

Translation Studies in the View of Deconstructionism

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Abstract: In traditional translation theories, the translator and target language text are subordinate to the writer and source language text, so the target text should be exactly faithful to the source text. However, in the view of deconstructionism, the target text serves as the afterlife of the source text, and it can implement and extend the meaning of the source text, thus making the source text continue to live in other linguistic contexts. Deconstructionism enhances the status of the translator and the target text and broadens the view of translation studies.

Keywords: Translation; Deconstructionism; Criteria; Faithfulness; Expressiveness

1. Introduction

In mid 1960s, deconstructionism came into being as a theory to be against structuralism. The representative figures of deconstructionism are French philosophers Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, and German scholar Walter Benjamin. Since then, in the western world, deconstructionism spread as a revolution to the scholarly domains like humanity, society, philosophy, and was regarded as a theory to doubt and challenge all the traditional theories[1].

The origin of deconstructionism began from Jacques Derrida's three books: *Of Grammatology*, *Speech and Phenomena*, *Writing and Difference*. With the publication of these three books, Derrida formed the theory of deconstructionism. On the one hand, Derrida criticized the structure-centered theory of structuralism and Martin Heidegger's theory of metaphysics. So deconstructionism has collapsed the basis of traditional metaphysics and challenged the authority of logocentrism. On the other hand, based on Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of value difference and Martin Heidegger's theory of ontological difference, Derrida created the theory of "differance", and introduced "differance" into deconstructionism[2]. Later on, together with French philosophers Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes, and Belgian translator Paul de Man, Derrida introduced the theory of "differance" into translation. In translation, except "differance", Derrida used the term "dissemination" by which he means that the target language text will disseminate to every direction, with no central area[3]. Therefore Roland Barthes declares that the writer is dead. Walter Benjamin thinks that the target text is the afterlife of the source text. The target text will no longer depends on the source text, instead, the source text depends on the target text to disseminate in new linguistic contexts. Deconstructionism does not mean deconstructing everything in the meaning

of the source text. It also admits the relative stability of meaning. What deconstructionism deconstructs is to restructure the meaning that hides in the text and differs according to distinct contexts[4]. Deconstructionism is not a kind of translation criteria, but it broadens the horizon of translation studies, especially it challenges the narrow translation thought of structuralism which views the meaning of translation regardless of humanism and context.

Although there is no translation theory put forward by deconstructionism, it breaks the closeness of language and views the theories and criteria of translation in critical eyes. With doubtful, critical views towards translation, deconstructionism has detected the problems in translation and taken new views and thoughts to translation studies.

2. The Writer, Translator, Source Language Text, Target Language Text in the View of Deconstructionism

2.1. The writer in the view of deconstructionism

The writer, in traditional translation theories, is the composer of the source language text, so he must be the authority to the text. The theme of the text, the style of the text, the arrangement of the text, even the hidden meanings of the text must be derived by the writer and his background. As for translation, the target language text must reflect the exact meaning of the source language text, with no addition or omission. The translator is only a tool for converting the language codes; he has no right to change the meaning of the source text and he should not add his own thoughts onto the text. In a word, the translator must be loyal to the writer.

However, the theory of deconstructionism denies the authority of the writer and the source language text. In

the view of deconstructionism, the meaning of the source text is not inherent. Only when the readers contact the text will the meaning emerge. The readers get the text's meaning while reading, and different readers may get different meanings, and in different contexts its meaning may be varied. So in some sense, the writer is dead according to the theory of deconstructionism. As a result, the translator's status is elevated[5], and even the translator can stay in the same status as the writer, not as a tool in traditional translation theories.

In 1968, Roland Barthes published an essay to deny the authority of the writer who is formerly regarded as the god of the text, and he also denies the creative labor of the writer. In the theory of deconstructionism, the role of the translator changes from servant of the writer to another creative writer who has the same status as the source language writer.

2.2. The translator in the view of deconstructionism

In traditional translation theories, the source language writer dominates the text and has the supreme authority for the source text. The writer can interpret the meaning of the text at his own will. John Dryden once compared the translator to a slave of the writer[6]. The translator can only labor for the writer in the orchard, but the fruits belong to the writer. In a word, in view of the traditional translation, the translator should obey the writer absolutely and reflect everything of the source text, and he should not express any meaning beyond the writer's. The translator is invisible.

In the theory of deconstructionism, the absolute authority of the source language writer is discarded. Deconstructionism thinks the translator has the same role to establish the meaning of the text as the writer. Walter Benjamin points out that the task of the translator is to find the special meaning of the text in the target language context, so as to create resonance for the target readers and the writer[7]. In order to create resonance for the target readers and the writer, the translator must have resonance with the writer first, because the translator is the medium of the language transcode. In the process of translation, the translator, with his own cultural backgrounds and knowledge, communicates and interacts with the writer, to get the special meaning of the source text. Through communication and interaction with the writer, the translator gets his own understanding of the text and then conveys it to the target language readers. So in the view of deconstructionism, the role of the translator is as important as the writer's. A good translated work is created through the cooperation of the writer and the translator[8]. Deconstructionism elevates the translator's status and endows him equal status with the writer. Therefore the translator's authority is established in deconstructionism's translation view.

2.3. The source language text in the view of deconstructionism

In traditional translation theories, the relation between the source language text and the target language text is like the relation between the master and the servant. The servant must obey the master. If there is no master, there is no servant. If there is no source language text, there is no target language text. The target text can only exist with the existence of the source text. The target text is to imitate or copy the meaning and form of the source text, so the supremacy of the source text is held high in traditional translation views.

In the view of deconstructionism, the meaning of the source language text is not fixed. In one context, the source text may have some certain meaning, but this is only the temporary meaning of the text. If put in another linguistic context, the meaning of the source text may be different, which is called "differance" in Derrida's deconstructionism. The translator's task is to spread the source text into the target language context. The translator should try to find the meaning of the source text, and by linguistic transcode, make the meaning of the source text develop and become mature; so the source text can exist in other linguistic contexts. In deconstructionism's view of translation, the source text can only exist with the existence of the target text. In Derrida's opinion, the status of the source text is no higher than the target text. Because language has the characteristic of "differance", the source text may have a certain meaning under certain circumstances. With the development of society and times, people may have different understanding towards the same text. So there is no exact or fixed meaning to a text. As for translation, the source text cannot live without the target text; the target text is a kind of development or supplement to the source text, thus making the source text complete and mature. Chinese writer and translator Qian Zhongshu puts forward in his book *On Translation* that, if the source text omits some information, the target text should add the related information to make the source text sound; if the source text reverses the sequence of something, the source text should modify it; if the source text is redundant in some part, the target text should make it concise; if there are some mistakes in the source text, the target text should correct them; if the source text is obscure in meaning, the target text should clarify it[1].

Therefore, in the view of deconstructionism, the meaning of the source text can be changeable according to different linguistic contexts, so there is no absolute meaning of the source text. Deconstructionism denies the authority of the source text, and admits the creative product of the translator. The source text is no longer the master of the target text; the two texts must coexist.

2.4. The target language text in the view of deconstructionism

In traditional translation theories, the task of translation is to transfer the meaning of the source language text accurately to the target language text. The meaning of the source text is fixed and the meaning of the source text can only be explained by the writer. The meaning of the target text must be as exact as the source text; the target text must be equivalent to the source text. The source text is the creative work of the writer; the translator should try to show it in the target text; the target text itself has no thought and style except the original writer's.

In the view of deconstructionism, the target language text itself is an independent text. It is also the creative work of the translator. The source language text has no fixed meaning. Every time when the source text is translated, it is endowed with new meanings and new living power. As the translators have different experiences and living backgrounds with the writer, the translators may have different interpretations to the same text[9]. Walter Benjamin points out in his book *The Task of Translator* that although the target text comes from the source text, it is the afterlife of the source text. It is known that many significant literary works can't find their appropriate translators when they first came into being, then the later translated versions serve to continue the lives of those significant literary works[7]. Therefore the significant literary works can spread to the world and live on and become mature and prosperous. Benjamin especially emphasizes the role for the target text to prolong the life of the source text, which is unprecedented. If a good literary work is completed by the writer, the writer's task is over. If the work needs to be appreciated by foreign readers, the original writer must rely on the translator to spread his work. Therefore the target text is never the replica of the source text. If without the translator's efforts, many literary works cannot be spread to the world and their lives may end in the source language context.

3. The Criteria of Translation in the View of Deconstructionism

3.1. The criterion of faithfulness in the view of deconstructionism

In traditional translation theories, the target language text must be faithful to the source language text, which is called faithfulness or equivalence. The translator cannot change the meaning of the writer and should not disturb the writer. The source text and the writer are absolutely superior to the target text and the translator. If the target text is not faithful to the source text, the translation activity will be regarded as a failure.

In the view of deconstructionism, although the meaning of the target text should be as same as the source text, it is a criterion that the translator can never achieve. The

process of translation is the activity of disseminating and differing the source text. Therefore the meaning of the source text is uncertain and has no definite "center". So the target text is the re-understanding and re-creation of the source text[8]. The task of the target text is to continue and innovate the source text. Lawrence Venuti, American advocate of deconstructionism, points out that the target text can never be faithful to the source text, because the translator may involve his own idea into the target text more or less[10]. Faithfulness is only the ideal of translation that can never be reached. Walter Benjamin thinks there is no faithfulness for the target text to the source text. The target text is not to reproduce or duplicate the meaning of the source text, but to supplement or extend the meaning of the source text.

3.2. The criterion of expressiveness in the view of deconstructionism

In traditional translation theories, the target language text should be expressive and comply with the target language and culture. The aim of this target-culture-oriented criterion of translation is to cater for target language readers; but to some extent, the cultural difference is wiped out in the target language in order to make the target text expressive and easy to understand. Therefore, through translation, the target culture is consolidated, but cultural communication is out of the question.

In the view of deconstructionism, the aim of translation is not to erase the difference in language and culture, but to enrich the world's language and culture. Lawrence Venuti thinks that the purpose of translation is to keep the difference among the cultures in the world. So the target language text should carry the elements of the source language text. To carry the foreign elements means the target language cannot totally cater to the target readers. Therefore, in some parts, the target text may be foreign to the target language. The target language may not be expressive for the native readers, but in the view of deconstructionism, in order to make the world's language and culture rich, the target language text should not necessarily be expressive, but should make foreignization as the priority.

4. Conclusion

The theory of deconstructionism reverses the relationship between the source language text and the target language text. Traditional translation theories think the target text relies on the source text and must be faithful to the source text. However, deconstructionism thinks the target text is the afterlife of the source text; it extends and supplements the source text, and makes the source text live on in other linguistic contexts. The theory of deconstructionism enhances the status of the translator and target text, broadens the view of translation studies and translators' horizons, makes people reconsider the role of translation, and

enables translation to be the medium for world communication and diversification.

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