

Conference Paper

An Investigation into the Case of Multi-interpretation in Poetry Translation

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Abstract

In translating poems, it is very common that different people have quite different versions of the same poem. It therefore intends to expound upon its underlying factors from the perspective of Hermeneutics, by exploring the relation between the textual meaning and the textual significance of a poem, the relation between the author's intention and the textual intention of a poem, aiming to explain the key element in translating poems—multi-interpretation.

Keywords: poetry translation, Hermeneutics, the textual meaning, the textual significance, the author's intention, the textual intention, multi-interpretation

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1. Introduction

Poetry is a unique literary style, through which a poet can express his profound feeling with a few words. Certainly, the words are refined again and again, and only a few of them can be combined to form some certain frame of mind in which a reader seems to be listening to what the poet wants to say, or seems to be exchanging ideas with the poet. That is the reason why poem is a very beautiful literary style. However, the difference between the intention of the author and the intention of the text is inevitable for polysemous words are used in poems, the intention of the author cannot be inferred from the poem literally, and readers have to read between lines for correct comprehension. Therefore, translators cannot translate poems until they understand them, and they are supposed to exercise their imagination to concretize the uncertainty of poems. If understanding poems means accepting them, concretizing the uncertainty of poems is translators' interpretation of poems. In the sense, the translator plays the role of a receptor and an interpreter. It shows that translating poems is closely related to Hermeneutics to some extent.

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2. Translation and Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is defined as the science or theory of interpretation. The term "hermeneutics" is originated from Hermes, the name of the messenger in Greek mythology, who was in charge of commerce, traffic, animal, and speech. It is said that in the messages he sent, Hermes often added his own interpretation to them. The word "Hermeneuo" is a verb in Greek, which is synonymous to the term "interpretali" in Latin and the term "interpret" in English (Xuemei CAI,1997:12). Hermeneutics has experienced three periods, traditional Hermeneutics, contemporary Hermeneutics, and present-day Hermeneutics since it gained the term. Traditional Hermeneutics is from Hermeneutics of ancient Greek, Hermeneutics of middle Ages, to Hermeneutics of German philosophy by F. Schleiermacher and W. Dilthey. Although there are some differences among them, there is an unchanging thing emphasizing the objectivity of the text. Therefore, readers are supposed to understand the intention of the author by reading the text again and again. It is in accordance with the spirit of traditional translation theories that translator should understand the author's intention and convey it in his translation.

However, from the beginning of the 20th century, Heidegger and his student H. G. Gadamer, two famous representatives of contemporary western Hermeneutics, criticized traditional Hermeneutics greatly. They declared that the author's intention didn't exist and it was vain looking for the author's intention, a text was free from the author once it was created, and it had no relations with him. In their opinion, translators should concentrate their attention on something that the text is concerned about, instead of considering the author's intention. But E. D. Hirsch, a famous American scholar, said that no one but the author could determine the meaning of the text, which is the textual intention, the text only represented the author's words and his intention. Hence, translators should respect the intention of the author, which is the best meaning of the text and the most reasonable criterion of interpretation.

The essence of traditional translation theory lies in the fact that translators should regard the author's intention as the departure translation. It is influenced, even overturned by the contemporary Hermeneutics. Hirsch criticizes the contemporary Hermeneutics from the perspective of objectivism. He thinks that interpreters should insist in seeking for the textual meaning, and rebuilding the author's intention, and that the author's intention could be gained through continuous interpretation. He disagrees with Gadamer's opinion that interpretation is the significance the interpreter adds to the textual meaning, and the "Horizontal view" of the author merges the "Horizontal

view” of the interpreter because the interpreter’ understanding of the text is based on their own experience. Hirsch maintains that Gadamer ignores the author’s intention and overemphasizes the significance that the interpreter adds to the textual meaning, the text becomes the object interpreted at the interpreter’s will and the author’s intention is lost in interpretation. Hirsch thinks that interpreters can find the author’s intention and it should be regarded as the basis of interpretation.

Since translation is the re-writing of the text on the basis of comprehension, a text can’t be appropriately translated until it is correctly interpreted. Comprehension is the first step of interpretation, and Hermeneutics lays stress on the historicity of comprehension, the creativity of comprehension, and the subjectivity of comprehension. Hermeneutics also lays stress on the multiplicity of meaning of language, the dynamic of language, and the difference between language and speech(Xuemei CAI,1997:13). Traditional Hermeneutics emphasizes the author’s intention, considering it as basis of translation; while contemporary Hermeneutics emphasizes the textual intention, regarding it as the basis of translation. Hirsch thinks that translation is a dialogue between the translator and the author through the text, the author’s intention and the textual intention should be respected, and the author’s intention was born before the textual intention.

3. Multi-interpretation in Translating Poems

3.1. The textual meaning vs the textual significance

By using polysemous words, a poem becomes a complicated structure of various ideas. It will surely lead to the phenomenon that different people have different versions of the same poem, which is called multi-interpretation in translating poems. There is a great space of imagination for interpreters, as polysemous words are used. The phenomenon of multi-interpretation can be demonstrated by different versions of the following poem composed by Wen Tingjun, a poet of the Song Dynasty in China” One of the version of the former two sentences of the poem is: “*After dressing my hair, Alone I climb the stair, On the railings I lean, To view the river scene.*” To add its poetic flavor, the translator rendered the term “building” into “stair”, and the term “*climb the stair, to view the river scene on the railings*”. This is a new outstanding comprehension of the term. Because the term may be translated into “long-standing time”, or “long space”, or “a leisure man”. The following examples are six different versions of the sentence.

1. *The slanting sun reddens the waters many a miles;*(John Turner)
2. *Calmly shone the setting sun and the water ceaselessly flew on.*(Chu Dagao)
3. *She stares and stares at the slanting sunshine, the water flowing far away.*(Burton Watson)
4. *The slanting sunrays cast a lingering glow; the broad river in its continuous flow;*(Xu Zhongjie)
5. *O how tender the sun's parting look, how melancholy the stream's languid flow!*
(Weng Xianliang)
6. *The slanting sun sheds sympathetic ray; the carefree river carries it away.* (Xu Yuan-chong)

In the first version, the term is translated into "reddens", It is simply translated into "continuous flow", thus fails to convey the innermost feeling of the poet. By using the words "tender", "melancholy", and "languid", the fifth version succeeds in conveying the poet's innermost feeling, the hating love feeling to the reader. The sixth version is the best of them, because the words "slanting", "sympathetic", and "carefree" convey the innermost feeling of the poet, in the same style as the original text.

The differences between the six versions demonstrate that multi-interpretation's phenomenon is inevitable in translating poems, and different comprehensions to the text always lead to different interpretations of it. It seems reasonable for Gadamer to believe that comprehension is diachronic, and it is true to object—the text, as well as the subject—the reader who is a real being in history. On the basis of this, Gadamer concludes that the author's intention (the textual meaning) "itself" doesn't exist, and it has been diversified into a series of "others", different textual significance in different times. Hence he thinks that it is impossible for interpreters to re-express the author's intention(Tianzheng Xie,2000:60). However, Hirsch holds that although comprehension of the text is diachronic, it doesn't mean that the author's intention has been changed. There is only a change in the textual significance. The author's intention, refers to the textual meaning, is really eternal; and the textual significance refers to the significance of the textual meaning. In other words, the textual significance is a relation between readers and the textual meaning, changing with history and the interpreters' subjective conditions (Yuechuan Wang,1998:140). The most distinct feature of poem is that there are many different significance of the same poem through analysis from different perspectives, and the author's intention is the mere standard of these significance.

Hirsch's viewpoint is of significance for studying translating poems. He holds that the textual meaning is definite and can be re-expressed because it lies between the lines of the text and can be paraphrased in spoken or written language, i.e. translators are able to interpret and translate the text. There is a poem created by Dufu, a poet of the Tang Dynasty in China. The most controversial point of it is the sentence translated into two extremely different versions:

1. *The myriad chrysanthemums have bloomed twice. Days to come—tears. The solitary little boat is moored, But my heart is in the old-time garden*(Amy Lowell).
2. *The sight of chrysanthemums again loosens the tears of past memories, To a lonely detained boat I vainly attack my hope of going home*(William Hung).

The two versions' difference shows that different translators have their own comprehension and interpretation of the same poem. Therefore, it seems that the intention of the poem is not easy to be understood and translated. Hirsch provides us a good explanation that there are two reasons that the textual meaning is considered uncertain and hard rewritten by translators. The first reason is that experiencing the textual meaning is not identical to the textual meaning itself. Everyone has his own experience, and others cannot have the same experience as the author, while then textual meaning is definite, so it can be rewritten. The second is that the comprehension of a text is far from being the exact comprehension of it. Someone can understand the text, but this doesn't mean that he can understand it exactly.

Experiencing the textual meaning is special experience of the author when he composes the text. It is not hard for us to understand that everyone hasn't the same experience as the poet Dufu had when he created the poem. However, the poem's meaning can be rewritten because it has already been there since it was composed. Has Amy Lowell and William Hung got the exact comprehension of the intention of Dufu? Does the term "Kai" mean the bloom of the chrysanthemums or the drop of the poet's tears? Does the term "Xi" mean that the boat or the poet's heart is tied? Does the term "ta ri" refers to someday in the past or the future? Is it on the day when the poet feels the same sorrow as the two autumns when he saw the blooming of the chrysanthemums? Is the term "lei" dropped in the past or in the future? Is the hope of the poet placed on the boat by which he could go home, or tied to the boat that never sails? Is the poet's heart tied to the boat or has going home and seeing the chrysanthemums in the garden of his own home?..... From the discussions, it is easy to see that the exact comprehension of the text cannot be gained. But translators have never give up their efforts in seeking for better interpretations and translations of the

text. The following lines are A. C. Graham's version: *"The clustered chrysanthemums have opened twice in tears of other days, The forlorn boat, once and for all, tether by homeward thoughts."* This version is better because the term "ta ri lei" is translated into "tears of other days", instead of "tears of another day" misunderstood by interpreters that the day is in the past like Hung's version "tears of past memories", or in the present as Lowell's version "Days to come—tears". Graham's version "tears of other days" conveys the day in the past or in the future. Since the textual meaning is definite and can be rewritten, translators are able to interpret and translate the text. However, the textual significance has been changing, so multi-interpretation occurs inevitably in translating poems, for translators are legitimate to interpret and translate the text in different ways or times.

3.2. The author's intention vs the textual intention

Why did Lowell, Hung and Graham recompose quite different versions of the same poem? The main reason is that they, three translators, interpret the poem from different perspectives. This will change the poem's significance, instead of its meaning. Furthermore, the poem is not able to convey completely the author's intention, because some words of the poem are polysemous and there is a difference between words and thoughts. Although the textual meaning of the poem is closely related to the author's intention, there remains a difference between the author's intention and the textual meaning (also defined as the textual intention). The following is a poem composed by Li Shangyin, one poet of the Tang Dynasty in China.

Souvenirs-Herbert A. Giles *You ask when I'm coming: alas not just yet...How the rain filled the pools on that night when we met! Ah, when shall we ever snuff candles again, And recall the glad hours of that evening of rain?*

A Note on a Raining Night to a Friend in the North-Witter Bynner *You ask me when I am coming. I do not know. I dream of your mountains and autumn pools brimming all night with the rain. Oh, when shall we be trimming wicks again, together in your western window? When shall I be hearing your voice again, all night in the rain?*

Written on a Rainy Night to My Wife in the North-Xu Yuanchong *You ask me when can I come back but I don't know, The pools in western hills with autumn rain overflow. When by our window can we trim the wicks again And talk about this endless, dreary night of rain?*

The title of this poem was once interpreted as Chinese "YeYu Ji Nei", because in ancient Chinese language, the term "内" refers to "wife". However, some hold that

this poem is composed after the death of the poet's wife, so they think that the poem should be composed for one of his friends. According to the title translation, Xu Yuan-chong thought that it was written for the poet's wife, but Witter Bynner maintained that it was written for one friend of the poet, moreover Herbert A. Giles translated the title into "souvenirs" simply. On translating the first sentence of it, there is no difference between the translation by Xu Yuan-chong and the one by Witter Bynner, but Herbert A. Giles translated it into "You ask when I'm coming; alas not just get...". In translating the second sentence of it, Xu translates the term "巴山" into "western hills", and the whole sentence is translated into "The pools in western hills with autumn rain o'erflow". Bynner's version is "I dream of your mountains and autumn pools brimming all night with the rain", while Giles translates it into "How the rain filled the pools on that night when we met!" In translating the last two sentences of it, they have got different versions, because they interpret them from different perspectives. The distinct difference among their translation of the poem lies in the versions of the fourth sentence. Giles translated it into "And recall the glad hours of that evening of rain?" Bynner's version is "When shall I be hearing your voice again, all night in the rain?" and Xu translated it into "And talk about this endless, dreary night of rain?" If it could be understood that there is difference between the author's intention, the textual intention, and the translation text's intention is often far from being the original text's intention, it is not hard for us to accept that different translators will have different versions of the same poem.

The above analysis demonstrates that the uncertainty in translating poems is often inevitable, and it is well known that the words of poems are refined again and again, and the polysemous words are often found in poems. When the poet's intention is written into the text of poems in polysemous words, there may be difference between the author's intention and the textual intention. Therefore, there are many uncertain things in the text of poetry. And then different translators simplify the uncertain things in their own ways according to their understanding. Here, take another poem by Li Shangyin, the poet of the Tang Dynasty in China, as an example: **The Sad Zither·Xu Yuanchong** *Why should the sad zither have fifty strings? Each string each strain evokes but vanished springs; Dim morning dream to be a butterfly; Amorous heart poured out in cuckoo's cry. In moonlit pearls see tears in mermaid's eyes; From sun-burnt emerald let vapor rise! Such feeling cannot be recalled again; It seemed long-lost e'en when it was felt then.*

Jeweled Zither·John A. Turner *Vain are the jeweled zither's fifty strings; Each string, each stop, bears thought of vanished things. The sage of his loved butterflies day-dreaming; The king that sighed his soul into a bird. Tears that pearls, in ocean moonlight streaming. Jade mists the sun distills from Sapphire Sward. Why need their memory to recall today?—A day was theirs, which is now passed away."*

Although there are only eight sentences in this poem, ancient Chinese literary allusions are quoted in four sentences of them. It seems that the intention that the poet want to convey through the text of poetry has exceeded the poetry text's intention. Therefore, conjecturing the poet's intention and the poem text's intention is the first step of understanding the poem for interpreters and translators. The object is the poet's intention, since it exists before the poem text's intention. Interpreters and translators try their own best to interpret and translate the poet's intention.

There are two different main interpretations to the poem, in the Qing Dynasty's of China. The first is believed that the poem was composed to mourn the dead wife of the poet, and the second that the poem was composed to repent the fate of the poet himself. Qian Liangze and Zhu Yizun are two representatives of the former interpretation, while He Zhuo the representative of the latter one (Zhaowei Zhu 2002:376). Qian maintained that it was a mourning poem, according to Tang Yin Shen Ti, he quoted another poem of the poet Li Shangyin, Fang Zhong Qu, which said that when the poet went back his house, the zither used by his wife remained there, but she died. Furthermore, Qian held that Fang Zhong Qu annotated the poem Zither. In the poem, the zither referred to the musical instrument used by the poet's wife. Seeing the zither, the poet was induced to miss his dead wife. And then Zhu interpreted the poem from the zither itself, the details of the interpretation tended to the intention of mourning the poet's wife. He explained that the zither once had 25 strings, and each was divided into two parts, thus 50 tunes was formed, like the term "Xian" (sting) which signified the meaning of wife, thus the term "Duan xian" (the dividing string) meant the death of wife. The sentence "*Each string each strain evokes but vanished springs*" meant that the poet's wife died at the age of 25. The words "*butterfly*" and "*cuckoo's cry*" meant that the death of the poet's wife, and the words "*vapor rise*" meant the buried wife of the poet. According to the version of the poem, by Xu, he believed that the poet's intention was to mourn his dead wife, because such phrases as "*the sad zither*", "*Dim morning dream*", "*amorous heart*", "*cuckoo's cry*", "*tears in mermaid's eyes*", and "*such feeling cannot be recalled again*" conveyed the poet's feeling to mourn his dead wife. While another representative He held that the poem was composed to repent the fate of the poet himself. In collection of poems by the poet—Li Shangyin, which was published

in the Song Dynasty of China, the poem "Zither" is the first poem of the collection. He Zhuo held that it demonstrated the theme of repenting the poet's fate. The first sentence of the poem "Zither", liked an actor's opening statements at the beginning of a play. And it brought the way to the poet, through which the poet was able to say what he wanted to say. In the second one, the phrase "*thought of vanished things*" showed the poet's intention. It seemed that the third and the fourth tended to say that the poet could realize his ideal only in dreams or the next life. And the fifth and the sixth showed that the poet was disappointed with his official career, though he possessed remarkable talents as priceless as pears and jade. Furthermore, the seventh and the eighth expressed the innermost sadness of the poet. Turner agreed with the opinion of He, as that can be further proved by evidences in his translation, the phrases "*vain*", "*bear thought of vanished things*", "*day-dreaming*", "*sighed his soul into a bird*", "*jade mists*", "*recall*", "*a day was theirs*", and "*pass away*", all of them showed that the poet's innermost sadness to his fate.

Different comprehensions lead to different interpretations. Zhu and He learned something different in the poem from different perspectives. Zhu held that the object of the poem is the dead wife of the poet, while He that the object of the poem was the poet himself. The jade mentioned in the poem experienced the same fate in both their interpretations, but it is the symbol of the poet's dead wife in the former interpretation, the symbol of the poet's talent. It resulted from the difference between the poet's intention and the poem text's intention. It was the difference that led to different comprehensions of the same poem. And different comprehensions resulted in different interpretations. As a result, there were different versions of the same poem in translating poems.

4. Conclusion

In different times, there are different interpreters and translators, who try their best to get the better comprehensions and interpretations of poems when they understand, interpret, and translate them. According to the historical environment and the composing motive of the poet, they conjecture all kinds of possibilities from all possible perspectives. However, their own different experiences or backgrounds and the historic of poems will lead to different interpretations and versions of the same poem in translating poems. Translating poems is re-express of poems on the basis of comprehension and will be completed via interpretation. To some extent, the phenomenon of multi-interpretation in translating poems is the result of the historicity of interpretation. In

a word, the phenomenon in translating poems is inevitably, related to the textual meaning and the textual significance of a poem, to the author's intention and the textual intention of a poem.

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