

The Evolution of Translation Standards From a Hermeneutic Perspective

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Modern hermeneutics centers on the relationship between the “author, text, and reader” in interpretation. Various schools emphasize different aspects, shifting perspectives in translation studies from the author’s original intention to the reader’s experience, acknowledging translator subjectivity, and focusing on textual analysis. Traditional standards of “faithfulness” and “equivalence” have evolved into diverse standards advocating individual differences, promoting tolerance and plurality in translation.

Keywords: hermeneutics, understanding, meaning, translation criterion

Introduction

Modern hermeneutics primarily revolves around the relationship between the “author, text, and reader” involved in the interpretation process. Peng Qifu (2003) divided hermeneutics into three stages based on this relationship: The first stage is represented by the “author-centered” hermeneutics of Schleiermacher and Dilthey; the second stage is represented by the “reader-centered” hermeneutics of Heidegger and Gadamer; and the third stage is represented by the “text-centered” hermeneutics of Ricoeur. Each hermeneutic school addresses issues related to meaning and methodology, often presenting differing viewpoints on these matters.

Thus, questions arise: Is there an independent and objective meaning of the text? What is the relationship between the text’s “objective” meaning and the reader’s “subjective” interpretation? Is there a single correct understanding? These questions are also of concern in translation studies. Therefore, this paper aims to examine the core concept of “understanding” across various hermeneutic schools, analyze how the evolution of the concept of understanding influences the shift in translation research models, and explore the issues of meaning and translation standards in translation studies, with the goal of providing a broader perspective.

“Author-Centered” Theory of Hermeneutics: Reconstruction and Experience

In handling the relationship among the author, text, and reader, Schleiermacher and Dilthey adopted the stance of “author-centered theory”. According to this theory, the significance of a text lies in expressing the author’s original intent, and the reader’s interpretation of the text aims to grasp that original intent, making the author’s original intent the core governing the entire understanding activity. The purpose of hermeneutics is to reproduce this original meaning. Their ultimate goal is to “understand the author better than the author understands himself” (Dilthey, 2001, p. 76). In order to grasp the author’s original intent, readers must strive to

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avoid subjectivity and relativity in interpretation, transcending the specific historical context, in which the interpreter exists, to comprehend the author's subjective intentions behind the text.

The general hermeneutics pursued by Schleiermacher and Dilthey, with its focus on the author's original intent, aligns closely with the pursuit of fidelity and equivalence in both Chinese and Western traditional translation theories. Traditional translation theories, influenced by binary oppositional philosophy, place the author and the original work in an absolute position of authority, suggesting that the translator's task is to diligently pursue the reproduction of the author's original intent.

However, translators are unique individuals with distinct qualities, leading to subjective and creative experiences during the translation process. Each experience is non-replicable, making translation more than a mere replication of the authors intent. A correct understanding of the original text forms the foundation for accurate translation. Translators must master both languages, grasp the author's hidden subjective world, and reconstruct the context of the original work.

“Reader-Centered Theory” of Hermeneutics: Existence and Fusion

Heidegger dismissed the methodological approach of general hermeneutics, viewing understanding as a fundamental mode and characteristic of human existence, thereby shifting hermeneutics toward ontology. His student Gadamer embraced this transformation, establishing a comprehensive philosophical hermeneutics framework that regards understanding itself as the subject of study.

Gadamer argued that historicity of understanding is not an obstacle but a prerequisite for generating meaning. The interpreter brings their biases and horizons, while the text's historicity shapes its horizon. Understanding is a process where these horizons merge, transforming the text into a work in progress, with meaning realized through the reader's interpretation. Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics shifts focus from the author's intent to the reader's historicity, emphasizing the translator's subjectivity and allowing exploration of phenomena like misreading, retranslation, cultural filtering, and creative rebellion.

As a result, different readers' interpretations of the same text, or even the same reader's interpretation of the same text, are marked with personalized labels. This explains why the same original work appears in different versions when translated by different translators, and even why the same translator may produce different translations under the influence of various contemporary ideologies. Especially in the context of literary translation, which has a nature of recreation, the translator inevitably integrates their understanding and interpretation of the original work, leaving an imprint of their own language style, life experiences, and personal temperament on the translated work.

Under the influence of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, traditional translation criteria like “faithfulness” and “equivalence” are challenged, suggesting that translated texts differ only in interpretation, without a hierarchy of superiority. This raises questions about the objective meaning of the original text and the criteria for judging translations. Gadamer distinguishes between “legitimate prejudice”, which aids understanding, and “erroneous prejudice”, which hinders it, implying that a minimum level of objective meaning exists for comprehension. However, since prejudice often operates unconsciously, judging interpretations remains complex. Ultimately, Gadamer posits that the validity of interpretation is determined by the hermeneutic situation, emphasizing diverse understandings as sufficient. As he put it, “If we generally have understanding, then we always understand in different ways, and that is enough” (Gadamer, 1999, p. 203).

“Text-Centered Theory” of Hermeneutics: Interpretation and Dialogue

In Ricoeur’s hermeneutics, “A text is any discourse that is fixed through writing” (Ricoeur, 1987, p. 152). He argues that the importance of the text has been neglected in both Dilthey’s “Author-Centered Theory” and Gadamer’s “Reader-Centered Theory”. To balance the relationship between the author, the text, and the reader, Ricoeur believes that the focus of understanding and interpretation must shift to the text itself. This perspective is significant for translation studies, as it means that the object of translation returns to the text.

Writing gives the text “independence from the author’s intention, the context of the work, and the original readers” (Ricoeur, 1987, p. 154). This creates a state of uncertainty for the text’s meaning, potentially addressing all readers. On the one hand, the text’s independence makes it crave interpretation, allowing meaning to be realized; on the other hand, readers achieve their ultimate self-understanding, self-generation, and self-renewal through the mediating language of the text during the reflective stage of reading and interpretation. In short, the construction of the self and the construction of meaning are simultaneous.

In the context of various postmodern currents where meaning is constantly dissolved, Ricoeur’s call to return to the text is of more realistic guidance for translation activities and research. Ricoeur not only fully affirms the value of the text but also acknowledges the creativity and plurality of reader understanding and interpretation, achieving a unity between the objectivity of textual meaning and the subjectivity of the reader’s perspective.

Ricoeur’s translation philosophy parallels his textual interpretation theory, emphasizing the distancing of meaning. He innovatively presents translation as both intratextual and intertextual, highlighting the inevitable encounter between the self and the other. Translation fosters dialogue and openness to differences, illustrating that the same story can be told in various ways, embodying the translator’s role in expressing meaning through different words.

Ricoeur’s textual hermeneutics and translation philosophy emphasize meaning diversification without clear standards for interpretation or translation, yet they suggest ways to address these issues. Each reading is unique, reflecting the realization of textual meaning within its context, making the pursuit of complete equivalence in translation unrealistic. Good interpretations and translations are inherently diverse. This leads to the broader concept of intratextual translation, which asserts that the same story can be told in multiple ways, advocating for a grand view of interpretation that embraces various translation models. Thus, “We should move towards a grand view of interpretation in translation, allowing for the existence of multiple translation models, and break out of the deadlock of translatable and untranslatable” (Wu, 2008, p. 17).

Conclusion

Therefore, under the influence of the evolution of hermeneutic perspectives, the focus of translation studies is undergoing continuous shifts. From the relentless pursuit of the author’s original intention to the assertion of the translator’s subjectivity, to consideration of the reader’s feelings, and eventually grounding itself in textual analysis, each shift in concepts and methods provides rich theoretical resources for translation studies. This allows for the exploration of translation activities from various perspectives and angles, thereby deepening the understanding of translation research. The most notable transformation is reflected in the impact on translation standards, evolving from traditional standards of “faithfulness”, “equivalence”, and “faith, expressiveness, and elegance” based on the author’s original intention, to diversified standards that embrace individual differences. Translation standards are gradually moving toward tolerance and multiplicity. This also explains why the understanding of a text is always similar to that of others, yet never identical.

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