Is Achieving a Scientific and Coherent Account of Translation an Illusion? — Looking Into the Traditional Approaches to Translation Studies

HONG Xiyao[a],*

[a]Foreign Language Department of Guangdong University of Finance, Guangzhou, China.
* Corresponding author.

Abstract

In the past several decades, translation studies have been developing quickly, lots of theoretical fruits have been achieved. Nevertheless, up to now, few theoretical fruits can be said to form a scientific and coherent account for translation studies, with Gutt's theory as expounded in *Translation and Relevance* (2004) being one of some brilliant exceptions in this regard. Through unveiling the methodological advantages that underlie the success of the Gutt's theory, the present paper purports to provide a reference for future translation scholars in forming a scientific and coherent account for translation studies.

Key words: Gutt's theory; Methodological advantages; Traditional approaches; Translation studies

INTRODUCTION

What is translation? For a student majoring in translation studies, a standard answer he or she may provide is "translation is a science, an art and a craft". It is easy to understand translation as an art and a craft, the study of which is in fact what has been concerned by scholars of translation studies for centuries. The idea that translation is an art and a craft has been so deeply-rooted that many scholars even utilize it as a tool to relieve themselves from the seemingly formidable task of reaching a comprehensive account of translation in the form of coherent and homogeneous theory. Fortunately, believing translation is also a science, many other scholars have been engaged themselves with achieving a scientific understanding of translation. However, although much endeavor has been taken and insightful views have been put forward, a scientific account of translation still seems to be an illusion until the advent of literature like the relevance-theoreticaccount of translation proposed by Ernst-August Gutt (2004).

1. THE MAJOR DIFFICULTIES IN FORMULATING A SCIENTIFIC ACCOUNT OF TRANSLATION STUDIES

Why the task of forming a scientific account of translation is so daunting? In other words, what are the major difficulties that are in the way of reaching a coherent understanding of translation in a scientific manner? Gutt in his book identifies three main difficulties or problems.

One is due to the multidisciplinary nature of translation studies. Since translation is related with so many other factors except linguistic ones, and these factors belong to different areas of research such as psychology, communication theory, anthropology, semiotics and sociology, hence to many scholars the task of reaching a comprehensive account of translation in the form of coherent and homogenous theory only seems to be out of the question.

The second major difficulty, as Gutt points out, lies in the problem of domain, i.e. to define what translation is about, or what translation is not about. The approaches taken in the past literatures on translation studies mainly fall into three lines, namely, the intuitive approach, the domain-delimiting approach and the culture-oriented approach.

The intuitive approach defines the domain of translation studies according to the intuitions shared by

theorists without any attempt at doing it in a systematic way. Though this approach has been taken most often in the past, it is obviously not constructive to the scientific understanding of translation, as it can only lead to a "mass of uncoordinated statements" (Wilss, 1982, p. 11).

The domain-delimiting approach is to define the domain of translation studies by setting up boundaries between what translation is taken to be and what is not taken to be. Because of such boundaries, this approach has been criticized as potentially normative in that will exclude all those phenomena which do not fit the criterion set by the definition. However, as we know, translation studies, as a humanity science, is very complicated and very different from those natural sciences, with the former mainly being phenomena-studying-oriented, while the latter the axioms-finding-orientated. Translation studies can never be as objective and scientific as those natural sciences in the strictest sense. There are no objective axioms for us to find, the only thing we can do be just to study various phenomena so as to reach comparatively more objective understandings of sets of phenomena. As is understood at all, truth is always relative; it can be true only under certain conditions, rather than under all conditions. Therefore, delimiting the domain in the study of any humanity science such as translation studies, is much the same as controlling variables in the axioms-finding process of natural science, it is both legitimate and necessary if a relatively scientific account of the discipline is to be achieved. In fact, Gutt himself has followed this approach in *Relevance and Translation* (2004) by ruling out certain unrelated phenomena such as "covert translation" from his general account of translation. In doing so, he is successful in making all the other phenomena he dealt with accountable from the relevance-theoretic perspective.

The culture-oriented approach, proposed as a reaction to the second approach which is said to be prescriptive, is represented by Toury's "Descriptive Translation Studies' as embodied in his *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond* (2004). A crucial step in the approach is to establish a corpus of target texts which are considered to be translations, and in this way the domain of investigation is thus formulated. Regarding the question of how to distinguish translations and non-translations, Toury suggests that a 'translation' will be taken to be any **target-language utterance** which is presented or regarded as such within **the target culture**, on whatever grounds … (1985, p.19f; see Gutt, 2004, p.6; emphasis my own). Although hailed as achieving "a considerable widening of the horizon, since any and all phenomena relating to translation, **in the broadest sense**, become objects of study" (Hersmans 1985, p.7; see Gutt, 2004, p.6, emphasis my own), as we can see in its very definition of the domain, this approach excludes all the other translation-related phenomena in the cultures except "the target culture" from its corpus. In fact, by only focusing on those "target-language utterance",

the assumptions drawn from this approach can only be said to be culture-specific. Since translation studies are an intercultural discipline, only when intercultural assumptions are made can we say that the study is carried out "in the broadest sense". In this sense, the drawback of this approach is obvious enough in itself.

Now that the three main traditional approaches to the problem of domain are not satisfying, then what shall we resort to define the domain of translation studies? Before giving the answer, let us now first look at the third difficulty which is also in the way of formulating a general account of translation studies, i.e. the problem of evaluation and decision-making.

Since any decision-making in, of or related with translation is carried out within the "black box" of human brains which is in fact one of the most complicated objects in the world, hence the problem of decision-making seem to be unconquerable at the present stage and it has seldom been touched upon if not neglected altogether. What has been most often discussed is the problem of evaluation which is the result of that decision-making process. By looking at translation as products, a large amount of theorists have made investigations in this field, and many insightful views have thus been put forward. One of the most crucial underlying concepts guiding their investigation is "equivalence", or its past synonymies like "faithfulness", "fidelity", and so on.

For those theorists who are engaged with the investigation on the problem of "equivalence", the first question that they need to tackle is "equivalent to what". In other words, what is/are the aspect(s) that need to be made equivalent to that of the original? For this question, a lot of suggestions have been made, including Kade's (1983; see Gutt, 2004, p.10) "content level", Nida and Taber's (1969) audience response, Koller's "textual effect"(1972) and five frames of reference (denotation, connotation, textual norms, pragmatics, and form(1983; see Gutt, 2004, p.10), and the currently most prevailing concept "function" (House, 1981; de Waard and Nida, 1986), to name just a few. All these aspects are identified as the "super" factor(s) which is the departure point of their investigation.

Having decided on that, then the next pending problem for the theorists in their pursuit for a general account of translation is to make further classifications of these super factor(s) and then assign status to all the sub-categories, for it is obvious that not all sub-categories enjoy the same status with each other. Take Koller's "five frames of reference" model for example, the five super factors (denotation, connotation, textual norms, pragmatics and form) themselves do not share the same status in a given text: In an informational text, "denotation" may enjoy the highest status while "form" may enjoy the lowest status; however, in an expressive text such as a poem, the situation may just be the opposite. In a word, in order to lend generalizing and explaining power to these super factor(s) so as to make them operative as guiding

principles for evaluating translation as products, what the theorists need to do next is to subcategorize the super factor(s) and then give them hierarchical status. However, as we know, circumstances keep changing; everything related with translation seems to be variables. With the view of deconstructionism, we know that even meaning itself is indeterminate. Therefore, the hierarchical schemes designed by these theorists will be text-specific rather than universal. To make them operate as universal principles for evaluating translations, the theorists will have to subject themselves to inexhaustible designing of "hierarchies". In this way, the theory thus formed actually loses its appeal in terms of generalization power, since, after all, one of the basic charms of theory-construction is to allow us to account for complex phenomena through simpler generalizations.

2. THE PROBLEMS WITH TRADITIONAL APPROACHES TO THE NATURE OF EQUIVALENCE

Up to now, it seems that what is widely recognized as the most fruitful area in translation studies turns out to be falling into a never-ending game of categorizing and status-ranking. This is, in fact, what many theorists worldwide have been undertaking throughout history. Although this kind of investigation has indeed contributed insightful views to translation studies, it can carry us nowhere towards the goal of achieving a general account of translation studies except leaving us amid a dazzling proliferation of frames of reference for equivalence. Then, what is at the root of the problem of equivalence?

On the whole, it seems that these theorists fail to recognize the very nature of equivalence. As we have mentioned in passing in the above discussion, equivalence has three basic natures.

First, it is comparative rather than evaluative in nature. For it to be operative as an evaluative principle, another assumption should be added, e.g. something like "the more equivalent the better". However, such assumption has at least two in-born defects: One is that it is hard for us to quantify equivalence in terms of "more" or "less", for the list of factors that can be compared is infinite; the other is that even if we can quantify equivalence in terms of its subcategories, it still hard to hold water, for the simple reason that it is often not the case that the more equivalent of a translation the better it is in reality. History has offered many examples of successful translations which are not at all more equivalent than those unsuccessful ones. In this sense, we cannot say they are "better" than those more equivalent ones. Therefore, the comparative nature of equivalence itself makes the reliance on it as a departure point of theory-formulation obviously problematic.

Second, equivalence is text-specific rather than universal. Different text types have different requirements for equivalence. Since every single element in the context where a translation occurs has a bearing on the effect of translation, there will never be an end to the task of listing aspects that need to be taken into consideration. For example, for the translation of the same text type drama, apart from pragmatic and other contextual factors that need to be taken account of, the linguist factors alone that call for much attention is a long list including "rhythm, metre, verse, rhyme, nominal-verbal style, choice of words, proverbs, puns, metaphors, euphony and cacophony, gammatico-rhetorical figures, syntactic means … intonation, tempo, pauses and a few others" (Hofmann 1980, p.23; see Gutt, 2004, p.15). What are their respective statuses when translated? Can we design a permanently effective and universally applicable hierarchical scheme of these factors for drama translation in general? The answer is negative, for the simple reason that other contextual factors should be taken into consideration when designing such a hierarchical scheme. However, contextual factors are variables which may even have a bearing on the production and interpretation of a 'meaning in the same text, this entails that a hierarchical scheme can never be universally applicable, and in this sense, equivalence is always text-specific. Since there will be no upper limit to the number of texts that one society can produce, and accordingly no upper limit to the texts that may be translated into another language which forms the corpus of descriptive translation studies, hence, theoretically there will also be no upper limit to the task of hierarchies-designing and classification. This explains why different classifications and hierarchies keep increasing with new phenomena related to translation coming up constantly.

Third, equivalence is dynamic rather than static. From the deconstructionist point of view, even the most "invariable" has now become variable, i.e. meaning, which is the most basic element in translating and has been regarded as a constant in the past. Now the deconstructionism tells us that it is not the case any longer, and thus meaning is indeterminate and is a variable too. Bearing this in mind, it seems that all the previous remarks on equivalence made before the advent of deconstructionism are "static" in nature due to the fact that the fundamental assumptions shared by all those remarks is that there is a "meaning" in the original which is determined and fixed for translators to deal with while translating. Briefly, from the deconstructionist point of view, even those labelled as "dynamic" equivalence such as that proposed by Nida（1964）are in fact not "dynamic" at all but "static" at its heart.

CONCLUSION

From the above discussion, we can tentatively attribute the defects of traditional approaches to translation studies to at least one fact—they fail to recognize the

basic nature of translation (or phenomena related to translation). For example, the multidisciplinary approach only identifies one of the surface features of translation studies, i.e. multidisciplinarity. Recognizing this, theorists representing this approach thus extend their descriptive-classificatory framework to other domains like psychology and sociology, which only make the already complex and constantly keep increasing descriptive-classificatory frameworks even more complicated. By looking at translation as a kind of "product" or "process" of "translational behaviour" (van den Broeck 1980; see Gutt 2004, p.21), the descriptive-classificatory approach also subjects itself into infinite work of description and classification, since the "product" or the "process" of translation can never be exhaustible.

Then what on earth is the fundamental nature of translation? Since translation studies is a kind of humanity science, as we have mentioned before, the study on all phenomena related with translation has to be carried out in the human's minds, in this sense translation is best to be understood as a kind of cognitive-psychological activity. And since translation involves negotiation among communicator, linguistic stimulus and the audience which constitute the basic elements of a communication, hence it is also basically a kind of communicative act. Therefore, translation is a kind of cognitive-psychological communication. In fact, as a kind of activity carried out by the information-processing faculties of our mind, "translational behaviour" is a special type of communication. Hence all the features related with translational behaviour can be subsumed under that of communication.

At this point, then it is only too natural that for a general and scientific account of translation, two shifts in the traditional approaches to translation studies have to be made. One is a shift in the domain of the theory away from "**translational behaviour**" to "**communicative competence**", this in fact answers the question raised at the beginning of 2.3 regarding the domain of theory. The other is a shift away from the "**descriptive-classificatory approach**" to "**explanatory approach**", through which, theorists of translation studies need not to subject themselves to the infinite task of classifying and hierarchies-designing while trying to give an orderly description of complex phenomena related with translation, instead, the only thing they need to do is to understand the complexities of communication in terms of cause-effect relationships. Since relevance theory is a kind of communication theory, it provides a congenial ground for the investigation on translation as a communicative act. Under the relevance-theoretic framework, these two shifts can be made possible. In a word, with the help of theories like relevance theory, the goal of achieving a scientific and coherent account of translation is not an illusion, and this is also what Gutt has proved in his *Translation and Relevance: Cognition and Context* (2004).

REFERENCES

de Waard, & Eugene, A. N. (1986). *From one language to another: Functional equivalence in Bible translating*. Nashville: Nelson.

Ernst-August, G. (2004). *Translation and relevance: Cognition and context*. Shanghai, China: Shanghai Foreign Language Education and Press.

Gideon, T. (2004). *Descriptive translation studies and beyond*. Shanghai, China: Shanghai Foreign Language Education and Press.

House, J. (1981). *A model for translation quality assessment*. Tübingen: Gunter Narr.

Nida, E. A. (1964). *Toward a science of translating: With special reference to principles and procedures involved in bible translating*. Leiden: E. J. Brill.

Nida, E. A., & Taber, C. (1969). *The theory and practice of translation*. Leiden: E. J. Brill.

Wilss, W. (1982). *The Science of Translation: Problems and Methods*. Tübingen, Germany: Niemeyer