

Multi-interpretation in Translating Poems

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Abstract—In poetry translation, it is ordinary that different translators have different translation of the same poem. It therefore wants to explain the implicit factors from the viewpoint of Hermeneutics by analyzing the connection between the textual meaning of a poem and the textual significance of a poem, the connection between the author's intention of a poem and the textual intention of a poem, trying to explicate the fundamental ingredient in poems translation--multi-interpretation.

Keywords—the textual meaning; the textual significance; the author's intention; the textual intention; multi-interpretation

I. INTRODUCTION

Poem is a special literary style, by which a poet can express his deep and complex feeling with a few words. Surely, these words are improved over and over, and only a few of them can be united to make a certain framing of mind, in which a reader appears to be listening to what the poet intends to say, or discussing with the poet. That is why poetry is a pretty literary style. But the difference between the author's intention of the poem and the textual intention of the poem is unavoidable for poly-semantic words are utilized in a poem, hence the author's intention can't be deduced from the poem literally, and the reader has to read between lines for proper understanding. As a result, a translator can't translate a poem until he understands it, and he is expected to practice his imagination to embody the uncertainty of the poem. If understanding a poem means the translator's accepting the poem, embodying the uncertainty of the poem means the translator's interpretation of the poem. Therefore the translator plays the role of a reader or receptor as well as an interpreter. This reveals that poetry translation is closely connected to Hermeneutics to a certain extent.

II. TRANSLATION AND HERMENEUTICS

Hermeneutics is referred to as the science or theory of interpretation. The term "hermeneutics" is originated from Hermes, which is the name of the messenger in Greek mythology, taking charge of commerce, traffic, animal, speech, etc. It is said that in the message he sent, Hermes usually added his own interpretation to them. The term "hermeneuo" is a verb in Greek, a synonym of the term "interpretali" in Latin and "interpret" in English (Cai Xuemei, 1997:12). Hermeneutics has undergone three periods: traditional, contemporary, and present-day Hermeneutics. Traditional Hermeneutics had developed from Hermeneutics of ancient Greek, Hermeneutics of Middle Ages, to Hermeneutics of German philosophy by F. Scheleiermacher and W. Dilthey. Although there are some

differences in the developing of traditional Hermeneutics, there is still an unchanging thing—stressing the objectivity of a text. Hence a reader is expected to understand the author's intention by reading the text over and over. That meets with the spirit of traditional translation theory that a translator is supposed to understand the intention of the author and transmit it in his translation.

But at the start of 20th century, Heidegger and H. G. Gadamer, two representatives of contemporary western Hermeneutics, hard criticized traditional Hermeneutics. They proclaimed that there wasn't the intention of the author and it was vain searching for the author's intention, a text was free from the author when it was produced, having no relations with him. In their opinions, translators should focus on something that the text is about, without thinking about the intention of the author. However E. D. Hirsch thought that nobody but the author could decide on the meaning of a text, i.e. the intention of the text, the text only expressed the author's words and intention. Therefore, the translator should esteem the author's intention, i.e. the most suitable meaning of the text as well as the most rational standard of interpretation.

The core of traditional translation theory is rooted in the fact that the translator should look on the intention of the author as the base of translation. But it was impacted, even overthrown by contemporary Hermeneutics. Hirsch criticized contemporary Hermeneutics from the viewpoint of objectivism. He thought that the translator should persist in searching for the meaning of the text, reconstructing the intention of the author, and the intention of the author could be obtained via continual exploration and interpretation. He disapproved of Gadamer's opinion that interpretation was the significance that the interpreter added to the meaning of the text, the "horizontal view" of the author combined with the "horizontal view" of the interpreter since the interpreter's understanding of the text was on the base of his own experience. Hirsch insisted that Gadamer ignored the intention of the author and over-stressed the significance that the interpreter added to the meaning of the text, the text turned out to be the object interpreted at the interpreter's will and the intention of the author was lost in the interpretation. Hirsch thought that the interpreter was able to find the intention of the author and it should be thought of as the base of interpretation.

While translation is re-writing of a text based on understanding, the text isn't properly translated until it is right interpreted. Understanding is the first step of

interpretation, and Hermeneutics emphasizes the historicity of understanding, the creativity of understanding, and the subjectivity of understanding. Hermeneutics also stresses the multiplicity of language's meaning, the dynamic of language, and the difference between language and speech (Cai Xuemei, 1997:13). Traditional Hermeneutics highlights the intention of the author, viewing it as the starting-point of translation; but contemporary Hermeneutics underlines the textual intention, considering it as the foundation of translation. Hirsch thinks that translation is a conversation between a translator and an author via a text, hence both the intention of the author and the intention of the text should be esteemed, and the intention of the author is born before the intention of the text.

III. MULTI-INTERPRETATION IN TRANSLATING POEMS

A. *The Textual Meaning Vs the Textual Significance*

By using polysemous words, a poem gets a complex structure of various ideas. It will certainly result in the phenomenon that different translators have different translation of the same poem, called multi-interpretation in poetry translation. There is a great space of imagination for interpreters. The phenomenon of multi-interpretation can be exemplified by different versions of the following poem composed by Du Fu, a poet of the Tang Dynasty in China. “丛菊两开他日泪，孤舟一系故园心” was translated into two extremely different versions:

- The myriad chrysanthemums have bloomed twice. Days to come—tears. The solitary little boat is moored. But my heart is in the old-time garden (Amy Lowell).
- The sight of chrysanthemums again loosens the tears of past memories. To a lonely detained boat I vainly attack my hope of going home (William Hung).

The two versions' difference shows that different translators have their own comprehension and interpretation of the same poem. Therefore, it seems that the intention of the poem is not easy to be understood and translated. Hirsch provides us a good explanation that there are two reasons that the textual meaning is considered uncertain and hard rewritten by translators. The first reason is that experiencing the textual meaning is not identical to the textual meaning itself. Everyone has his own experience, and others cannot have the same experience as the author, while then textual meaning is definite, so it can be rewritten. The second one is that the comprehension of a text is far from being the exact comprehension of it. Someone is able to understand the text, but this doesn't mean that he can understand it exactly.

Experiencing the textual meaning is special experience of the author when he composes the text. It is not hard for us to understand that everyone hasn't the same experience as the poet Du Fu had when he created the poem. However, the poem's meaning can be rewritten because it has already been there since it was composed. Has Amy Lowell and William Hung got the exact comprehension of the intention of Du Fu? Does the Chinese term “开” mean the bloom of the chrysanthemums or the drop of the poet's tears? Does the

Chinese term “系” mean that the boat or the poet's heart is tied? Does the Chinese term “他日” refer to someday in the past or the future? Is it on the day when the poet feels the same sorrow as the two autumns when he saw the blooming of the chrysanthemums? Does the Chinese term “泪” refer to the tears of the poet or the dew in the chrysanthemums? Is the Chinese term “泪” dropped in the past or in the future? Is the hope of the poet placed on the boat by which he could go home, or tied to the boat that never sails? Is the poet's heart tied to the boat or has going home and seeing the chrysanthemums in the garden of his own home (A. C. Graham, 1982:225-227)? From the discussions, it is easy to see that the exact comprehension of the text cannot be gained. But translators have never given up their efforts in seeking for better interpretations and translations of the text. The following lines are A. C. Graham's version of it: “The clustered chrysanthemums have opened twice in tears of other days, The forlorn boat, once and for all, tether by homeward thoughts.” This version is better than the first two versions because the Chinese term “他日泪” is translated into “tears of other days”, instead of “tears of another day” misunderstood by interpreters that the day is in the past like Hung's version “tears of past memories”, or in the present as Lowell's version “Days to come—tears”. Graham's version “tears of other days” conveys the day in the past or in the future.

The differences between the three versions show that multi-interpretation is unavoidable in poems translation, and different understanding of a text result in different interpretations of the text. It seems rational for Gadamer to believe that understanding is diachronic, and it is true of object—the text, and also the subject—the reader who is a real being in the history. In this sense, Gadamer drew a conclusion that the intention of the author (the meaning of the text) “itself” didn't exist, and it had been diversified into a series of “others” —different significance of the text in different times. Therefore he believed that it wasn't possible for the interpreter to re-express the intention of the author (Xie Tianzhen, 2000:60). Nevertheless, Hirsch held that while understanding of the text was diachronic, it didn't mean that the intention of the author had been altered. There was only a change in the textual significance. The intention of the author, i.e. the textual meaning, was actually eternal; and the textual significance referred to the significance of the textual meaning. Furthermore, the textual significance was a connection between the reader and the textual meaning, changing with times and subjective conditions of the interpreter (Wang Yuechuan, 1998:140). The most outstanding feature of a poem is that there are many different significance of the same poem via analyzing from different viewpoints, and the intention of the author is the most suitable criterion of the significance. So the textual meaning is definite and can be rewritten, translators are able to interpret and translate the text. However, the textual significance has been changing, so multi-interpretation occurs inevitably in translating poems, for translators are legitimate to interpret and translate the text in different ways or times.

B. *The Author's Intention Vs the Textual Intention*

Why did Lowell, Hung and Graham re-write pretty various versions of the same poem? The major reason was that they, the three translators, interpreted the same poem from different viewpoints. And this would change the poem's significance, instead of its meaning. Furthermore, the poem was not able to convey wholly the author's intention, because some polysemous words were used in the poem and there was difference between words and thoughts. While the textual meaning of the poem was closely connected with the author's intention, there were still difference between the author's intention and the textual meaning (also defined as the textual intention). The following is a poem composed by Li Shangyin, one poet of the Tang Dynasty in China. “锦瑟·李商隐 锦瑟无端五十弦，一弦一柱思华年。庄生晓梦迷蝴蝶，望帝春心托杜鹃。沧海月明珠有泪，蓝田日暖玉生烟。此情可待成追忆，只是当时已惘然。”

- The Sad Zither· Xu Yuanchong: Why should the sad zither have fifty strings? Each string each strain evokes but vanished springs; Dim morning dream to be a butterfly; Amorous heart poured out in cuckoo's cry. In moonlit pearls see tears in mermaid's eyes; From sun-burnt emerald let vapor rise! Such feeling cannot be recalled again; It seemed long-lost e'en when it was felt then.
- Jeweled Zither· John A. Turner: Vain are the jeweled zither's fifty strings; Each string, each stop, bears thought of vanished things. The sage of his loved butterflies day-dreaming; The king that sighed his soul into a bird. Tears that pearls, in ocean moonlight streaming. Jade mists the sun distills from Sapphire Sward. Why need their memory to recall today?—A day was theirs, which is now passed away.”

Although there are only eight sentences in this poem, ancient Chinese literary allusions are quoted in four sentences of them. It seems that the intention that the poet want to convey through the text of poetry has exceeded the poetry text's intention. Therefore, conjecturing the poet's intention and the poem text's intention is the first step of understanding the poem for interpreters and translators. The object is the poet's intention, since it exists before the poem text's intention. Interpreters and translators try their own best to interpret and translate the poet's intention.

There are two different main interpretations to the poem, in the Qing Dynasty's of China. The first is believed that the poem was composed to mourn the dead wife of the poet, and the second that the poem was composed to repent the fate of the poet himself. Qian Liangze and Zhu Yizun are two representatives of the former interpretation, while He Zhuo the representative of the latter one (Zhu Chaowei, 2002:376). Qian maintained that it was a mourning poem, according to Tang Yin Shen Ti, he quoted another poem of the poet Li Shangyin, Fangzhong Qu, which said that when the poet went back his house, the zither used by his wife remained there, but she died. Furthermore, Qian held that Fangzhong Qu annotated the poem Zither. In the poem, the zither referred to the musical instrument used by the poet's wife. Seeing the zither, the poet was induced to miss his dead wife.

And then Zhu interpreted the poem from the zither itself, the details of the interpretation tended to the intention of mourning the poet's wife. He explained that the zither once had 25 strings, and each was divided into two parts, thus 50 tunes was formed, like the Chinese term “弦” (string) which signified the meaning of wife, thus the Chinese term “断弦” (the dividing string) meant the death of wife. The sentence “Each string each strain evokes but vanished springs” meant that the poet's wife died at the age of 25. The words “butterfly” and “cuckoo's cry” meant that the death of the poet's wife, and the words “vapor rise” meant the buried wife of the poet. According to the version of the poem, by Xu, he believed that the poet's intention was to mourn his dead wife, because such phrases as “the sad zither”, “Dim morning dream”, “amorous heart”, “cuckoo's cry”, “tears in mermaid's eyes”, and “such feeling cannot be recalled again” conveyed the poet's feeling to mourn his dead wife. While another representative He held that the poem was composed to repent the fate of the poet himself. In collection of poems by the poet—Li Shangyin, which was published in the Song Dynasty of China, the poem “Zither” is the first poem of the collection. He Zhuo held that it demonstrated the theme of repenting the poet's fate. The first sentence of the poem “Zither”, liked an actor's opening statements at the beginning of a play. And it brought the way to the poet, through which the poet was able to say what he wanted to say. In the second one, the phrase “thought of vanished things” showed the poet's intention. It seemed that the third and the forth tended to say that the poet could realize his ideal only in dreams or the next life. And the fifth and the sixth showed that the poet was disappointed with his official career, though he possessed remarkable talents as priceless as pears and jade. Furthermore, the seventh and the eighth expressed the innermost sadness of the poet. Turner agreed with the opinion of He, as that can be further proved by evidences in his translation, the phrases “vain”, “bear thought of vanished things”, “day-dreaming”, sighed his soul into a bird”, “jade mists”, “recall”, “a day was theirs”, and “pass away”, all of them showed that the poet's innermost sadness to his fate.

Different comprehensions lead to different interpretations. Zhu and He learned something different in the poem from different perspectives. Zhu held that the object of the poem is the dead wife of the poet, while He that the object of the poem was the poet himself. The jade mentioned in the poem experienced the same fate in both their interpretations, but it is the symbol of the poet's dead wife in the former interpretation, the symbol of the poet's talent. It resulted from the difference between the poet's intention and the poem text's intention. It was the difference that led to different comprehensions of the same poem. And different comprehensions resulted in different interpretations. As a result, there were different versions of the same poem in translating poems.

IV. CONCLUSION

There are various interpreters and translators in different times, do their best to gain better comprehensions and interpretations of the poems when they understand, interpret, and translate them. On the basis of historical environment

and composing intention of the poet, they guess various possibilities from various viewpoints. But their own different backgrounds or experiences and the historic of poems will result in various interpretations and versions of the same poem in poems translation. Translating poems is re-write of poems based on understanding and will be finished through interpretation. To a certain extent, the phenomenon of multi-interpretation in poems translation results from the historicity of interpretation. All in all, the phenomenon of multi-interpretation in poems translation is unavoidable, connected with the textual meaning and the textual significance of a poem, with the author's intention and the textual intention of a poem.

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