Translation Norms and the Translator's Agency

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Abstract

Translator Studies has undergone a shift from a focus on SC constraints to the manipulation by TC patronage. Translators play an active role in different phases of the activity and their agency has not been given due attention.Norms determine the suitability of translation. Non-compliance is not only possible but also necessary at times, though the behavior involves a price to pay. Norms and the translator's agency are two sides of every translation activity. The former lays down socio-cultural constraints on translating, and the latter is the source of creativity. Both adherence to and breach of norms require the translator's agency. Both the theory and praxis of translation would stand to benefit from a dialectical, rather than a mechanical, view of their relationship.

Norms refer to the translation of general values or ideas shared by a group - as to what is conventionally right and wrong, adequate and inadequate - into performance instructions, appropriate for and applicable to particular situations, specifying what is prescribed and forbidden, as well as what is tolerated and permitted in a certain behavioral dimension *(Toury 1998: 15)*. Translation, as a social and cultural activity, or a socio-cultural activity is norms-

governed. Norms are not to be understood as hard and fast rules though. Norms operate not only in translation of all kinds, but also at every stage in the translating event *(Toury 1995: 58)*. John Dryden's metaphor of '*dancing on ropes with fettered legs*' refers to the constraints imposed by the source text and by the linguistic-cultural ethos of the potential or intended target text as well as to the linguistic and cultural norms on translation.

On the other hand, as a highly creative task, translation sometimes requires the practitioners to move beyond norms. The relationship between translation norms and the translator's agency is hence paradoxical and complex. This paper is an attempt at clarifying the relationship between the two. The article begins with a review of the translator-studies literature, and after a discussion of the possibility and necessity of loosening up norms, investigates the translator's role in the different phases of translation. It perorates with the conclusion of a dialectical view of the relationship between translation norms and the translator's agency.

1. Change of Focus in Translator Studies

Concern with the 'how-to' in interlingual transfer determines the focus of traditional translator studies on the prerequisites for becoming a translator. In ancient Rome, Philo Judaeus (20 B. C (?) - 50 A.D (?)) and St Augustine (254-430) stressed the significance of 'God's inspiration' to Bible translation and argued that only the pious clergymen were qualified for the job. They prescribed that translators were but dictating tools and there was nothing creative at all in translation *(Tan 1991: 28)*. In China, one of the first to have commented on translator qualifications was Yan Cong (557-610). In his translation treatise *On Dialectic Translation,* Yan listed eight conditions for a translator, half of which were about morality, and another half was about educational requirements. These include faithfulness to the Buddhist cause, modesty, discipline, a good command of the Sanskrit and Chinese, knowledge of the Buddhist

scriptures and the Chinese classics, etc. *(Chen 1992: 38)*. It was impossible for people in Yan's time to possess all the *eight conditions*, because Chinese 'translators' were typically monolingual then.

These source-oriented researchers are also interested in formulating all sorts of standards for translators to follow. Translators are required to imitate the authors, to the extent that the translations are so smooth in vocabulary, so idiomatic in phrase, so correct in construction, so smooth in flow of thought, so clear in meaning, and so elegant in style, that they do not appear to be translations at all, and yet at the same time fully transmit the message of the originals. Translators are considered servants of the 'master' authors and are expected to be absolutely objective and invisible.

Scholars in the Manipulation School initiated a target-oriented paradigm in Translation Studies. They were convinced that,

> "from the point of view of the target literature, all translation implies a degree of manipulation of the source text for a certain purpose"
>
> (Hermans 1985: 10)

Translations were one of the primary literary tools that larger social institutions - educational systems, arts councils, publishing firms, and even governments - had at their disposal to *manipulate* a given society in order to *construct* the kind of *culture* desired *(Hermans 1985: 10).* Translators are manipulators of the source texts and the target readers, and the manipulating tools of their patronage.

It follows that the paradigm shift in Translation Studies just means a change from emphasis on the constraints of the source texts and cultures to those of the target cultures. Hardly have translators

shaken off the shackles of the source texts and authors when they are again chained by the target cultures. The translator's agency has not been given due attention.

2. Possibilities and the Necessity of the Loosening Up of Norms

Norms always imply *sanctions,* actual or potential, whether negative (to those who violate them) or positive (to those who abide by them). Within the group, norms also serve as a yardstick according to which instances of behaviour and/or their results are evaluated *(Toury 1995:55 / 1998:17).*

Acceptance of the idea that translation events are basically norm-governed does not entail the denial of free choice during an act of translation *(Toury 1998: 20).* Non-normative behavior is always a possibility. After all, it is the translator who decides how to behave, be that decision fully conscious or not. So far as the solution to specific problems is concerned, translators obviously have great power, for they are the only people doing the creative work of translation. Translators are manipulated by the patronage. But as the actual performers of the act of translating, they can at times move beyond the constraints.

Breaking norms may be closely related to the motivation of translation. As social agents, translators work in a certain context. They have certain goals to reach, personal or collective interests to pursue, and material and symbolic stakes to defend. Some translators are politically motivated and their very purpose is to subvert the dominant norms.

Ideological control of translation is strict in many societies. But some translators are defiant of or indifferent to the political or ethical norms of the target culture and remain faithful to the source text even if it is hostile or threatening to dominant political or ethical values. And for certain purposes, some would rather challenge the

target culture ideological norms and face possible severe punishment.

For example, in the Medieval Period, the Bible was prohibited from being translated into vernacular languages. But the attempt of the church authorities finally failed. In the Middle East, similar things happened to the rendition of Koran. In China, during T*he Proletariat Cultural Revolution* (1966-1976), ideological control went to the extreme. In the five years from May 1965 to November 1971, not a single translation of foreign literature was published. And in the remaining years of the 'cultural revolution', only a total of 34 translations got printed. But some people secretly translated Western literature, not to serve the dominant ideology, but just for the sake of translation, and their translations came out soon after the end of the 'cultural revolution'. *(Ma 2003:65)*

The existence of competing norms in a society involves choices. Translators tend to follow the mainstream norms so as to be more easily patronized. In some cases, however, particularly at times of cultural transition, several conflicting norms might be equally influential. This enables translators to decide to go with one norm and accept one patronage rather than another.The translator's position is crucial at this moment. One example is that during the Sino-Japan War (1937-1945), works both in praise of and severely critical of, the Japanese aggression were translated into Chinese, though in different regions of China.

Breach of poetical norms is very common in literary translation and is diversified by the translator's personal aesthetic preferences. For instance, at the beginning of the 20th century, three kinds of temporal dialects co-existed and were available for the translation of creative fiction in Chinese:
   a) The classical dialect *(wenyan)*
   b) The simple classical dialect and
   c) The vernacular dialect *(baihua)*.

Most translators stuck to the use of one form, but some alternated between the two. In rendering the same text, some people followed the source culture norms and translated more literally, while others attached greater importance to the readership and produced works with more latitude.

The translator's response to the editor's poetic requirements and the critic's comments is also complex. Translators normally obey the obligatory requirements, but may accept or reject the technical suggestions according to their own professional judgment. Some translators may establish good relationships with the critics while others may insist on their own principles in spite of the critics' opposition.

The selection of alternative norms involves a price to pay. But it does not necessarily lead to severe punishment, nor does it mean the invalidity of norms. At times, a slight breach of norms is not only tolerated, but also encouraged.

> "Some literary translators might claim that their intention is precisely to break these norms. And translations of advertisements sometimes appear deliberately to flout the expectancy norms of the target culture"
>
> (Chesterman 1997: 60)

Norms are *"the main factors ensuring the establishment and stability of a social order"* (Toury 1995:55), but they may also, in effect, restrain innovation. In this sense, they must sometimes be challenged and changed. Otherwise, prejudice will last a long time. Hence failure to adhere to norms does not always mean anything negative. On the contrary, it may be the source of cultural creativity. Only when the previous norms are broken is it possible for new ones to become dominant, and for cultures to develop.

3. The Translator's Agency in Different Phases of Translation

Translation is governed by norms, but as a creative activity, it also requires the maximum use of the translator's agency.

> "The translator's agency is manifested not only in the translator's comprehension, interpretation and artistic re-presentation of the source texts, but also in the selection of source texts, the cultural motivations of translation, the adoption of strategies, and the manipulation in the prefaces of the expected functions of the translations in the target culture".
>
> (Cha et al 2003: 22)

The translator's role in text selection varies from time to time. In most cases, it is the publisher who selects source texts and translators. But translators have the right to accept or reject the rendition of certain works. Regardless of the actual power of translators, in the Chinese context, text selection has often been an important criterion of translation criticism. A case in point is the different evaluations Yan Fu (1853-1921) and Lin Shu (1852-1924) received. Patriotic motivations and careful selection of Western social works have often been considered a significant feature of Yan's translation whereas Lin Shu has been repeatedly criticized for being unselective and having wasted most of his time rendering a large percentage of secondary or third-class literature into Chinese.

The product of translating is directly shaped by the translator's comprehension of the source texts and the specific strategies he employs. Competence is crucial to the accuracy of translation, but the translator's conscious or unconscious intervention is inevitable, particularly in the forms of ideological and/or poetical deletions, rewritings and additions. Manipulation exists not only in the translations, but also in the prefaces and postscripts, which are short, conspicuous, and therefore very effective in manipulating the readers to produce the desired cultural results.

Translators manipulate the source texts in the service of power. They are in turn manipulated by the patronage so that the target readers and society are manipulated. On some occasions, however, translators may manipulate their patrons.

> "Translation involves trust. The audience, which does not know the original, trusts that the translation is a fair representation of it".
>
> (Lefevere 1990: 15)

Trust from readers and translation commissioners bring some power to translators, the exercise of which is closely connected with the translator's loyalty and reliability. In case translators have access to information unavailable to their clients, or where translators are in short supply, they might make full use of this and manipulate both the source texts and the patrons in order to achieve certain purposes. This helps us to understand why translators who have exclusive or near-exclusive access to information otherwise unavailable to those in power tend to be closely supervised and vetted for political loyalty *(Hermans 1999b: 130).*

One Chinese example of manipulating the patrons is found in the *Treaty of Tientsin* (1858), signed between the Qing dynasty feudal court and the British government. Article L of the English version stipulated that

> All official communications addressed by the Diplomatic and Consular Agents of Her Majesty the Queen to the Chinese Authorities shall, henceforth, be written in English. They will for the present be accompanied by a Chinese version, but it is understood that, in the event of there being any difference of meaning between the English and the Chinese text, the English government will hold the sense as expressed in the English text to be the correct sense. This provision

is to apply to the Treaty now negotiated, the Chinese text of which has been carefully corrected by the English original.

(1917, Vol. 1: 418)

However, the Chinese text of the same article read somewhat differently, which is:

Henceforth the communication shall be written in English; but *until China has selected students for learning the English language and their English has become very fluent,* the communication shall be accompanied with a parallel text in Chinese. …

There is no way of telling how this statement found its way into the Chinese text. Due to lack of bilingual Chinese, for a long time, the Qing court had relied on Western missionaries for interpretation in diplomatic communications or in signing treaties with Western powers. Wang Kefei and Fan Shouyi (1999) said that the negotiators probably intended to include the statement in the Chinese text in order to force the Emperor to start a language school for training interpreters.

Manipulation in translation is often very subversive because translation offers a cover for the translator to go against the dominant constraints of his or her time, not in his or her own name, but rather in the name of a writer. This gives the translator two privileges: S/He relies on the authority of the author when s/he himself is not well known.Expressing his own opinions with the discourse of the author, within a certain limit, the translator takes no responsibility for his/her own statements. Moreover, deviations occurring in translations often meet with greater tolerance. And the way censorship is applied to translations has often been much more lenient. One reason for this difference is that the presumed non-domestic origin of translations makes them look less menacing.

Another reason is that there seems to be no way of actually going after the 'absent' author, who should presumably take most of the blame. Translation thus constitutes a convenient way of introducing novelties into a culture, without arousing too much antagonism, especially in cultures reluctant to deviate from sanctioned models and norms *(Toury 1995: 41).*

Translating involves both the source and target norms and this enables translators to make a choice as to which to follow. Translators tend to stay partly within and partly out of these two sets of norms.

4. Social Determinism and the Translator's Idiosyncrasy

Government and creativity are two sides of the same translation coin. In contrast to scholars from the philological school, who highly value artistic creation and the translator's freedom in literary translation, scholars in the Manipulation School attach greater importance to the constraints of the target cultural norms on translation. This evokes criticism from some scholars. Antoine Berman, for example, argued that since norms tended to prescribe translations of the naturalizing kind, and translators were supposed to obey norms, a norm-based approach denied all creativity to translation and translators (Berman cited in *Hermans* 1999b: 154-5). And as Anthony Pym pointed out, a mechanistic application of the norms concept is bound to downgrade the individual translator's agency (Pym cited in Hermans 1999b: 154 -5).

However Hermans contends that constraints are conditioning factors, not absolutes. Individuals can choose to go with or against them. Translators, too, can decide to defer to the powers or foment opposition, be it poetic or political. He then quotes from Bourdieu, adding that two dangers threaten research in the human sciences:

> ...naïve teleological or 'finalist' thinking,
> which sees the end of a known process as
> illuminating the path towards the goal; and
> mechanistic determinism, which interprets processes
> as the inevitable unraveling of a set of initial
> conditions.
>
> (Hermans 1999b: 128-132)

A translator is at the same time social and individual, which means he is constrained by social and cultural norms of the time, and at the same time, has his own specific individuality and agency. The translator's agency and the factors that constrain his agency exist side by side. On the one hand, the translator is bound to constraints by certain factors in his exercise of agency. Faced with many constraints, on the other hand, the translator still has room to exert his agency. Translation is a combination of universal constraints on translators as a group and the agency of translators as individuals. As Hermans (*Hermans 1999b: 74*) put it, "*translation decisions are neither fully predetermined nor totally idiosyncratic*". Over-emphasis on social constraints and ignoring the translator's agency will result in the fall of the translator's status and responsibility as well as the quality of translations. And negligence of cultural norms might lead to random translation.

Translation, as a norms-governed creative work, requires the translator to follow his own inclinations, but within an acceptable range of norms. For this, the maximum use of the translator's agency is required. Norms ensure the suitability of the translation behavior, and the translator's agency is the source of creativity. Both the adherence to and loosening up of norms require the translator's agency. A dialectical rather than a mechanical view of their relationship is healthy for translation studies and practice.

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