

# Cultivation of MTI students' awareness of the translator's subjectivity in literary translation

Qin Fangfang

College of Foreign Languages, CTGU, Yichang City, China

## Email address:

qinfancy@163.com

## To cite this article:

Qin Fangfang. Cultivation of MTI Students' Awareness of the Translator's Subjectivity in Literary Translation. *International Journal of Literature and Arts*. Vol. 1, No. 3, 2013, pp. 41-46. doi: 10.11648/j.ijla.20130103.14

---

**Abstract:** Literary translation is a kind of artistic recreation. Only by exercising his/her artistic talent and subjectivity, can the translator produce a translation which can ravel the original work. In literary translation, the translator's subjectivity is inevitable and indispensable as well. So it is essential for MTI students to be fully aware of the translators' subjectivity during practice. The paper will explore the means to cultivate MTI students' awareness of the translator's subjectivity by analyzing the causes for its existence from the aspects of the special characteristics of literary works, translator's personal factors, social factors and so on, in hope of deepening the study on the translator's subjectivity and the development of literary translation as well as promoting the development of MTI education.

**Keywords:** Literary Translation, The Translator's Subjectivity, MTI, awareness

---

## 1. Introduction

Along with the increase of international exchanges, high-level professional translators are in great need. As traditional education of MA (Master of Arts) in translation, focusing on theories and academic study, cannot meet the requirements of the market. To solve this problem, China initiated the program of MTI (Master of Translation and Interpretation) in 2007. This program aims at supplying qualified professional translators and interpreters to the society. How to realize this aim has aroused the concern of many scholars and researchers. As far as I am concerned, in the training of MTI students, it is of great importance to cultivate their awareness of the translator's subjectivity, which is especially prominent in literary translation.

The traditional original-text-centered translation theories led to the ignorance of the translator's cultural status. Translators were regarded to be servants and invisible persons. Therefore, the subjectivity of the translator was not acknowledged and did not receive proper attention. In fact, translation is a dynamic and complex process, with many factors involved. In this process, the translator, acting as a reader of the source text, a determiner of translation strategies and also a writer of the target text, will unavoidably add something subjective in his/her translation. In translation, especially literary translation, the translator's subjectivity is inevitable and even indispensable if used in a

positive way. However, this fact has not been realized until the "Cultural Turn".

Since the 1990s, the "Cultural Turn", which took place in translation studies in the west, brought about new insights into the translator's subjectivity in translation. Translation is understood as a cultural rather than a linguistic transfer, and the act of translation is no longer a "trans-coding" from one context into another, but an "act of communication". Hans J. Vermeer has argued that translation is first and foremost a "cross-cultural transfer". Thus, the translator must not only be bilingual but effectively bicultural as well. The research on the translator's subjectivity develops from being neglected to the confirmation of "translator's choices". Western theories such as deconstructionism, skopos theory and hermeneutics supply theoretical basis for the research of this subject. Chinese scholars also began to carry out the research in the 1990s. The main representatives are Yang Wuneng, Yuan Li, Zha Mingjian, Xie Thianzhen, Xu Jun, etc. From different perspectives, they justified the existence of the translator's subjectivity. But what are the causes for the existence of the translator's subjectivity? The question has not been studied in detail yet.

Based on the previous studies on the translator, this paper takes the discussion of the translator's subjectivity in literary translation as a central task. Since up to now there have been few systematic researches on the translator's subjectivity in literary translation, the author is highly motivated to engage

in this field, in hope of offering insight into the cultivation of MTI students' awareness of translator's subjectivity so as to improve their translation ability.

## 2. Causes for the Translator's Subjectivity in Literary Translation

### 2.1. Characteristics of Literary Works

Since literary text is the subject, it is necessary for us to look into the characteristics of the literary text as an aid for our argument of literary translation. Generally speaking, "a literary author's intention is usually not to describe the 'real world' (as it is seen and acknowledged in the culture community) but to motivate personal insights about reality by describing an alternative or fictional world." [4] "From a linguistic point of view, literary language has been defined as either 'deviant' from the norms of everyday communication or as the creative use of the potential of the language system against which ordinary language use represents a reduction. Whatever stand we take on these questions of definition, literary language is clearly assumed to have a particular connotative, expressive or aesthetic meaning of its own, which may shed some light on the sender's intention or intentions". [4]

The translating of literary texts is a very difficult and complex activity, difficult in that the reproduced text is to represent not only the linguistic meaning of the original, but also its aesthetic effect as well; complex in that it involves the mental processing of the translator in his reading and transferring of the text, given the fact that of the same text there are several different versions. A literary text may be comprehended and represented in different ways. Different translators might have different comprehensions of a literary text, hence produce different translated versions. Endeavoring to carry the original author's message across a linguistic and cultural divide, the translator faces numerous obstacles. There will be lexical items whose referents lie outside the experience of the target reader. There will be texts whose messages depend not on a literal understanding of the words, but on the cultural connotations of a particular word, phrase, or action. There will be puns and other rhetorical devices that exploit the special use of a particular word. Translation is the forcible replacement of the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text with a text that will be intelligible to the target language reader. This difference can never be entirely removed. As translators, they are faced with an alien culture which requires that its message be conveyed in anything but an alien way. That culture expresses its idiosyncrasies in a way that is "culture-bound": cultural words, proverbs and of course idiomatic expressions, whose origin and use are intrinsically and uniquely bound to the culture concerned. So translators are called upon to do a cross-cultural translation whose success will rely on their understanding of the culture they are dealing with. In all, the main characteristics of literary works reflect on their language and the culture

elements in them.

#### 2.1.1. The Specialty of Literary Language

Literary translation is different from the others because it uses a unique language which is artistic and has esthetic effects. Mao Dun says in one of his articles that literary translation is using another language to transfer the artistic conception of the source language text (SLT) and enable the target language text reader (TLT-R) to share the same inspiration, emotional response and aesthetic enjoyment with the source language text reader (SLT-R) [8]. In order to achieve this aim, the translator must strive to employ every possible means in target language, such as the diction of proper words. As we know, some words have similar meanings, but they may cause different esthetic feelings. That is why many different literary works are re-translated. Luo Xinzhang [7] has the same opinion with Mao Dun. In his viewpoint, literary translation is not only a kind of translation, but also another form of literature. Literature should be a kind of art, and hence literary translation will be the practice of the art. In translation studies, Luo also claims that translation is a kind of art. It all depends on whether the translator can transfer the aesthetic enjoyment of SLT to TLT-R and inspire their creativity as SLT does. So translation is a kind of re-creation to the translator. In this article Luo also appeals to the translator for their strenuous work to bring about successful translations. Therefore, translation studies should not deny the translator's subjective awareness. Instead, much more attention should be paid to studies on how to bring it into full play. Without the translator's subjective consciousness the flourish of literary translation would not be possible [7].

#### 2.1.2. Cultural Element

To translate literary works, it is impossible to avoid the issue of cultural elements. A translator has to make the translated version retain the original's cultural code beyond the mere structural and linguistic level. That is, he/she should seek cultural representation beyond linguistic rendering.

We need to understand what culture is before we explore some of the difficulties of translation in cultural perspective. Culture is a word that we are all familiar with but it is difficult to define. There are many definitions. Here is one of the most commonly used: "Culture is the learned, socially acquired traditions and lifestyles of the members of a society, including their patterned, repetitive ways of thinking, feeling and acting..." [2] Viewed from the definition, we can infer that culture must cling to one community and society with distinctive features. Culture is also associated with religions and local customs. That is to say, each culture has historical relations with a certain nation or community, for which the alien could scarcely find a substitute or counterpart at random. Accordingly, substitution of one culture in many cases is inappropriate and incapable. As a result, it constitutes a hindrance for communication and understanding.

Literary works, as the mirror of social life, are not merely

the artistic creation of language. More significantly, they are the most direct reflection to a specific culture whose aspects of diversity will be reflected in languages. John Lyons, an English linguist, asserts in his *Semantics* "language is a part of culture. Differences on the language usage will expose the features of the social culture in terms of the substances, customs and other activities." [3] That is why no linguistic text, particularly literary discourse, can exist without a certain cultural context. Even when all linguistic symbols could find their equivalences in the other language, the relationship between the text and the source culture can never reach a harmonious state. This fact calls our attention to the cultural factors that complicate the translation process.

In translation, especially in translation between culturally and linguistically distinct languages such as Chinese and English, even if a translator has sufficient linguistic competence in the relevant languages, he/she is still at a dilemma of whether to sustain the culturally-loaded expressions in the target language. If he/she prefers to transplant the cultural elements as they are, they might be tasteless or hardly intelligible to the westerners. If he/she prefers the other way, discarding the cultural elements, and simply transfers the meaning, the original and exotic color will suffer the loss to some extent. It is a matter of degree, which a translator often finds it hard to operate.

## 2.2. The Translator's Personal Elements

The famous translator Ye Junjian said, "The role of the translator's individual factors in translation by no means can be neglected." [11] As an active translating subject, the translator always consciously or unconsciously bring his own world outlook, value orientation, mode of thinking, cognitive manner, and aesthetic sentiment into his translation action and results. Their different command of the native language, specific personal styles and individual life experiences will also influence the translation. So any translator will inevitably impose some subjective factors on his/her translated text. The personal factors are the causes for his/her subjectivity and thus account for many of the differences between various translations of the same source text. But owing to the great subtlety and complexity of the factors involved in this question, this thesis will not be able to cover all of them exhaustively, so we will focus our attention on some key factors.

### 2.2.1. The Translator's Previous Experiences

"The past experience of the individual will affect the translator." The Spanish and Portuguese translator Gregory Rabassa observes, "People have a kind of liking for certain words, either from experience or background or cultivated reference". [1] Corpus linguistics has revealed that much of what we say and write in our own language is both routine and predictable because of what we and others have already said and written.

In translation, the previous experience including that of life and education plays an important role in the understanding and representation of the text. Chinese

famous translator Yang Yi, in her essay titled *Sour Fruit: on Translating in the Forty Years*, said, "That night, it was a rainy storm. Gusts of wind were howling outside and the raindrops were knocking on the windowpanes heavily. It seemed as if Katherine wailed outside, begging me to open the windows. Since there was a desolate garden out of the house I lived in. I felt as if I lived in the old house near Yorkshirt. Suddenly I had an inspiration about the translation of the title of *Wuthering Heights* which I had long searched for. This is the origin of the name "呼啸山庄" [6]. The purpose of the translator is to emphasize the importance of inspiration. But the sparks of inspiration need the lighting of experience. Without thoughtful deliberation based on rich accumulation of book knowledge and life experience, inspiration is just like a castle in the air. Generally speaking, the more colorful his/her life experience and the wider scope of knowledge are, the more inspiration the translator will get. So it is no wonder that T. Ribot once defined inspiration as experience and knowledge accumulated from abundant materials. From a different angle, but for such an experience, the title will probably be different.

Similarly, the reason why some translators choose works which have similar experience with them is based on this. For example, in translating Lu Yao's works, if the translator also comes from a poor family and suffered a lot of pain or if he knows a lot about the life of Chinese farmers during the 1970s by experiencing, visiting personally or reading books, he will have a deeper understanding about their hardships and sufferings. Hence, he will deal with the translation more vividly and easily.

### 2.2.2. The Translator's Intention

The most overriding factor leading to the translator's subjectivity lies in his/her intention (purpose) in his/her translation activity. A writer's intention determines the texts he/she chooses to translate and the strategies he/she adopts.

According to the skopos theory proposed by a German translator Hans J. Vermeer the prime principle determining any translation process is the purpose (skopos) of the overall translational action. And skopos here is a Greek word for translation itself, may be conceived as an action, as the name implies. "Any action has an aim, a purpose. [...] The word skopos, is a technical term for the aim or purpose of a translation. [...] Further: an action leads to a result, a new situation or event, and possibly to a 'new' object." [4]

Since translation is a purposeful action, every translator must possess a certain "skopos" when translating, and each of his/her translated work may serve a given purpose. Therefore, the translator just is the subject who determines the aim of translation and directs his/her activity at this destination unswervingly.

The process of translation is complex and involves various choices, and the choice of the translator goes through the whole process of translation activity. It is no wonder there is the saying "Translating is choosing". Thus, as the operator of the translation activity, the translator is confronted with all kinds of choices: at the translation

preparation stage, he/she must decide what to translate, whose works to translate; and during the translation process, he/she must determine for whom to translate and what translation strategy to use.

What to translate is the primary question prior to translating. Generally speaking, translators usually have a main principle to guide their choices. As far as different principles of choosing ST are concerned, translators could be divided into two schools: the school choosing texts with which they have the similar personal taste, style and even experience and the school translating mainly for the society need. Each school has its representatives in the history of literary translation.

As a famous translator of French literature works, Fu Lei stands for the first school and becomes well-known by years' translating practice. He once commented, "Choosing original texts is just like making friends, some simply can not suit me, so I will not force myself to make friends with them". [7] According to his translating experience, Fu Lei contributed most of his energy to Balzac's works after he found that he had the same personal taste with him. For the same reason, he even declined the invitation to translate another French classics *Red and Black* of Stendhal by People's Press on the ground that Stendhal did not go with his taste. Professor Wang Zuoliang expresses the similar idea, "A translator should translate only texts which have similar style to his; translating indiscriminately will inevitably lead to bad translations." [10] In his book *The Translator's Invisibility*, Venuti also presents us an example that an American translator of Italian, an old, widely published, and very gifted writer, translated an Italian author in the same generation and got much success. This translator explained that "when author and translator live in the same historical moment, they are more likely to share a common sensibility, and this is highly desirable in translation because it increases the fidelity of the translated text to the original. The translator works better when he and the author are simpatico." [5]

Translators of the second group pay more attention to the social influence of the translated works; in other words, they care about whether it is in conformity with social trend or serves the social need. In fact, this was a dominant translation tendency in Chinese translation history, especially before the founding of the new China. Translators hoped to import new ideas, revolutionary theories to guide the Chinese revolution and open the people's mind through translation. For example, the reason for Yan Fu's translation of the book *Evolution and Ethics and Other Essays* is that it "expounded the generally acknowledged truth of the law of the jungle, the survival of the fittest and the preservation of species through unceasing efforts." At that time, Chinese people were facing the danger of being invaded by imperialist countries. To awaken the people, Yan Fu, as well as Liang Qichao (1873—1929), Tan Sitong (1865—1898) and other statesmen and thinkers made great contributions to the enlightenment of the bourgeoisie in China. They were engaged in writing articles to establish the theory of

Constitutional Reform and Modernization or in translating western works to spread the bourgeoisie ideology of Europe. So Yan Fu did not just care about translating itself, or the original text, but the advanced thoughts and ideas introduced by translating, which could greatly influence Chinese readers. The translated book brought a new hope to people who had felt disappointed and disheartened. It became popular with the whole country and was regarded as the best of the translated works. The above examples show that translators indeed enjoy freedom in making choices about what to translate with strong personal preferences.

What's more, during the process of translating, the manifestation of the translator's intention (or subjectivity) lies in the choice of translation strategies and techniques. Translators usually enjoy relative freedom in their choices. In terms of translation strategies, the argument between domestication and foreignization has always been a hot debate. In a sense, domestication and foreignization as thinking tendency and value orientation are determined by the translator's intentions. Provided a translator aims to introduce the original work and help the target readers to know the source culture, or to introduce fresh expressions to influence the target culture, the translator may tend to use foreignization strategy, so as to keep the original flavor and style. If the translator wants to minimize the strangeness of the foreign text for target language readers or if a translator aims to enlighten his/her people, or to introduce an advanced idea, i.e. to convey his/her views through the translated text, he/she is apt to adopt domestication strategy for the purpose that it is easier for the translation work to approach readers and be accepted by them. Moreover, in the history of translation, some translators took advantage of omission and adaptation to achieve specific translation purposes. Although this practice sometimes is subject to criticism, translators like Yan Fu and Lin Shu utilized this method in their translation works and obtained significant effects that could not be ignored.

The fact and examples mentioned above shows that the translator's intentional choices pervades in the whole translation process, which simply reflect their subjective manipulation on the source text and is an obvious factor contributing to their subjectivity in translation.

### 2.2.3. The Translator's Competence

In the translation history, there were translators like Lin Shu and Ezra Pound who didn't know about the source language, they still produced successful versions with the help of people to read the original text. However, it is a given undisputable fact that a translator has to be competent in both source language and target language. In terms of the source language, a translator must be sufficiently capable of understanding the various conceptual, associative or thematic meanings of the original. Good translation demands correct interpretation which is based upon the translator's command of the source language and understanding of source language culture. With regard to the target language, a translator must be capable of effectively

representing in the target language what he or she has interpreted from the source text. That is to say, he or she must be able to find or establish in the target language the closest natural content of the source language message. This is a basic requirement. Generally speaking, a good command of the source language facilitates the translator to understand the original text, and that of the target language will help to produce the text.

Besides, as I have mentioned in the former part of this paper, literary translation is not only a cross-language but also a cross-cultural activity. A translator should be not only linguistically competent, but also culturally compatible with a good comprehension of the cultural meanings, so that he/she can receive cultural entities correctly. The translator is not only an expert language communicator, but also a human bridge across cultural differences. The translator's cultural competence mainly refers to his/her knowledge structure about cultures, i.e. his understanding of the religious beliefs, social protocols, conventions, values and way of thinking, etc. Particularly, he/she must have a good understanding about the differences of the cultures involved.

Furthermore, to the literary translation, the translators must be equipped with literary competence, which includes knowledge of literary history, grasp of literary facts, acquaintance of literary theories and application of literary techniques, etc. For instance, without any knowledge of psychoanalysis and stream of consciousness, a translator can hardly understand James Joyce's works, not to mention translating them. Meanwhile, the translator has to get familiar with the historical reality in which the original work was produced and the literary position as well as the influence of the writer and his work. Of course, in literary translation an encyclopedic knowledge is so essential that it should be regarded as a requisite to translating since literature is such a vast vessel of human knowledge. Similarly, in technical texts, without the specialized knowledge in areas such as aeronautics, accounting, international law, medicine, or agronomy, the translated work cannot be expected to be satisfactory.

The three types of competence mentioned above are the basic requirements for a qualified translator. But personal competence varies among different translators, thus different translations, representation of their separate subjectivity, come out. As I mentioned before, the translators are always engaged in a constant process of generating and evaluating alternatives. Just under the influence of their varying personal competence and experience, professional translators appear to generate alternatives that are ultimately closer to the good solutions. They nevertheless appear to be wiser than student translators in generating possible solutions, and thus they can produce more successful translated versions.

#### **2.2.4. The Translator's Cultural Awareness**

What is cultural awareness? It refers to the translator's acknowledgement of the fact that translation involves cross-language as well as cross-culture information

exchange. And just like lingual differences, cultural differences usually lead to obstacles in communication. While transforming languages, the translator should make efforts to overcome the obstacles caused by the cultural differences, so as to realize the successful exchange of information.

On one hand, as a special kind of reader and as a part of his/her own culture, the translator cannot smoothly move beyond his/her own cultural heritage into the world of the other. Sometimes he/she may be so locked into his/her own cultural way of thinking that he/she become unable to share other cultures. In such cases, the cultural exchange through his/her translation can only reach a very low or even zero level. In fact, cultural bias is pervasive because cultural differences and cultural barriers are everywhere. This is where the difficulty lies.

On the other hand, the translator may have difficulty in understanding the culture of source language or in conveying the cultural meaning properly. It matters significantly whether the translator is aware of the cultural elements and cultural value of the texts to be translated. Only when the translator is clearly aware of the cultural elements of the source text, he/she will pay due attention to render them properly or at least to avoid mistranslation. However, if the translator is not conscious of the cultural elements in the source text, he/she is likely to make mistakes in translation.

Cultural differences originate from the confrontation of cultural elements of one language with another in translation, and therefore, they require decisions on the part of translators. The translator, being part of a very complex cultural structure, must take into account rules that are not strictly linguistic, but broadly speaking, cultural. As the famous translator Wang Zuoliang ever said, "Although it is words that the translator deals with in translating, there are two different types of culture that he has to face, so the translator must be a true cultural man". [10] By this, the famous translator put forward the requirement on translators for their cultural awareness and cultural accomplishment. Lingual proficiency is merely a basic requirement for a person to become a translator but far from being sufficient. Another equally indispensable request for a qualified translator is his/her cultural awareness.

Translation is viewed as a cross-cultural communication. It is cultural transfer rather than linguistic transfer. Therefore, in the process of communication the translators are required to have a kind of cultural awareness to know the differences between the source culture and target culture. In order to bridge cultural distance, to remove cultural barriers and to overcome cultural bias, we should have a thorough research into the factors involved in the process of cultural exchange through translation so as to find a way to get a relatively high degree of cultural exchange through translation. Therefore, the translator should not only be proficient in the two languages involved in the translation, but also know and study the cultures behind different languages, as well as methods to deal with cultural differences and remove

obstacles in every concrete case under the guidance of a translating method.

In a sense, translation brings focus into the cultural shock which is inevitable and even insurmountable in message transfer. A culturally divergent language pair will often challenge translators with a high degree of untranslatability. A translator should attach greater attention to cultural conveyance than to any other aspect.

### 2.3. Social Factors

The social factors including political, economic, and cultural factors play a significant role in the translator's translation. The constrictions of social factors on the translator not only manifest in his/her choice of translation topic, source text, but also his/her presentation.

Every translator lives in a given society with its special social background and its specific power system. The translations produced in a particular period, must have been attached with the distinct characteristics of the times, from the thought to the language. Usually, if living in a relatively loose social environment, and suffering less political, cultural and ethical restrictions, the translator is freer in choosing a source text, and is more flexible in presentation. But the translator, who lives in a specific age or in complex social conditions, is inevitably greatly restricted by the external factors. For example, the famous scholar, Yan Fu, chose to translate the book *Evolution and Ethics*, for it contained what he considered the essence of western thoughts to serve for China's national awakening. His choice reflects the influence of a specific social demand on him.

In addition, the public's attitude to translated literature and its status in target culture, as well as the specific translational view at that time also exert a subtle influence on the translator, which makes the translator realize the discrepancy between the source culture and the target culture, providing the translator with a special cultural attitude, which inevitably will affect his translation choices and strategies.

## 3. Conclusion

To sum up, the translator's subjectivity in literary translation exists on account of many factors and this paper only discusses three main aspects: social factors, characteristics of literary works, such as the specialty of literary language and cultural elements in literary works, and the translator's personal elements such as his/her previous experience, intention, competence, cultural awareness and

so forth. As a matter of fact, there are still some other factors which may influence the translator's translation, such as the initiator of the translation, translated versions of other translators and so on. Because of the complexity of this topic and the limit of time and my knowledge, there is still room for further discussion and study.

All in all, to cultivate MTI students' awareness of translator's subjectivity, the foremost thing is guide them to analyze the causes of its existence. After knowing the factors involved, they will pay special attention to the factors during practice and avoid being confined by traditional translation theories. Besides, they can do some case studies about some translation works which are characterized with this phenomenon. In short, in order to become qualified professional translators, the MTI students must keep pace with the development of translation theories and the requirement of the market, be fully aware of the translator's subjectivity, and endeavor to use it in a most proper way.

## References

- [1] Biguenet, John; Schulte, Rainer. *The Craft of Translation*[C]. The University of Chicago Press. 1989.
- [2] Harris, M. *Cultural Anthropology* [M]. New York: Harper&Row.1983.
- [3] Lyon, John: *Semantics* [M]. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1968.
- [4] Nord, C. *Translating as a purposeful Activity — Functionalist Approaches Explained* [M]. Manchester: ST Jerome Publishing. 2001.
- [5] Venuti, L. *The Translator's Invisibility* [M]. London and New York: Routledge. 1995.
- [6] 方梦之. 翻译新论与实践[M]. 青岛出版社. 1999.
- [7] 傅雷. 翻译经验点滴谈[A]. 翻译研究论文集[C]. 外语教学与研究出版社, 1989.
- [8] 罗新璋. “似”与“等”[J]. 文学, 1990, 02.
- [9] 茅盾. 为发展文学翻译事业和提高翻译质量而奋斗[J]. 中国翻译工作者协会, 翻译研究论文集(1949-1983) [C]. 翻译通讯编辑部, 1984.
- [10] 王佐良. 论新开端: 文学与翻译研究[M]. 外语教学与研究出版, 1991.
- [11] 叶君健. 关于文学作品翻译的一点体会 [J]. 中国翻译, 1983, 02.