



A Paradigmatic Turn in Recent Translation Reception Study: Toward an Empirical Trend

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Abstract. In translation reception study, a rudimentary sub-field in Translation Studies (TS) with controversial accounts and views, several paradigmatic turns have brought about refreshing insights and promoted the heated issues to move beyond extant disciplinary boundaries and restrictions. This paper first presents a brief overview of how the recent decades have witnessed a proliferation of paradigmatic turns in TS in terms of cultural, sociological, technical, economic, and cognitive thought and practice. By mapping translation reception study into a digital-driven setting, I attempt to expound the changes, reforms, and fashions in current research scope and academic foci, and contribute to a viable outlook on prospective research regarding theoretical models, readership, and diachrony. Toward an empirical trend, plausible exploratory and explanatory solutions are likely to unravel the secret of how global translation products circulate and how they are received by target audiences, readers, or users.

Keywords: translation reception · research paradigm · empirical trend · literary translation

1 Introduction

Research paradigms refer to “the set of common beliefs and agreements shared between scientists about how problems should be understood and addressed” [1]. Since a new paradigm is likely to emerge that will replace existing paradigms [2], disciplinary turns grow mature when current events or discourses are possibly involved with contradictions, irregularities, opposition, and fierce debate [3]. As far as Translation Studies (TS) is concerned, interdisciplinary cooperation has contributed to various positive findings, whereas the discipline as a whole is still at state of borrowing methods and techniques from other disciplines, thus generating much-cited paradigmatic turns in the past century. The research paradigm in the recent translation reception study displays an empirical trend extending to a more fluid field where new models and approaches take the shape of transformation, convergence, as well as divergence.

2 A Brief Overview of Paradigmatic Turns in Translation Studies

2.1 Cultural and Sociological Turns

From a traditional perspective, TS is regarded as a linguistic study where the equivalence between the source language and target language weighs. However, the choice of the texts

to be translated, as well as the omission, deletion, and commentary of the translated texts go beyond linguistics-concerned issues. First articulated by Bassnett and Lefevere [4], the cultural turn of TS introduced the concepts of “rewriting”, “manipulation”, “ideology”, “patronage”, and “hegemony”, and by combining the historical view and contextual factors, extended the research scope to the sociological and cultural elements affecting the translators and translation process, thus challenging the text-oriented tradition favored by the linguistic school.

Despite the breakthroughs brought by this turn, scholars gradually realize the existing research lack enough attention to the translation producers, the production process, and the social value of these translated texts. Correspondingly, the sociological turn value how translation activities play a role in culture and society and generate impacts on them. During this turn, drawing on ethnography and fieldwork methods from sociology [5], [6], [7], researchers delve into the power relation hidden in the different stages of the translation process where the external factors make a subtle influence on translators’ decision of translation strategies.

2.2 Technical and Economic Turns

As FIT (Federation Internationale des Traducteurs) 20th World Congress themed “Man vs. Machine – the future of translators, interpreters and terminologies” was held in Freie Universität Berlin in 2014, coupled with the progress in computer science, computational linguistics, Internet and big data, as well as the advent of computer-aided translation software such as Trados, Déjà vu, MemoQ, more attention in the academic field has been given to topics including machine translation post-editing, translation project management, cloud translation, translation memory, natural language processing. Cronin argued that the technical turn in TS was generated by a great shift in modern translation modes which requires exquisite and systematic re-investigation of translation and translators in traditional settings [8].

The digital era has witnessed positive outcomes for the potential values of language, especially its additional economic values. Accordingly, some professions and industries based on language and texts have emerged and language economy, as a new economic form, has drawn wider public attention. As a commercial activity, translation and language-related services, for example, language training services, aim to obtain language-related benefits through developing and utilizing language [9].

2.3 Cognitive Turn

Under the interactive background among modern information technologies, neuroscience, and psychology, TS embraces the empirical, interdisciplinary, and comprehensive features of these disciplines, reflected in constantly creative methodologies and paradigms, such as corpus-based studies [10], eye-movement studies [11], keylogging studies [12], and screen-recorded studies [13].

3 Mapping Translation Reception Study in a Digital-Driven Setting

3.1 Changes in Text Modes and Fields

From paper media to digital media, the way texts are produced, stored, and disseminated has undergone dramatic changes. From a symbolic perspective, the manifestation of a linguistic unit has been extended from simple abstract symbols to multi-media symbols, from static written symbols on paper to dynamic symbols driven by digital media [14]. With a constant increase in digital file forms, such as websites, eBooks, and streaming media, digital text in different forms of storage needs to be processed with the aid of different software and platforms. Narrative works featured with digital three-dimensional hypertext are created through hypertext and hyperlink technologies, and more attention is paid to multi-media symbolization, dynamic three-dimensional, hypertext features, and 3D virtual effects.

In terms of content, translated texts have experienced a shift from a single field to diversified vertical fields, including financial services, game localization, life sciences, engineering and manufacturing, aerospace, tourism and retail, language technology development, media, etc., according to Slator 2022 Language Industry Market Report. As the global epidemic has further boosted demand for audio-visual services such as interpretation, dubbing, and subtitling, as well as for more practical and entertainment texts, the audience's demand for the user experience of such texts is also growing diversified.

3.2 Reforms in Translation Technologies and Process

In the era of digital culture, the reforms in translation technology lead to the transformation of translation mode towards collaboration and crowdsourcing. The rapid development of translation editing, machine translation, computer-aided translation technology, intelligent voice transcription, and recognition technology has lowered the threshold of digital translation technologies. The grassroots have the opportunity to present their translated texts on the Internet. The amateur translation practice, which takes "crowdsourcing translation" as the pioneer, breaks the original linear translation production chain through cooperation and online translation.

The "user-generated translation" [15] is especially embodied in the industry of Chinese online literature, namely, Chinese web novels, where an increasingly high demand in overseas reading markets has required a higher standard on the updating speed and translation quality of the released novels. In this current market, driven by the sophisticated progress in machine translation, the leading enterprises have adopted the MTPE working flow to facilitate the global circulation of Chinese web novels. However, the unsatisfied reading appetite of overseas readers has contributed to the emergence of translated web novels especially provided with machine translation in the fandom community (e.g., <https://lnmtl.com>). The frequent engagements in web novels and MTPE show the irreversible trend of technology-enabled translation in digital-born literature.

3.3 Fashions in Recipient Environment and Behaviors

With the development of social media and the rise of social reading platforms, the previously private reading behaviors and reading purposes are presented in an increasingly open and free environment, in turn promoting user participatory culture [16]. In these social reading platforms, the individual completes self-presentation by publishing notes, writing comments, adding a book list, and so on. To this extent, digital footprints are generated through various reading behaviors such as browsing, selecting, reviewing, and sharing. In that process of digital reading, the textual trace is the result of a series of consumer production behaviors such as marking, commenting, textual researching, extending, questioning, and giving thumbs-up and thumbs-down. The individuals' explanation, summary, and comment on the text in the reading process reflect the deep meaning processing of individuals.

In this field of translated texts, the translators and the audience read, observe, and evaluate the translation quality at the same time, forming a multi-discourse field in the digital environment. Apart from sharing their reading experience online, participants from all walks of life are enabled to evaluate the accuracy, style, and fluency of the translation, which in return benefits the circulation of translated works worldwide.

4 Outlook on Prospective Research in Translation Reception Study

With constant advances in digital technologies, research methodologies, theoretical frameworks, and research design deserve much more up-to-date rethinking in Translation Studies [17]. As far as the translation reception study is concerned, the following questions are supposed to be addressed. Who are the recipients? What is received? Where does the translation reception take place? How does translation reception happen? What effects does translation reception generate? What are the possible reception traces? And to which media? Cautious attention should be given to the chronological lens through which the above questions are concerned.

4.1 Adopting Compatible Theoretical Frameworks in Different Settings

In the digital era, numerous translation phenomena have emerged, which calls for suitable theoretical frameworks to conceptualize these brand-new occurrences in TS. In translation reception study, several scholars have put forward prominent theoretical models to try to define or conceptualize the keywords related to reception effects.

Researchers from the school of cognitive poetics value the retention of translation effects so that translators are required to achieve the equivalence of cognitive effects on both source readers and target readers during their reading experience [18]. In cognitive literary studies, the reception of translated literature is closely concerned with the issues of readers' cognitive responses. By drawing upon the concept of "foregrounding", "conceptual metaphor", "cognitive setting", "mental space", and "text world theory", the schema theory underlines the cognitive process when readers interpret the translated texts, which requires empirical research on the cognitive variables in the effects of translation on readers [19].

Chesterman bridged concepts in translation sociology by putting forward three levels of translation reception, namely, reaction, response, and repercussion [20]. Encouraged by Chesterman's bold attempt, Gambier extended this reception framework to the context of audiovisual translation studies and addressed legibility, readability, as well as viewers' preferences and habits in the following "3R": response (perceptual decoding), reaction (psycho-cognitive issue), and repercussion (attitudinal issue). He argued that "reception, perception, reader, reading, effect are all important elements of metalanguage that need further discussion" [21]. Methodologically, with the growing visibility of readers' online expressions, translation reception study could borrow solutions from art consumption, literature communication, and sociology to inquire about the expectations, interpretations, or suggestions of the real or implied readers on reading/viewing strategies as well as translation strategies. Specific methods can be adopted, such as online questionnaires and cloze texts. Due to individuals' micro experiences and perceptions, a potential hazard is an inadequate attention to cultural, historical, and sociological factors in a broader sense.

4.2 Discriminating Readers with Well-Rounded Variables

The extant research classifies several potential categories of readership, which has generally recognized the distinction between implied readers and imaged ones. Suojanen et al. emphasized "actual readers" and divide them into four blocks, where user attitudes towards translation products could be probed with the help of social sciences research, such as questionnaires and interviews [22]. In terms of individual readers versus readers as a community, Fish first viewed readers groups as interpretive communities [23], and Sedo stressed the social dimension of readers' reception by examining the forming of communal readers in book clubs and reading groups [24]. Hickey distinguished professional readers and lay readers while criticizing translated works [25], and creatively, Chan gave more attention to the subtle behaviors between bilingual readers and monolingual readers [26].

Things become complicated in audiovisual translation (AVT) reception study when the hearing and sight impaired are taken into consideration. Gambier summarized a bunch of variables related to different viewers in the reception study, including age, sex, education background, reading skill, reading habits, reading rate, oral and reading comprehension in one's mother language, frequency, and volume of AVT consumption, AVT habits, command of foreign languages, degree of hearing loss, age of onset of hearing loss, type of language and daily use, despite the consensual variables, such as professions, socio-economic backgrounds, as well as language proficiency.

Taken as literary studies, the traditional literary translation reception study usually adopted text analysis with a prominent lack of empirical grounding or compelling supporting evidence. Given possible differences among readers or consumers of translated products, prospective research may try to follow an inductive approach to derive authentic data from the readership market through qualitative and quantitative methods involving coding, to delve into a plausible category of variables among real readers, which is likely to promote a sub-topic – Reception Statistics.

4.3 Valuing the Trace and Diachrony in Reception

Regarding the issue of dissemination and reception in TS, diachronic descriptions should be given from the perspective of participants, periods, regions, driving forces, influences, images, etc. The importance of tracing back the forming of translation reception contributes to the key to the forming of the classics through the dynamics of diachrony. Since individuals' reading experiences are highly engaged in communal interaction in the digital era through social media, which lays the foundation for collective memory, translation reception study may go beyond the scope of TS towards a bigger picture involving media study and social study.

As Kuipers argued translator's creative decisions could shape what the audience sees, hears, and interprets [27], how texts can be received by experiencing translated media over time deserve valuable attention. The digital environment forms a communication field among readers and readers, as well as among readers and translators who used to be regarded as "invisible". These two kinds of communication modes would influence each other's interpretations of a certain translation work or product. With the exposure of translators who would have a chance to be the spotlight in a digital setting through social media, how translators' involvement and readers' opinions would generate mutual effects on each other deserves more academic attention.

5 Conclusion

As far as the empirical trend is concerned, an exploratory or an explanatory study is intended to offer a contextualized description of the real readership in a certain translation reception case, instead of attempting to generalize universal conclusions. Since "Translation Studies is interdisciplinary nature" [28], and "translation theory is never dogmatized" [29], translation reception study could benefit from this nature and go toward a more fluid field by drawing upon various disciplinary methods and views to unravel the secret of how global literature circulates and are received by target audiences or readers across space and time through translation, the exploratory and explanatory answers to which are likely to bring refreshing insights to translation history, ideological history, cultural history, and social history.

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