Source Text Revisited: Nature and Role

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Abstract

Source text is a term inevitably involved so long as translation is concerned. The form of source text and its relationship with the target text is very much subject to the way translation is conducted. Based on an analysis of stable versus unstable text, the source- target relationships as well as the ways source text offer information, source text has been herein revisited and destablized as dynamic rather than static, a combination of texts instead of a single one. It is argued that what source text can offer is a broad spectrum of relatable information.

Key words: Source text; Equivalent; Relatable; Offer of information

INTRODUCTION

Source text is a term inevitably involved so long as translation is concerned. It refers to "the text (written or spoken) which provides the point of departure for a translation" (Shuttleworth & Cowie, 2004, p.157). In terms of how much a translation can depart from a source text, scholars hold varied views. "The questions of meaning, equivalence and translatability became a constant theme of translation studies in the 1960s" (Munday, 2001, p.37) and for such scholars of linguistic schools as Nida and Newmark, equivalence as a major concern is required as much as possible. On the contrary, for scholars in target text-oriented translation studies (Toury, 1980, 1995) , a broader view of what is qualified as a translated text seems to allow any deviation from the source text. As such, growing scholarly discussion is basically on the final variants of target text ranging from imitation, adaptation to pseudo-translation. However, source text, which is much more complicated than a mere single text, draws much less attention.

Based on a certain translated text, it may be constructive to trace which is the source text, how it exists and what role it plays in translation. That is to say, as the departure for a translation, source text does not necessarily mean a single static text. A translation may have one or more than one source text, it may be either established in written forms or not and it plays different roles in translation as well. This paper is a probe into existing forms, nature and roles of source text in translation with examples from a Chinese context, which in turn provides an illuminating insight into translation.

SOURCE TEXT: STABLE OR UNSTABLE

Text, in a traditionally common sense, is something established and accordingly it's the same case with source text. On this basis, scholars of linguistic schools underpin "equivalence" from varied perspectives. Eugene A. Nida distinguished formal equivalence and dynamic equivalence, Peter Newmark differed communicative translation from semantic translation and Koller described five different types of equivalence ranging from denotative, connotative, text-normative, pragmatic to formal equivalence, just to mention a few. So long as "equivalence" is used to justify a translation, source text is at the core. In this sense, the stereotype of source text is a single written one. However, As the notion of "text" is extended in poststructuralist thought as a dynamic process

of meaning, what a text is has undoubtedly been widely broadened. It's the same case with what a translation is. In Toury's definition (1995, p.35), a translation is regarded as any target-culture text for which there are reasons to tentatively posit the existence of another text, in another culture and language, from which it was presumedly derived by transfer operations and to which it is now tied by certain relationships, some of which may be regarded within that culture as necessary and/ or sufficient.

In this definition, traditional "equivalence" between source text and target text gives way to "certain relationships", which needs to be detailed and specified. As mentioned above, the common way is to explore the variants of translation, but a clear idea of source text may help clarify the relationship since in historical settings, source text appears to be diversified in many ways. That is to say, for a certain translation, the source text as its departure can be further explored in terms of form, volume and roles.

When source text is considered as the starting point of translating, it is usually considered as established verbal text. For example, Catford (1965, p.20) defines translation as the "replacement of textual material in one language (SL) by equivalent textual material in another language (TL)" at the levels from lexical, syntactic to textual. These concepts denote that the source text is established as a written linguistic one. Nevertheless, Jackbson's framework of translation (1966, p.232), intersemiotic translation in particular, covers not merely verbal, but nonverbal sign system. Similarly, source text in a much broader sense, has also been extended from written text to other possible forms including oral, graphic, audio and the like, which falls into the category of multi-modal translation studies. It's noteworthy that source text is often highlighted in the discussion of source-target relationship while the source text itself, as an independent one needs further exploration in its volume, nature, and role in translation. To put it more specific, source text can be either stable (as commonly observed) or unstable (as often ignored). In addition to the usual stable written text, source text take some other forms.

Translation of Buddhist sutras in ancient China has ample examples for the diversity of source text. Sutra is said to be what Buddha said to his followers when he was alive and began to pass down with word of mouth. Although source text (*ben* 本) has been repeatedly touched upon in those widely-known prefaces on translation such as "案本而传" (follow the source), there was no recorded text at all in the very beginning and it was in this oral process that sutras gradually came into being as written texts. Prefaces of Buddhist sutras is a clear evidence with such descriptions as "外国法，师徒相传，以口授相付，不听文载" (word of mouth without written texts), "口授出之" and "口诵" (orally). Since no fixed source text existed, it's impossible to achieve equivalence on any linguistic level. Therefore, source text in this case is

a only carrier of original meaning and it's hard to identify precisely what the source text is.

What is more complicated and intriguing, in the following transmission, different versions have been developed for a given sutra, either a relatively complete one or an abbreviated one, which have been the source of the subsequent translation. "合本", as a frequent phrase about sutra translation, exemplifies this phenomenon. Different from "co-translation" which is finished by more than one translator, "合本" refers to the translation which is based on several different versions of a same sutra. For example, Zhi Mindu (支敏度) detailed the source texts of his translation of "shoulengyanjing" (首楞严经) in the preface. Those five texts he referred to were said to be rather different in length, grammar, diction and meaning and thus the translator had to make his own choice. Due to its unique origin and way of passing, it's quite common for sutras to be translated on several source texts. Arguably, the source text in this case can be more a combination of several texts than a single one. Likewise, Gentzler (2017: 168) studied translation of Hamlet in China and then put that " perhaps because of the linguistic and cultural distance, there has been less obsession with adherence to the original and more freedom to use already existing versions as the source". It's evident that source text may be much more intangible than a single written text.

It's similar to the unstable sources, as Pym discusses, of the medieval texts, which "were in fact constantly being rewritten, and translation was frequently perceived as another step in the chain of rewritings" (Pym, 2004, p.175). Guerrero (2009, pp.43-46) further proposes the binary opposition 'stable' versus 'unstable' sources in the discussion of news production. This pair of concepts can be drawn on here to facilitate the understanding of the source text in a general sense. Here comes one problem that "each source text is understood in a different way by each recipient so that there are as many source texts as there are recipients and this makes equivalence impossible" and another that some "do not aim at equivalence". (Göpferich, 2007, p.30) As a result, what catches most scholarly attention is stable source while unstable sources make equivalence impossible and the source-target relationship more complex.

SOURCE - TARGET RELATIONSHIP: FROM EQUIVALENT TO RELATABLE

The diversity of source text suggests that equivalence is a potential result only for translations with stable sources while in those translations without stable source it is not necessarily required. Given that source text may be either unstable as oral telling or in multiple texts, it's proved that "one can not assume a one-to-one relationship between a source and a target" (D'hulst, 2012, p.142). Instead, other alternatives can be zero-to-one or multiple-

to-one relationship. As a matter of fact, even a one-to-one relationship, it's not necessarily equivalence. As a wider range of activities such as adaptation, imitation and pseudo-translation are included, further departure from the source text has been explored. In other words, the source-target relationship is on a continuum where equivalence is just on one extreme with closest departure from the source, but others go much farther. It's hard, even unlikely to achieve equivalence to the source text in form, content and volume. In fact, equivalence is not the aim of translation in some cases.

Good examples can be found at the end of Qing dynasty in China when translation played a vital role and adaptation was quite popular. Translators made use of and then manipulated the source text. In other words, "considerable changes have been made in order to make the text more suitable for a specific audience or for the particular purpose behind the translation" (Shuttleworth & Cowie, 2004, p.3). At that critical historical moment, enlightenment is the major concern with the help of translations from foreign countries. Based on a source text, translation is often mixed with translators' addition and omission for their own purposes (Liao, 2010, pp.92-96). After outlining the source text, translators often made their personal interpretations, comments, or creations to meet the needs of readers. On one hand, although adapted and distorted, the source text on this occasion, can still be traced. On the other hand, no matter what the original themes in the source text had been, they could be adapted to satisfy the aim of social revolution and modernization. Social, scientific, adventurous, detective novels and the like have been translated to serve a common purpose and such well-known translators as Lin Shu and Yanfu have been involved in. Much deviated from source text, their translations were still widely accepted. "The approach led not only to a higher degree of readability but also allowed translators to impose their own ideas and social-political beliefs on to the translations, sometimes in a shockingly direct fashion." (Gentzler, 2017, p.198) The significance of source-target relationship and the part of translations in target culture have drawn enough attention, but at the same time it deserves deliberation as well what role on earth the source text plays.

Another extreme departure from the source text is pseudotranslation which in Toury's definition (1980, p.31) is "TL texts which are regarded in the target culture as translations though no genuine STs exist for them" while in Rado's definition (1979) is a TT that deviates too greatly from its ST to be considered a translation. For all the divergence between the above two definitions, it's a kind of translation that goes too far from source text and can hardly or never be recognized. Anyway, when a translation is regarded as even pseudotranslation, it bears some connection, more or less, with the source text/language. If not, it's a creation rather than a translation. As is discussed above, adaptation and pseudotranslation

under the umbrella term "translation" differ from each other in the distance from the source text.

Equivalence is only one of the many (at least several) source-target relationships, but it's noteworthy that there must be something in common to guarantee the role as source text of translation. Therefore, source-target relationship needs to be redefined no matter how it is discursive and meanwhile "a criterion is needed to determine the levels on which deviations are allowed or necessary" (Göpferich, 2007, pp.29-30). Otherwise, the border between translation and others like rewriting would be effaced. Even Zohar (1990, p.75) denies the value to discuss the probability that a translated utterance is identical with its original and proposes that "a more adequate question seems rather to be under what circumstances, and in what particular way, a target utterance/text b relates (or is relatable) to a source utterance/text a". The word "relatable" (which is quite flexible and inclusive itself) here is inspiring and revealing about source-target relationship. It is in a position to encompass nearly all the variants of translations no matter how far it departs from the source text so long as it is relatable to the source. Presumably, whether a text is related to another text in source language may be a possible way to discern types of translation including adaptation, imitation, trans creation and pseudo-translation. Since "relatable" is a word more inclusive than "equivalent", the role of source texts in translation can be partly justified.

NATURE OF SOURCE TEXT: OFFER OF INFORMATION

A source text, according to Scott (2012, p.3), is never static, but always in the process of composition and revision, a "process of potentially infinite extension" (Gentzler 2017, p.230). Hutcheon (2006) explodes traditional definitions of and loyalties to fidelity and instead turns to forms of intertextuality to make her points. She even uses "adapted text" instead of "source text," as all "originals" have already been adapted as well. Post-translation studies tend to destablize source text. Target text can be as equivalent as possible to the source and can also go as far as possible from the source. Now that the connection with the source is a basic to distinguish a translation from writing, it's imperative to clarify the nature of source text in the process of translation.

In "a plea for widening the scope of translation studies", translation studies is defined as "the field of research whose object is any mediated transformation of offers of information performed to fulfil specific functions and meet the needs of specific audiences" (Göpferich, 2007, pp.27-28) . Based on it, the role of source text can find its possible explanations in not only source text-oriented approach but also target text-oriented one. That

is, as the starting point of any translation, source text provides an access to the source culture and serves as the offer of information in translation activities. A critical question following is about the ways information is offered apart from one-to-one verbal equivalence.

Take translation of Buddhist sutras, for example again. The information in the source text, either oral or based on several versions, was gathered in translations. Daoan (道安), in his preface to *Daoxingjing* (道行经), compared three previous versions with a mixed reception. One (Zhu shuofo竺朔佛) followed the original closely subject to an oral version, one (Zhu Shixing朱仕行) simplified the original largely and another was faithful both in form and content. "Since the source sutra had been copied by hand and the chapters had been heavily edited, and since the usages and the sounds of the two languages were different, an oral translation could hardly bring out the meaning of the source thoroughly (得本)." (Cheung, 2006, p.72) Therefore, what's most important is the transmission of core message of Buddhist (委本从圣). Even if texts in Sanskrit (梵本) was available later on, existing translations were also an important reference. It can be found that translators gathered information, the words of Buddhist in this case, from the source text which existed either orally or in previous translations.

However, in the case of late Qing dynasty, the information in the source text, fictions in particular, was reinterpreted or even misinterpreted with intended aim. Since Liao Qichao (梁启超) contrasted the difference of fictions at home and abroad and addressed the social value of foreign fictions in enlightening the citizens, all kinds of fictions including political, historical, geographical, adventurous, educational and other ones have been translated in large numbers and endowed with the motivation of social evolution which, though in many cases, were absent in source text. Furthermore, other texts, not fictions at all, were claimed to be in disguise. What source texts offered at this time was could-be role that fictions were supposed to fulfil.

The situation was different in the subsequent decades around the 1920s when foreign literature was largely translated for the sake of literature. The information in the source text, notably the literary style, was imitated. It is found from the prefaces to the translations at the time that more focus was on such foreign literary schools as romanticism, naturalism, expressionism and realism or outstanding writers. This period is noteworthy and unique in that many translators engaged in writing in the wake of translations and they themselves are great writers. For example, Guo Moruo (郭沫若), Zheng Zhenduo (郑振铎), Zhou Zuoren (周作人) and many others are typical in this sense. Evidently, what source text offer is literary style which is followed and widespread in turn.

The examples above indicate that source text, as offer of information, plays multifaceted roles in translation.

The content, theme, literary style, or even the mere image in the source text can be borrowed. In a digital setting, source text as offer of information involves growing number of forms such as audio, visual, sensory and graphic and becomes increasingly intangible. Moreover, target texts, so long as relatable to the source text, differ in how much information represented, that is, the distance from the source.

CONCLUSION

Source text has been herein revisited and destablized. As discussed and exemplified above, source text is not static but probably dynamic, it may exist in multiple texts instead of a single one, and it can take varied forms. Moreover, what source text can offer is a broad spectrum of information. As translation studies widen its scope into the border with cultural studies, transfer studies, communication studies and the like, translation tend to cover a variety of departure from the source text. Accordingly, a better understanding of source text is conducive to a further exploration of translation activities.

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