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Retracing the History of "Word for Word", "Sense for Sense" Translation

—Confronting and Inheriting of the Ancient Roman Translation Theories*

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Abstract

With the help of manipulative theory put forward by Andre Lefevere, this essay corrected misunderstandings on translation views of influential Roman translators such as Cicero, Jerome and Augustine, pointing out that a hasty announcement on translator's opinion of "word-for-word" or "sense-for-sense" translation be not preferred. A close investigation on correspondent historical, cultural and political contexts has found new perspectives for the above Roman translators' translation views. Exploration on confronting and inheriting of ancient Roman translation theories not only displays the history of "word for word", "sense for sense" translation, but also serves as good examples to guide translation theory and practice.

Keywords

Word-for-Word, Sense-for-Sense, Ancient Roman Translators, Manipulative Theory, Confronting and Inheriting

1. Introduction

"Word-for-word" translation is generally considered as the rendering of text from an original language to the target language by following the exact words of the original text, while "sense-for-sense" translation emphasizes the idea of preserving the meaning of the write-up without obeying the exact grammar or structure of the original text. The debate on which approach is better runs through the history of western translation, and the exploration of this problem

can be traced back to the ancient Roman period when western translation originated. At that time, Cicero, Jerome, Augustine and other great scholars had already put forward opinions on "word-for-word" or "sense-for-sense" translation. Reviewing the questions of "word-for-word" and "sense-for-sense" translation can not only help to test translation theory and guide translation practice, but also help translators rethink the essence of translation.

It is generally acknowledged that among translators in ancient Rome, philosophers including Cicero, Horace and Quintilian preferred "sense-for-sense" translation, while theologians such as Augustine advocated "word-for-word" translation. St. Jerome thought that literary translation should be treated differently from religious translation (Tan, 2004: p. 36). He advocated "sense-for-sense" strategy for literary translation and "word-for-word" strategy for religious translation. The author here analyzed studies on translation theories in this period, finding that previous studies were mostly limited to interpreting the translation theories of specific translators without paying attention to the corresponding historical and cultural context. In fact, the mainstream ideology and the forms of poetics of the time when the translators were living played an important role in deciding translators' translation strategies (Lefevere, 2004: p. 48). Thus, the author selects Cicero, St. Jerome and Augustine as representatives in ancient Roman translation history, to explore the following questions: To what extent have the translation views of the above translators been misunderstood? What are the relations laying among different translation views, and what are the implications of these views?

To answer these questions, this essay first lists previous studies on translation theories of the three ancient Roman translators and points out misunderstandings on these translation theories successively. Afterwards, relations among the different translation views are explored. Implications of these views on translation practice are displayed at the end.

2. Close Readings on Translation Theories of Three Ancient Roman Translators

In this part, the author explores translation theories of three ancient Roman translators. Applying manipulative theory proposed by Lefevere, common misunderstandings concerning their translation strategies are investigated.

2.1. Cicero's Translation Theory Revisited

Examination of Cicero's translation theory can never be accurate without bearing in mind Cicero as an outstanding orator. Through translating orations from Greek into Latin, Cicero elevated his skill as an orator. Due to the aim of translation, his translation is unfaithful to the original.

Afterwards I resolved, and this practice I followed when somewhat older, to translate freely Greek speeches of the most eminent orators (Cicero, 2014a:

p. 7).

When Cicero grew up as an elite, he started to translate Greek philosophical works. It is worth mentioning that he translated some Greek works literally. Munday (2001) thinks Cicero's handing of such works aims to "move the listener", and "Romans would read the TTs side by side with the Greek STs" (Munday, 2001: p. 19). This point of view has been challenged by McElduff, who says Munday has put modern imagination onto Roman translators (McElduff, 2013: p. 113). Readings of Cicero's translation opinions find that although he adopted literal ways when translating these works, he speaks lowly of literal translation, and he thinks Latin is richer in vocabulary than Greek.

> The Latin language, so far from having a poor vocabulary, as is commonly supposed, is actually richer than the Greek (Cicero, 2014b: p. 12).

Cicero's most-often quoted utterance about translation lies in *On the Best Type of Orator*. This is a preface to a translation of orations from Aeschines and Demosthenes (McElduff, 2013: p. 110).

> I translated the most famous orations of the two orations of the two most eloquent orators from Attica, Aeschines and Demosthenes, orations which were ranged on opposite sides; I did not translate them as an interpreter, but as an orator, with the same ideas, forms and, as it were, shape, and with language fitted to our usage. In this I did not think it necessary to render word for word, but instead preserved every category and the force of the words. For I did not think that I should dole them out piece by piece to the reader, but rather, shall we say, pay them out by weight (Cicero, 1949: p. 365).

Cicero's utterances indicate that he speaks lowly of "word-for-word". However, "word-for-word" here cannot be equaled to literal translation, for "word for word" translation is more likely to be adopted by people who receive education emphasizing explicating words on an individual level, and never progress beyond this stage at Cicero's time (McElduff, 2013: p. 117). That is to say, "word-for-word" as a translation approach isn't raised up by Cicero, but an item generalized to be the counterpart of "sense-for-sense". Moreover, it is improper to simplify Cicero's translation view as "sense for sense". For one thing, although Cicero is talking about translation, his ultimate purpose is to defend himself as an authoritative orator (Liu, 2021: p. 8). Thus, whether his idea can be considered to be serious opinion concerning translation practice is in doubt. For the other, Cicero himself never used "sense for sense" to refer to his translation practice. "Sense for sense" hadn't been invented until St. Jerome's time. Thus, whether "sense for sense" is suitable to be viewed as Cicero's suggested translation strategy is in doubt. It may be more proper to refer to Cicero's translation opinion as being close to the "sense for sense" approach raised later by St. Jerome.

Besides, Cicero spoke highly of Latin, and he advocated to manipulate works written in Greek. This explains why Cicero objected "dole them (the original orations) out piece by piece to the reader". Only by combining the historical and cultural background of the translator and exploring the influence of mainstream ideology and poetics at that time can we fully understand his translation theory (Liu, 2016).

2.2. St. Jerome's Translation Theory Revisited

In the late period of ancient Rome, in order to save the crumbling empire, the ruling class took full advantage of Christianity. Thus, religious translation was naturally taken seriously (Tan, 2004: p. 24), and great translators like St. Jerome emerged.

Scholars generally accepted that Jerome emphasizes on using "sense-for-sense" translation in literary translation, while supports "word-for-word" translation in religious translation. As depicted above, Tan (2004) holds that Jerome believed "literary translation" and "religious translation" should be treated differently. Xie et al. (2009: p. 61) also claimed that Jerome preferred "sense-for-sense" translation for literary works, "word-for-word" strategy be adopted for Bible translation.

However, different views have been raised. Through comparative analysis of a large number of examples in the Bible translated by Jerome, Brown (1992) concluded that for the Old Testament "sense-for-sense" approach was actually adopted. Kraus (1996) also pointed out that Jerome's Bible translation adheres to "sense-for-sense" approach. By examining Jerome's translation preparation and the influence of religious politics and cultural context on his translation, Jiang (2013) claims that the common understanding of Jerome's translation theory is actually misreading.

More elaborated researches include: Venuti (2010) states Jerome has started an instrumental model in his Bible translation. "Jerome shares Cicero's belief that rhetoric translation, unlike its grammatical counterpart, can reproduce both the style and the meaning of the source text in the most polished form of the translating language" (Venuti, 2010: p. 12). However, Venuti speaks lowly of Jerome's translation view. He thinks it improper to see translation activity through an instrumental model. Furthermore, Jerome is inconsistent when talking about translation.

Redmann, through detailed statistical analysis, has found Jerome's Latin translation of the Old Testament differs greatly in word order from his original writings in Latin. The former has shown a clear adherence to word order of the original Hebrew texts (Redmann, 2020: p. 222, 223). However, the above statement doesn't always apply for Jerome's changes in his translation of different parts (Redmann, 2020: p. 230). Jerome's other translation from Greek into Latin has manifested a sense-for-sense feature, according to his own statement (Redmann, 2020: p. 233).

It can be seen that scholars haven't reached consensus concerning Jerome's

translation approaches. For literary translation, he claimed that a translator should march the original text, a captive, into his native language (Jerome, 2014: p. 26). As for religious translation, Jerome treated the case of holy scriptures as an exception that "even the syntax contains a mystery" (Jerome, 2014: p. 25). However, a more in-depth investigation into Jerome's translation views has found that Jerome contradicted himself when discussing translation strategy. Take Bible translation as an example, Jerome's Bible translation cannot be hastily summarized as "word-for-word". On the one hand, Jerome did a lot of preparation work before the retranslation of the Bible, including special studies on Hebrew names and places, translation of proper nouns and different cultures. It was these studies that made Jerome realize that it was extremely difficult to translate the words and phrases of the original Bible literally into Latin. He believed that it was not an easy task to convey every word of a person in consistence with the length of the original text (Jerome, 1893a: p. 483). It can be said that Jerome realized that the translator, to some extent, was a "rewriter". On the other hand, in Jerome's *Letter to Pammachius,* although he mentioned that word order was a mystery in the Bible, it was hard to find his comments on word-for-word translation in Bible. On the contrary, sense-to-sense translation claims abound. For example, in paragraph 5, Jerome echoes his ancestor Cicero by quoting Cicero's announcement,

> I have rendered them not as a translator but as an orator, keeping the sense but altering the form by adapting both the metaphors and the words to suit our own idiom … If all that I have written is not to be found in the Greek, I have at any rate striven to make it correspond with it (Jerome, 1893b: p. 114).

Jerome's personal experience can explain the contradictory remarks. In 382 AD, Jerome returned to Rome, serving as a secretary, interpreter and theological staff for Pope Damasusl I. He was appointed to start translating and revising the Bible. To avoid conflict with the churches, he tried all means to make his translation conform to the prevailing ideology and cultural environment at that time. The conservative forces of the church believed that previous Bible translations, such as *the Septuagint*, were "God's call", so the solemnity could not be desecrated. According to Lefevere, if the original works enjoy a high reputation in the target culture, its translation is more likely to adopt "word-for-word" translation (Lefevere, 2004: p. 91). However, as a scholar, he actively advocated that Latin culture should absorb loan words including Greek; Also, as an intellectual, he knew how difficult it was to produce translations that match the original words without losing the beautiful style. In the dilemma, it is understandable that Jerome made a cautious yet contradictory statement.

Judging from the above analysis, it is hasty to say that Jerome prefers "word-for-word" translation in his Bible translation, taking the correspondent historical and cultural context into account.

2.3. Augustine's Translation Theory Revisited

Augustine was a Christian theologian and philosopher at the end of Roman Empire, same time as St. Jerome. He initiated medieval theology and was honored as the founder of theology by Catholicism and Protestantism. Although Augustine did not do a lot of translation-related work, he revised parts of the Bible in Latin, and wrote some great works, including *Confessions* and *On Christian Teaching* (*De doctrina christiana*). *On Christian Teaching* is a book on linguistics from a theological point of view. In this book, Augustine offered insightful views on language research, which serves as an important document for studying ancient linguistics and translation theory. Moreover, Augustine's special profession and social status made him pay special attention to Bible translation.

Augustine once mentioned "word-for-word" translation of the Bible in *On Christian Teaching*, echoing Jerome's statement that even the order of the words is a mystery in the case of the holy scriptures (Jerome, 1956: pp 136-137). He said,

> we must master the meta-language from which the Latin version of the Bible is translated, or look up the "word-for-word" version of the translation … so that we can test whether the translator has translated the meaning and words correctly (Augustine, 2014: p. 33).

However, like the interpretation of Cicero and Jerome's translation theory, the interpretation of Augustine's translation theory should not be confined to his simple judgment of "word-for-word" translation. Instead, Augustine's translation views should be carefully explored in combination with his identity, together with the historical and cultural background at that time.

Translator's identity plays an almost decisive role in the translation strategies adopted. Augustine once served as a bishop in Hippo, North Africa, and annotated many Bible chapters. His *The City of God* (*De civitate Dei*) was an important basis for the establishment of medieval theology and Christian theological rule (Xie et al., 2009: p. 63). The interpretation of Augustine's translation thought cannot be separated from his status as the most famous theologian in the late Roman Empire. Augustine's theological translation view can be perceived in *On Christian Teaching*. He compared the Bible to a cure for the disease of human will. According to his understanding, Bible was originally written in one language, but later spread and translated into various languages, so that people of all ethnic groups who need redemption can study it, find out the thoughts and wills of those authors, and find God's will (Augustine, 2014: p. 32). Augustine thought God's will was eternal, although the translated languages were different. He believed that only by studying the Bible carefully with faith in God could we hear God's call. Believing in the so-called "God's call", he certainly advocates "word for word" translation of the Bible.

Moreover, Augustine's preference to "word for word" strategy in Bible translation had its political purpose. In line with the views of theologians such as Philo and Epiphanius, Augustine believed that only a few people inspired by

God could be competent in Bible translation. He pointed out that when revising Latin versions, people should refer to Greek versions, among which *the Septuagint* is the most authoritative version of the Old Testament. He said,

> All learned churches believed that *the Septuagint* is the result of all people's chorus under God's call. No one, even if he is knowledgeable, is not suitable to revise the consensus reached by so many knowledgeable elders (Augustine, 2014: pp. 31-34).

If only a few people called by God were qualified to translate and bestowed the right to interpret the Bible, ordinary Christians would become the objects of manipulation (Tan, 2004: p. 31). As Hermans (2014: p. 11) said, "From the point of view of the target literature, all translation implies a certain degree of manipulation of the source text for a certain purpose". This kind of manipulation can be various, among which the influence of ideology is the most significant. Lefevere (2004: p. 92) defined ideology in the cross-cultural context as a conceptual network, which contains the views and attitudes accepted by the public in a specific society in a specific period, and readers and translators can interpret texts through this network. In view of the lofty status of *the Septuagint* at that time, Augustine wrote to Jerome many times after learning that Jerome chose to retranslate the Bible directly from Hebrew instead of Greek, expressing his concern that Jerome's translation might cause unnecessary confusion.

Augustine believed that the Bible translation came from God's call, and translators should have devout faith before engaging in the corresponding translation activity. Although he emphasized the importance of the translator's knowledge of the source language, under the joint action of his personal identity and political purpose, he treasured the Septuagint. Therefore, Augustine was the one who had really implemented Jerome's view that even word order was a mystery in the Bible.

3. Confronting and Inheriting of Ancient Roman Translation Theories

From the above analysis, it can be seen that conclusions such as: 1) Cicero advocated "sense-for-sense" translation by his theory of "coin" and "weight"; 2) Jerome advocated literal translation from his statement that in the Bible "even the order of the words is a mystery" (Jerome, 1956: pp. 136-137); 3) Augustine preferred "word-for-word" translation for his preference of consulting *the Septuagint* when doing Bible translation, are all too hasty. Translators' opinion about "word-for-word" or "sense-for-sense" is hard to decide for they derive from complicated historical, political and cultural contexts. The translation theories of the above translators present complex and multidimensional characteristics. To dig further, Cicero, Jerome, Augustine and other translators' translation theories were not isolated from each other, but cross-permeated each other. They jointly constructed the framework of ancient Roman translation theories.

3.1. Inheriting from Cicero to St. Jerome

Cicero and Jerome held similar views on retaining the original style in literary translation. Cicero thought that there was no need to render word for word in the process of translation, but to preserve the general style and force of the language (Cicero, 1949: p. 365). Jerome put forward that the translator's responsibility lied in correctly understanding the original and fully conveying the substance of the original (Jerome, 2014: p. 29), based on the understanding that translation quality depends on the translator's language knowledge and correct understanding. It can be said that Jerome inherited and developed Cicero's translation theory to a certain extent. When the revised and translated Bible was severely criticized for failing to accept *the Septuagint* produced by "God's call", Jerome once approached Cicero. He said the translation would be extremely ridiculous if rendered word for word (Jerome, 1893a: pp. 483-484). Moreover, he clearly put forward the notion of "sense-for-sense" translation, more systematic and complex than Cicero's translation theory.

3.2. Confronting between St. Jerome and Augustine

When dealing with Bible translation, Jerome and Augustine had different opinions. First of all, on the idea of "God's call", Jerome clearly stated that sentences could only be understood and translated by the translator's erudition (Schwarz, 1963: p. 7), while Augustine held that God's will was eternal; Secondly, regarding *the Septuagint*, unlike Augustine and other theologians, Jerome clearly stated that he didn't know who first fabricated that "they were scattered in 70 rooms in Alexandria, but they also wrote the same words" (Jerome, 2014: p. 30); in addition, as a scholar, Jerome believed that the quality of translation depended entirely on the translator's language level and mastery of the translated subject matter, while Augustine put the translator's faith in the first place.

The above differences led to Jerome and Augustine's different choices of translation strategies. Jerome thought that literary translation faced a dilemma, and for most of the time he had to translate Greek works sense for sense (Jerome, 2014: p. 25). When translating the Bible, Jerome also struggled when choosing between "word-for-word" and "sense-for-sense" strategies because of his dual identity of intellectual and church translator; Augustine was not the case. His perspective as a theologian and church leader made him believe in the "word-for-word" approach, which was not only the direct effect of his theologian status, but also implied his ambition as a religious leader to control the translation of the Bible.

It is worth noting that although Augustine was more inclined to "word-for-word" translation for the Bible than Jerome, the two both emphasized choosing translation strategies according to the nature of the target text (Xie et al., 2009: p. 267). The echo between the two translators once again indicates that it is not scientific to label translators as advocating "word-for-word" or "sense-for-sense" ap-

proach, and the translators' identity, the historical and cultural context are the factors that should be considered when interpreting their translation theories.

4. Conclusion and Implication

Mixed translator identities have complicated translators' adoption of translation strategies. It is found that complicated historical backgrounds have influenced Roman translators' choice for "word-for-word" or "sense-for-sense" strategies. Only from the specific historical and cultural context of the translator, combined with the translator's identity, ideology and poetics at that time, can we interpret his translation theory in an all-round way. Furthermore, inheritance and confrontation exist in different Roman translators.

After detailed exploration of translation views of the ancient Roman translators, implications for translation practice can be drawn from the following perspectives:

1) Various Roman translators have attached great importance to abundant knowledge both in the original and target language before doing translation practice, reminding us contemporary translators of building up solid knowledge in both languages;

2) Translation is so complicated a phenomenon that any hasty statement about translation theory and practice is improper. Careful investigation is always recommended in order to get beneficial understanding about translation;

3) The ideas of "word-for-word" and "sense-for-sense" translation, rather than being understood as the translator's overall translation view, should be better regarded as the translation strategy adopted by translator under specific circumstances. We, as translation practitioners needn't be bothered with adapting one single strategy in practice. The more preferred method is to utilize proper strategy according to different occasions. "Word-for-word" and "sense-for-sense" can be complementary to each other as translation strategies;

4) Learned as Jerome, has been faced with a lot of difficulties when conducting translation practices. This is telling us, translation is a difficult task, and when we are striving for the best translated work, confidence and persistence are indispensable to accomplish the task.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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