time he states that he would like to take the latter view, that is, he prefers to look at norms as being descriptive in nature. He quotes Bartsch's words to highlight his attitude towards the descriptive nature of norms: "Norms are here understood not to be 'orders or prescriptions which are issued by a superior to a subordinate", and then he says: "but rather descriptive of particular practices within a given community" (ibid.: 54). Lefevere emphasizes that "constraints are conditioning factors, not absolutes", because "individuals can choose to go with or against them. Translators, too, can decide to defer to the powers that be, or foment opposition, be it poetic or political. Because translation means importation of goods from beyond the system's boundaries, it is always potentially subversive, which is why it tends to be heavily regulated" (quoted by Hermans, 2004: 128). Toury always stresses the descriptive nature of norms. He says, "Norms are a category of descriptive analysis and not, as the term might imply, a prescriptive set of options which are taught by the analysis or scholar to be desirable" (quoted by Mona Baker, 1998: 164).

The descriptive nature of norms provides the great possibility for the translator to exert his subjectivity in the translation process.

3. The Subjectivity of the Translator

3.1 The Definition of the Subjectivity of the Translator in a Socio-cultural Context

Subjectivity, in its philosophical sense, refers to the essential quality of the subject, the distinctive feature in his definite activities. Specifically speaking, subjectivity is the externalization of the subject's innate capacity in his definite activities, the distinctive feature that the subject possesses to change, influence and control his objects actively and to enable the objects to serve the subject. The connotation of the subjectivity includes three basic aspects: firstly, starting from the subject and making the object serve the subject; secondly, objectified function: the subject's distinctive feature in the objectified relationship between the subject and the object; and thirdly, the externalization of the subject's innate capacity (Wang, 1995: 36).

Norms are social and cultural constraints in nature. Toury uses them to account for the regularities and preferences translators show in their actual translating performance. They are seen as "performance instructions" (1980: 51), imposing constraints on the translator determining his "translational behavior". In a social-cultural context, the translator's decision-making is unavoidably constrained by these norms.

Thus, on the basis of the analysis of the term subjectivity in its philosophical sense and in terms of the nature of Toury's norms, the translator's subjectivity can be defined as the translator's subjective activity manifested in the translation process on the prerequisite of being adequately aware of the socio-cultural norms to achieve the purpose of translation.

In a socio-cultural context, the dialectical relationship between the subjectivity of the translator and the socio-cultural norms can be illustrated in the following table.

Insert Table 1 here.

From this table, it can be seen that there is no direct dialogical relationship between the translator and the author. The relationship between the translator and the source text is manipulating and being manipulated. As for the relationship between the translator and the reader, since the acceptability is the primary concern of the translator, the translator has to presume the reader's expectations, which demonstrates the translator's subjectivity as well. Moreover, we can see the mutual relationship between the translator and the socio-cultural norms. On the one hand, these socio-cultural norms tend to regulate and constrain the translator's behavior; and on the other hand, the translator can exert his subjectivity in the translation process.

3.2 The Subjectivity of the Translator Constrained by Specific Socio-Cultural Norms

In recent translation studies, the discussion of social-cultural norms constraining the translator's behavior in the translation process has been seldom touched upon and the relationship between the subjectivity of the translator and the social-cultural norms has been largely neglected so far. "Toury tends to overemphasize the pure academic research on norms while neglecting their practical values" (Chen, 2000: 126; my translation). Due to these insufficiencies in the Translation Studies, the following will fill the emptiness in this field and probe into the subjectivity of the translator through putting into applications some specific socio-cultural norms imposed on the translator, and through the translation strategies adopted by the translator, which manifest the subjectivity of the translator. These socio-cultural norms consist of politics, ideology, ethics, morality, religion, and so on.

3.3 Politics

Politics, as a socially active and politically vital cause, is one of the very important constraints on the translator's behavior. Nobody can deny that the political factors govern the context in which translations occur. It is obvious that politics circumscribes the translator's ideological space, and translators tend to have relatively little freedom in their dealing with politics, at least if they want to have their translations accepted by the target readers. More often than not, politics makes it quite clear what subject matters can be translated from foreign cultures at a given historical time to meet the need of social development and political stability of the target culture. Therefore, the political influence on the shaping of the translator's translating activity should not be underestimated. After the socialist revolutions in the Soviet Union in 1917, the government of the Soviet Union set up a literature press specifically for literary translation, and formulated the norms of literary translation in 1919, which guided translators in every step in the translation process, from the selection of foreign texts to the implementation of translation strategies to the editing of translations.

But what translation strategies will the translator adopt when he is in the face of the political constraints? He may distort the source text that is considered politically inappropriate for the consideration of political censorship. It is the case with the 1819 German translation of Washington Irving's short story *Rip Van Winkle*, which is set in the period before and after the American Revolution. This very first German version of "Rip" was an anonymous translation, published two months after the censorship laws of 1819 came into being, known as the Carlsbad Decrees, which required that all printed matter should be inspected by the authorities, thereby protecting the established monarchies. Concerning the comparison made by Erika Hulpke of the German translation with its English original, it can be concluded safely that the original has been distorted beyond recognition due to the translator's consideration of the political censorship. It is thus evident that under censorship conditions, the translator drew a negative picture of a post-revolutionary republican, domestic society. Among the multitudinous shifts in setting, characters and plots are two radical changes of historical facts, namely, the shift from George the Third to George the Second, and the shift from 1776, when the Declaration of Independence was accepted, to 1770. All in all, every change or shift can be interpreted as an attempt to eliminate everything that might remind the German readers of a successful revolution which may in turn threaten the German established monarchies (Wang, 1998: 7; my translation).

In the early Irish literature, Cu Chulainn, a legendary character, was presented as a young man who was infested with lice, neglected his duty to defend the border region just for a woman, had valor but lacked tactics and eventually came to a tragic end of his life. However, at the turn of the 19th century as the Irish national independence movement gained momentum, Chulainn was deliberately transformed by the Irish patriotic translator into a national hero: he was affable and courteous, noble and responsible, valiant and skillful in battle. Just as Maria Tymoczko argues, such distortion can be attributed to the translator's political motives to encourage the Irish people to fight against the United Kingdom for independence. And historical facts testified to the political effect of the translation: Patrick Pearse, for example, a leader of the Irish national movement, made a model of the distorted character, Chulainn (Jiang, 2003).

In brief, the translator is constrained by political factors and he can adopt some translation strategies, such as revision, abridgement, and interpolated comment to manifest his subjectivity.

3.4 Ideology

With the development of cultural studies, the subject of ideology has become an important field of study, and the claims about ideology pervade in many fields. The field of translation studies presents no exception to this general trend. Bassnett firstly introduces the notion of ideology into translation studies. She defines ideology as "conceptual grid that consists of opinions and attitudes deemed acceptable in a certain society at a certain time, and through which readers and translators approach texts" (2001: 48). Lefevere says, "On every level of the translation process, it can be shown that, if linguistic considerations enter into conflict with considerations of an ideological and/or poetological nature, the latter tend to win out" (1992: 39). He also says, "Ideology is a certain concept of what the world should be like. Ideology particularly shapes the translator's strategy in solving problems." (Hermans: 1985: 217) No wonder, ideology influences the translator's decision-making in the whole translation process, from the source-text selection to the actual linguistic choice and to the reception of the translated work.

The choice of a source text, which is governed by the preliminary norms, is commonly seen as ideologically driven. In other words, the translator's choice of a source text for translation must fit in with the target ideology for the consideration of authoritative censorship and its reception among the target readership. Thus, the translator has to make some adaptations or even omissions on the source text so that the ideologies represented in his translation can be adequately accepted by the target readers.

This strategy can be seen through the example of China during the 1950s and the period of the Great Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Due to its socialist ideology and the policy in favor of the Soviet Union in the 1950s, great efforts were invested in translating Russian works into Chinese. "In the year of 1950 alone, among the 2,147 translated pieces, the translated Russian works constituted 1,662 pieces, that is, 77.5 percent while English works only 382 pieces, that is, 18 percent" (Wang, 1997: 177). During the period of 1949 and 1958, the translated literature in China accounted for 100,001,000 copies and 5,300 pieces, among which Russian literature took up 82,005,000 copies, that is, 74.4 percent and 526 pieces, that is, 65.8 percent. Even so, only those Russian literary works could find their ways into translation in those days, which were regarded as revolutionary or progressive works. During the period of the Great Cultural Revolution there was a large number of translated literary works for restricted circulation which were regarded as "heresy" and used as objects for ideological criticisms, including memoirs written by Anglo-American political personages, works by militarist Japanese writers and modernist novels by Latin-American writers (Kong, 2000: 145).

Translation is like a bridge that brings the source ideology and the target ideology together, both of which may be relatively compatible with each other or absolutely not. Besides, what cannot be ideologically tolerated for the target reader at one historical time may be welcomed, even as classic or fashionable, at other times. Therefore, the translator may exert his subjectivity and resort to different strategies, so as to guarantee the conformity of his translated text to the expectations of target readers.

In brief, as a key factor of socio-cultural constraints on the translator, ideology determines the production, circulation, and acceptability of translated texts. But translators are not innocent bystanders of cultural prejudices, but rather active participants contributing to particular cultural constructions.

3.5 Ethics

Translation is also influenced by ethics, both important preliminary norms governing the translator's source-text selection and initial norms governing the acceptability to the target culture. On the one hand, if the SL ethics appears shocking to the target culture, translators may adapt it to the dominant ethics prevalent in the target culture. On the other hand, if translators object to the dominant ethics of their time, they may introduce the SL ethics to combat and destroy the dominant ethics.

Yang Zilin, when in 1903 translating the English novel, *Joan Haste* written by H.R. Haggar, removed anything that may pose offence to Chinese feudal ethics which took up a dominant position in the Chinese people's daily life: the plots in the original dealing with the first romantic encounter between the hero and the heroin, Henry and Joan, Henry's determined resistance to his parent's instructions and Joan's pregnancy out of marriage were all intentionally left out in his translation, which turned out to hit a great success in terms of the applause from readers and reviewers at the time. Directly opposite to Yang's practice, Lin Qinnan and Wei Yi, retranslated the same novel in its entirety in 1904, yet with the result that their product was showed with severe abuses and harsh attacks on the part of readers and critics. Obviously, the different feedback from the readership these two versions of the same novel received results from the fact that Yang's version tallied with the expectations of the readers and their ethical standards at the time while Lin-Wei's did not.

Another prominent example should suffice. Huxley, in his work *The Evolution Theory and the Ethics*, once referred to the name of Hamlet and with no further details offered since Hamlet was well known to every reader in England. In Yan Fu's translation, however, this name was translated as "xiaozi", a filial son in Chinese (Wang, 1997: 122). In this case, Chinese feudal ethics produced a telling constraint on Yan Fu. Obviously, he added the detailed information after the name of the character in the consideration that Hamlet was unfamiliar to the Chinese readers when he did the translation. But such practice exactly proves the constraints driven by Chinese feudal ethics. As we know, Chinese feudal ethics advocate that children should be obedient and filial to their parents. A son like Hamlet, who avenged his father, would of course be praised as filial son by Chinese readers. That is why he crowned Hamlet with the title of "xiaozi", which is evidently different in meaning from "a child who loves his parents" in the eyes of English-speaking readers.

3.6 Morality

Morality is concrete, historical, with regional and national features. Moral norms belong to Toury's preliminary norms governing the selection of the source text and correspond to Toury's operational norms governing the linguistic choice. Moral differences are fully displayed in languages and texts. On the one hand, two languages may use the same term to express different phenomena. For example, the English word "nature" can be used to show children's love for their parents, but the Chinese word "tian xing" usually refers to parents' love for their children. This is the major reason for which Zhu Shenghao rendered "nature" into "xiao" (meaning "filial" in Chinese) many times in his translation of Shakespeare's *King Lear* (Wang, 1998).

On the other hand, different peoples may label the same phenomenon with different or even opposite moral judgments. For instance, it is impolite and inquisitive to ask about a friend's salary in England, but it is intimate to do so in China. Burning one's wife to death is extremely immoral and illegal in most countries, but in India it is acceptable.

In fact, moral difference may bring trouble to translators and oblige them to adopt flexible translating strategies. There are quite a number of vulgar words in Shakespeare's dramas. While translating these words, Zhu Shenghao, constrained by Chinese traditional moral judgments of sex and literary language, had to give up his personal translation principles for the time being to "purify" these words (Zhu, 1998: 26).

In these cases, the translators' attitudes and translating skills were influenced by a kind of force caused by moral differences, which to the source culture is centrifugal, but to the target culture is centripetal. Of course, moral difference may affect translation in the opposite direction. In the case of moral difference, if a translation is closer to the target culture, it is target-culture oriented; otherwise, it is source-culture oriented. Which kind of translation a translator prefers concerns the moral gap, cultural communication, cultural stability, and the translator's tendency.

3.7 Religion

Compared with morality, the religious constraint on translation is more compulsory and more rigid. For anti-mainstream translators, moral trial is intangible and spiritual, while religious trial is often tangible and material, sometimes even going to the extreme of capital punishment. Therefore, religion can also affect translators' selection of source texts as well as their choices of the translation readership and translating principles.

With regard to the selection of source texts, translators need to be especially cautious, because religion usually has a very limited tolerance of heterodox works and translations. For instance, in the sixteenth century, Casterio's translation of Thirty Dialogues added to Calvin's hostility against him and rendered Calvin to decide to execute him because it seemed to Calvin that the interpretation of *The Bible* in this translation were blasphemous. In fact, before the trial it was already decided that Casterio should be sentenced to death. If he had not died from cruel persecution, he must have been burnt to death as many "heretical" predecessors.

There are similar examples in Chinese translation history, too. It was also for religious reasons that in certain historical periods the translation of western books, including religious books, was forbidden. Even when the ban was already lifted, translators had to be on their guard. For instance, when Lin Shu translated *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, he crossed out or simplified its religious contents in order to get himself into some unavoidable trouble. Another example is the translation of *The Koran*. It was not until 1981, about one thousand years after Islam was introduced into China, that the first complete Chinese translation of *The Koran* was published, which was the fruit of the Chinese government's enlightened religious policy.

And finally, religious belief also wields its influence on the choice of translation strategies. If there exists something in a chosen foreign text that is considered as offensive or unacceptable to the target religion, translators tend to adopt domesticating strategies. Take for example a Hebrew translation of Shakespeare's sonnets to the young man. In this Hebrew translation by Schwartz, the gender of the addressee is changed from male to female. As a result, the sonnets become love poems, unequivocally directed to a woman, in a striking contrast to their original intent. Gideon Toury thought Schwartz's behavior was not difficult to account for, if in light of the prevailing religious belief of the period: in the early twentieth century, the Hebrew translations, for the most part, were produced by "observant" Jews, or, at least, by Jews who had had intensive religious training and for an audience of the same backgrounds, for whom "love between two men was simply out of bounds" (Toury, 2001: 118).

Of course, there may be some other socio-cultural norms that tend to constrain the translator's behaviour in the process of translation. The translator can make his subjective role prominent by manipulating of the source text.

4. Conclusion

These norms, which underlie social and cultural establishment, tend to impose constraints on the translator's behavior in the entire translation process. The constraints are certainly inevitable, since the acceptability of the translated text remains the primary concern of most translators. But on the other hand, norms are descriptive in nature as well. We cannot deny the descriptive nature of norms while admitting their inevitable constraints on the translator's behavior. It is the descriptive nature of norms that provides the great possibility for the translator to exert his subjectivity in the translation process. It can be realized through the translator's active manipulation on the source text by adopting some translation strategies, such as adaptation, omission and total rejection.

In the context of cultural studies, the translator should be an active creator in the translation process. He cannot

be excluded from his fore-understanding structure in the dynamic process of interaction with the source text. He cannot be a bystander in the face of cultural conflicts and clashes. Inevitably the translator will feed his own knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes into his translation. Thus, his subjective role could be achieved.

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Table 1. The relationship between the subjectivity of the translator and the socio-cultural norms