

An Exploration of Translator's Identity From the Perspective of Literary Translation

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Regardless of the development trend of translation studies, the existence of translation is inseparable from the participation of translators. From the perspective of literary translation, this paper analyses and points out that a translator plays different roles in the course of translation. He is a reader, an author, a creator, and a researcher. These identities are independent from each other but inseparable as a whole.

Keywords: translator's identity, reader, author, creator, researcher

Introduction

Translation is the reconstruction of language, an interactive process among the translator, the text, and society. In any translation endeavor, the translator, as the determining agent within the translation process, plays an indispensable role. The translator's reinterpretation and re-expression of the author's concepts contribute to a unique identity. A successful translation is not only the crystallization of this reinterpretation and re-expression but also a testament to the translator's distinct identity. Dryden once vividly compared the translators to "dancers in shackles", implying that despite the constraints, they still manage to dance gracefully. Throughout the translation process, what roles should translators assume? What identities should they possess? Clarifying these points will undoubtedly have a positive impact on the entire translation activity, thereby promoting the translation to convey the information of the original work more accurately and perfectly.

To transfer the meaning of a literary work from one language to another is a multi-layered, multi-faceted process, rather than a flat, unidirectional one. It encompasses conceptual meaning, contextual meaning, formal meaning, stylistic meaning, and cultural meaning (Liu, 2001). Translation is an exceptionally complicated process. It is not merely a matter of linguistic conversion; it is also a cross-cultural activity. In the process of translation, a translator cannot simply adopt the perspective of the reader or the author and engage in translation activities. The author believes that the translator's identity should be multifaceted—simultaneously a reader, an author, a creator, and a researcher. This paper aims to discuss the issue of the translator's identity in the context of literary translation.

The Translator as a Reader

The translator is first and foremost a reader of the original work, although their identity determines that he/she is a special reader. The translator's personal cultivation, academic training, aesthetic appreciation, etc.,

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will all influence their cultural mindset and real-life choices. A prominent figure in contemporary aesthetics, Hans Robert Jauss, asserts that a literary work has no meaning and vitality without being read. It is through the reader's reading and interpretation that the work is endowed with inexhaustible significance. The activity of translation serves as a red thread, consistently linking the original author, the source text, the translator, the translated version, and its readers (Luo, 1990). From the perspective of the source text, the translator is also a reader, but not an ordinary one. An ordinary reader often seeks only a rough understanding and grasp of the work, unlike the translator who strives for a profoundly thorough and comprehensive understanding in order to achieve specific objectives. An ordinary reader's interpretation of a literary work is characterized by a greater degree of subjectivity and interpretive freedom, due to the absence of the obligation and responsibility of conveying the work's content. A general reader's appreciation of a literary work not only permits the addition and omission of elements, but also allows for a superficial skimming without a need for comprehensive comprehension. Generally speaking, the understanding and interpretation of a work varies with the readers' cultural cultivation, life experience, artistic appreciation, and aesthetic interests. As Lu Xun once remarked, in regard to *A Dream of Red Mansions*, "The very theme is viewed differently depending on the reader's perspective. The Yi Jin scholar sees the changes; the Taoist sees the obscene; the talented sees entanglement; the revolutionary sees rebellion, and the gossip sees palace secrets". Lu Xun's words sufficiently illustrate this point. Therefore, the translator is first of all a reader of the original work, but his/her identity determines that he/she is a distinctive kind of reader.

The translator is different from an ordinary reader in that he bears the responsibility and obligation to convey the source text. He must not only thoroughly read the source text but also penetrate the layers of meaning between the lines. Consequently, the difficulty faced by translators surpasses that of general readers. The renowned Chinese translator Fu Lei once stated,

Though translation is close to the tongue, it must be rooted in artistic cultivation. Without a sensitive heart, without fervent sympathy, without appropriate discernment, without considerable social experience, without sufficient common sense, it is difficult to achieve a thorough understanding of the original work, that is, even if it is understood, may not be able to deeply comprehend. (Fu, 1979, p. 119)

Translators possess distinct quality requirements compared to general readers. They must be proficient in both languages and cultures, and must extensively grasp and understand the social, historical, and cultural contexts of the time the work was created, as well as prevailing customs and styles. Additionally, they must delve into the author's philosophical perspectives, artistic viewpoints, distinctive artistic features, and linguistic styles, conducting in-depth and meticulous study to the greatest extent possible. Only by doing so can the translated work accurately convey the original author's expressed intentions.

In addition, translators and ordinary readers read from different psychological backgrounds. As readers are not burdened with the responsibility of conveying the content, their imagination can be free from the constraints of the social environment, while the translator's task involves the artistic re-creation of the text, and their creative output is inevitably influenced by factors, such as the content of the source text, the author's style, the social environment, and the acceptance of the readers. Therefore, a translator with a reader's identity, while preserving the original work's integrity, strives to unearth and convey the latent significance of the work. This type of reading, in essence, aligns with what is referred to in the field of literary studies as "interpretation", a far more diligent form of "interpretation" compared to general reading.

The Translator as an Author

The translator is not only a reader of the original work, but also the author of the translation, which is the extended form of the original work's life. As the author of the translation, the translator does not need to select materials, plan the structure, or devise the narrative as the original author does. Nevertheless, the translator's contemplations and descriptions must align seamlessly with the original author's intentions. In this role, the translator must relinquish their own thoughts, submit to the will of the original author, and become an embodiment of the original author's voice in another language.

As a literary translator, one must possess not only proficiency in two or more languages, but also the literary cultivation, linguistic sensitivity, expressive capabilities, insightful observations, and imaginative thinking abilities of an author. Only then can a translator profoundly understand the original work, grasp its essence, and convey the artistic atmosphere where content and form merge harmoniously. In the process of translation, the translator effectively assumes the role of the author and adopts the author's identity.

When the echoes evoked by the work in the translator's heart are so profound and clear, and the harmonious resonance between the minds of the author and the translator is so inextricable, with both displaying equally skilled artistic techniques, the translator almost feels like the author's predecessor and the author's reincarnation. Thus, they pour boundless enthusiasm, affection, and devotion into striving to emulate and vividly present the original work's brilliance. At this point, translation becomes a collaboration of two great souls transcending centuries and borders, yielding a rare tale and miracle in literary history. (Liang, 2006, p. 27)

Mr. Lin Yutang possessed deep literary attainments, with proficiency in English and a masterful command of the Chinese language. This cultural identity enabled him to "blend Eastern and Western cultures into a unified vision, using an egalitarian perspective, a broad mind, and rich imagination, aspiring for these two cultures to engage, comprehend, interconnect, and merge" (Wang, 1998, p. 5). He translated Shen Fu's *Six Records of a Floating Life*, a work that embodies the art of Chinese living and cultural spirit, into Western languages, which was warmly welcomed and repeatedly published. Without the literary cultivation and writing prowess of an author, without a similar depth of life experience and sensitivity to art, without a high level of aesthetic appreciation and imaginative thinking, it is absolutely impossible to produce high-quality translations. As China's literary master Mao Dun stated,

Such translation is not simply the technical change of linguistic form, but rather requires the translator to profoundly comprehend the author's artistic process through the linguistic form of the original work. They must grasp the essence of the original work and find the most suitable affirmation within their own thoughts, emotions, and life experiences. Then, they should utilize a literary language appropriate for the original work to faithfully reproduce both its content and form. This translation process merges the translator and the original author into one, as if the original author used another language to write their own work. (Mao, 1984, p. 15)

This demonstrates that the translator's identity as an author is profoundly evident in the translation process.

The Translator as a Creator

Literary translation possesses its own uniqueness. The diversity of literary language expression revealed at various levels of words, phrases, and discourse often creates a uniqueness beyond linguistic representation. In a certain sense, the creativity of the translator is no less than that of the original author, and at times, it may even surpass it. This is mainly evident in two aspects: Firstly, the original author's creative process is confined to their own method of writing, their personal choice of material, their worldview, and their style. Conversely, a translator

can render works from different eras and various authors, touching upon distinct content, materials, eras, worldviews, and styles. When translating, a translator must consider not only the textual structure, immediate context, and the cultural spirit of the original work, but also the cultural background of their own era, nationality, and class, as well as the needs of the readers. Additionally, they must account for the work's ideas, style, specific historical context, the author's worldview, creative intentions, artistic techniques, overall artistic style, and the potential artistic effects and social impact of the translation. Literary translation is both constrained by the original text and imbued with creativity. Its essence lies in transcending the constraints of language and conveying the content and cultural spirit of the original work. Only when the translator is able to maintain the same creative mind as the original author as far as possible, and re-create the essence and cultural spirit of the original work with the cultural background of the nation, is it possible to achieve a good translation that is not both in harmony with the original author, and accepted by the target language readers as well.

Literary translation is the re-creation of art. A translation is far from being equal to the original work; it has its own value. Translation is a self-contained body that incorporates the translator's subjective aesthetics and historical existence, and it is a re-creation of art. Of course, the translator's creation must be subject to certain restrictions and must be faithful to the original as a prerequisite; otherwise it is the destruction of the original work. Proper creativity of literary translation stems from the translator's subjectivity. The translator should not only make great efforts to integrate the spirit of the whole text into his heart to shorten the distance between himself and the original author in the process of mental cognition and resonate with the original author in his mind, but also take into account the cultural background and acceptance level of the readers of the target language and re-create his own understanding of the original work,

The Translator as a Researcher

In addition to the three identities mentioned above, the translator's role as a researcher is also of great importance. Literary translation is inseparable from literary research, and literary research forms the foundation of literary translation. Even if a translator possesses strong bilingual skills, they cannot fully understand the original work without studying the author and their works. It is crucial to explore the elements related to the material and themes of the translated work, as well as the historical context depicted in the work. The translator's understanding and grasp of the original work should encompass two aspects: understanding the linguistic connotations of the original work and mastering knowledge beyond the text itself. Generally, before translating a literary work, a translator needs to thoroughly read the author's major works and study their characteristics, as well as explore the author's biography. As literary works cover a broad range of content, encompassing various aspects of culture and society, philosophy, aesthetics, and more, a competent translator should also strive to accumulate knowledge of history, geography, socio-cultural history, customs, music, visual arts, and more. They should possess a profound cultural cultivation and extensive cultural knowledge; otherwise, they may fall short in their translation efforts.

In conclusion, the translator's identities as a reader, author, creator, and researcher are interconnected and form an integrated whole during the translation process. These identities cannot be isolated or treated as independent entities. Translators must consider the distinct roles played by these four identities in the process of translation; otherwise, it is likely to lead to the failure of translation. Therefore, translators must constantly acknowledge and embrace their multiple identities; only in this way can they ensure the high-quality and taste of the translations.

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