

Translator's Subjectivity in Eco-Translatology

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Abstract

This paper aims to examine translator's subjectivity from the perspective of eco-translatology. Translator's subjectivity emphasizes the subjective initiative of translators in the process of translation. However, the identity of translators is invisible in the viewpoints of traditional translation theories, which means that translation is studied with either writer or text as the center. Eco-translatology, a new translation theory brought forth by Hu Gengshen, assumes that translators should be placed at the central position during translation practice since translation is actually the cyclical alternation of adaptation and selection in the ecological environment of translation which involves elements such as author, source text, translator, target text, reader, and publisher. According to eco-translatology, translators, as the center of translation, are allowed to make selective adaptation and adaptive selection so as to keep the balance and harmony of the ecological environment. Selective adaptation means that translators are supposed to select the text of which they are capable for translation. Adaptive selection means that translators are allowed to make adaptations to the target text based on other factors in the ecological environment of translation. Translator's subjectivity, namely translator centeredness, is shown in the continuous process of adaptation and selection, and embodied in the three-dimensional transformations of language, culture and communication.

Keywords: Translator's Subjectivity, Translator Centeredness, Eco-Translatology, Adaptation/Selection, Three-dimensional Transformations, Ecological Environment of Translation, Translation Strategies, Balance, Stability

1. Introduction

For a long time, scholars had not attached adequate importance to the identity of translators in both stages of traditional philological paradigm study with writer as the center and structural linguistic paradigm study with text as the center, thus resulting in the invisibility of translators. Until the 1970s, there was a cultural turn in translation studies, which formed a pluralistic paradigm in the postmodern context. Translation studies began to shift from text centeredness to translator centeredness. The identity of translators then received the extensive attention, and accordingly, translator's subjectivity began to become a research hotspot of the translation circle. Translator's subjectivity refers to the subjective initiative shown by the translator as the subject of translation in order to achieve the purpose of translation on the premise of respecting source text (Mingjian & Yu, 2003, p. 22). The emergence of eco-translatology provides a new perspective for the study of translator's subjectivity.

Eco-translatology integrates the theory of biological evolution into the study of translation. It is an interdisciplinary study of translation from the perspective of ecology. Based on Darwin's theory of biological evolution, the theory breaks through the shackles of natural science and human science, and at the same time, expounds some ontological problems of translation by resorting to natural science and human science. The major concept of the theory is translation as adaptation and selection,

and the dominant approach is adaptive selection and selective adaptation. The theory stresses the dominant position of translators, and assumes translators as the summation of all “conflicts”. In the framework of eco-translatology, there is a close relationship between translators and questions such as how to achieve a relatively stable relationship among the elements in the ecological environment of translation, and how translators can survive in the ecological environment. This paper aims to analyze the translator’s subjectivity, namely translator centeredness, from the perspective of eco-translatology and its guiding significance for translation practice.

2. Theoretical Framework of Eco-translatology

Hu Gengshen (2004), based on Darwin’s “selection/adaptation” theory, made a new interpretation to the nature, process, standard and approach of translation, demonstrated and constructed the new translation theory of “translation as adaptation and selection” (p. 251), marking the birth of eco-translatology. After more than ten years of development, eco-translatology started to draw the attention from and win the recognition of both domestic and overseas scholars.

2.1. Ecological Environment Of Translation

Eco-translatology emphasizes the ecological environment of translation and the adaptation and selection of translators. Ecological environment of translation refers to the overall environment of translator and target language, which, generally speaking, covers a variety of factors that are related to translation behavior, such as natural and economic environments, linguistic and cultural environments, social and political environments. To be specific, it refers to the world presented by the aggregation of interactive elements such as language, communication, culture, society, authors, readers and clients (Gengshen, 2003, p. 288). These elements are inter-connected with each other, and the change of any one will lead to the changes of others in the ecological environment. Therefore, the ultimate purpose of translation is to maintain the balance of the ecological environment.

2.2. Translation as Adaptation and Selection

Eco-translatology is developed on the basis of translation adaptation and selection theory, which introduces the “adaptation and selection” in Darwin’s theory of biological evolution into translation studies, thus defining translation as “the translator’s selective activity of transplanting texts to adapt to the ecological environment of translation under the premises of taking the translator as the center, relying on the text and taking the cross-cultural transformation as the purpose.” (Gengshen, 2013, p. 245) Therefore, translation, in essence, is the selection of translators for the purpose of adapting to the ecological environment, and the process of translation is the cycle of continuous adaptation and selection, which is subject to the “survival of the fittest”. The selection of translation strategies is the result of translators’ adaptation to the ecological environment of translation. Translators, playing a dominant role in the process of translation, need to adopt different translation approaches to adapt to the ecological environment of translation from the dimensions of language, culture and communication until producing the most suitable translation.

2.3. Translator Centeredness

“Translator centeredness”, another important concept of eco-translatology, aims to highlight the central position and dominant role of translators, and tries to describe and interpret translation from the perspective of eco-translatology. Eco-translatology establishes the translator’s dominant role, sense of responsibility and individual development in translation through “translator centeredness” so that translators are truly respected and become the focus in translation studies. With the gradual extension of “who is translating” in eco-translatology, there forms a complementary system composed of “translator dominance”, “translator responsibility” and “translator development” (Dijiang & Jie, 2017, p. 57). At the level of translation practice, “translator centeredness” stresses the dominant role of translators, which means that translators are free to make judgment and decision on translation behaviors such as “selective adaptation” and “adaptive selection”. At the level of translation ethics, “translator centeredness” refers to “translator responsibility”, which means that they have to be responsible for keeping the balance of the ecological environment of translation.

2.4. Three-Dimensional Transformations

Eco-translatology summarizes translation methods as “three-dimensional transformations”, namely the adaptive transformation from the three dimensions of language, culture and communication under the principle of “multi-dimensional adaptation and selection” (Gengshen, 2006, p.52). “Adaptive transformation from the linguistic dimension” refers to the translator’s adaptive transformation in terms of language form. Due to linguistic differences, translators need to select the vocabulary and sentence structures according to the ecological environment of target language so as to make readers easily understand the information conveyed in the translation; “adaptive transformation from the cultural dimension” means that translators should not only carry out the conversion between source language and target language, but also pay attention to the differences of bilingual cultures in order to remove the obstacles in cultural exchange and finally achieve the transmission of cultural connotations. This requires translators to deal with special expressions in the culture of source language so as to prevent readers from misunderstanding the cultural connotation of these expressions; “adaptive transformation from the communicative dimension” refers to the fact that in the process of translation, translators should also attach importance to communicative intention of the source text (Gengshen, 2006, p.52-53). Any text is given communicative intention when created. Translators should be clear about such communicative intention before the start of translation for the purpose of the accurate transmission of information.

3. Study of Translator Centeredness in Eco-Translatology

3.1. Essence of Translator Centeredness

In the research and discussion of traditional translation studies in China and western countries, authors of source text were in the central position, and taken as the focus in the process of translation. In contrast, translators were neglected and placed in a subordinate position. They were compared as the “servants”, which revealed their embarrassing status. Therefore, in the traditional sense, translators must faithfully convey the intention of the original author and transmit all the information that the original author wants to express. The final translation was not allowed to contain translators’ personal understandings and translating characteristics, linguistic features of target language, and so on. Accordingly, translator’s subjectivity was not recognized. The emergence of eco-translatology alleviated the long-lasting embarrassment for translators.

Eco-translatology specifically confirms the relevance of translational ecology and natural ecology, and stresses that translation is realized through adaptive selection and selective adaptation, which is different from traditional translation theories at the micro-level (Dijiang, 2017, p.111). The adaptation and selection theory of Darwin assumes that all creatures that survive are adaptable to the environment, and those that have extinguished are not adaptable to the environment, which is the so-called the survival of the fittest. The process of struggle for survival is called natural selection. Taking the adaptation and selection theory of Darwin as the theoretical basis, eco-translatology posits that only translators who adapt to the ecological environment of translation can survive in the ecological environment of translation at last, and also grants the greater power and freedom to translators. “Translator centeredness” emerged accordingly in the case. Scholars of eco-translatology expect translators to bring into full play their subjectivity and creativity so as to keep the stability of the ecological environment of translation, thus creating the optimum translation. Therefore, “translator centeredness”, rooted in the “translation as adaptation and selection” of Hu Gengshen (2004), attracted the attention of more and more scholars during the development of eco-translatology. The construction of translator centeredness not only represents the further development of research into the role of translators, but also embodies the continuous development of eco-translatology.

Inspired by the idea, a great number of Chinese translation scholars started to occupy themselves with the study of translator centeredness, and their persistent exploration and research, in turn, enriched the idea and accelerated its development. Eco-translatology explicitly takes translators as the center, pays attention to the role of translators in ecological environment of translation, and emphasizes that all factors of eco-translatology should be in harmony with translators so as to keep the balance and stability of the translational ecological system.

In summary, “translator centeredness”, as a core concept of eco-translatology, gives prominence to the dominant position and initiative of translators, and also restricts translators with the rule of the survival of the fittest, which makes it different from any other translation theories (Shuya & Zhonglian, 2005, p.95). Hu Gengshen (2004) defined translation as the “selective activity of translators adapting to the ecological environment of translation”, which clearly pointed out the important role of translators (p.143). Translators should adapt to the ecological environment of translation for the purpose of survival. In addition, translator centeredness also requires translators to be responsible for their translation. In such a way, translators form a harmonious and symbiotic relationship with source text, target text and other factors in the ecological environment of translation.

3.2. Significance of Translator Centeredness

In essence, translator centeredness embodies the theory of human nature of translation thoughts. Eco-translatology puts translators in the core position in the process of translation, which is a great breakthrough on the basis of many traditional translation theories and is also a fundamental difference from other traditional translation theories. It focuses on the relationship between translators and the ecological environment of translation. Translation involves not only translators, but also authors, readers, publishers, and so on. Of course, translators play the most important role. As the reader, receiver and communicator of the source language, translators must select and adapt to the ecological environment of translation, take into account cultural differences between the two languages, and fully understand the author’s ideological intention (Zhihui, 2017, p.103). Meanwhile, translators also make continuous adaptation and selection according to the need of readers so as to produce the most suitable translation. For instance, when translating stories for children, translators should fully consider this age feature and try to select basic words for translation, and make the translation adaptable to the reading habit of children. Selection and adaptation are indispensable and complementary to each other. Only through constant selection and adaptation, translators may survive and keep the relative stability of the translational ecology.

Translator centeredness is a basic concept in eco-translatology, which marks the transformation of translation study from “text centeredness” to “translator centeredness”. This is the general trend of the development of translation. Translator centeredness and translator’s subjectivity are relatively consistent in essence. They both emphasize translators’ subjective initiative and creativity. Hu Gengshen (2013) believes that translators should, as one element in the ternary relationship of source text, translator and target text, not be “shielded”, but granted the “dominant role” and “central position” in the process of translation.

It is true that all translation activities are carried out by translators in the ecological environment of translation. Without translators, translation becomes impossible. At the same time, only translators are “alive” in the ternary relationship, and serve as readers and re-creators as well. On the one hand, translators need to fully understand the works to be translated, and find out the information to be conveyed in translation. In this case, they are readers; on the other hand, based on the linguistic

features and communicative purposes of both source language and target language, translators have to make selection and adaptation to the translation. In this case, they are re-creators.

From the perspective of eco-translatology, there is a dynamic balance among source text, translator and target text, forming a harmonious and unified “Trinity” translation viewpoint. The theory of “translator centeredness” emphasizes the important position of translators in the process of translation, and also shows that translation studies should return to translator’s subjectivity. Up to now, “translator centeredness” balances the two extreme views of “source centeredness” and “translation centeredness”, and serves as a bridge between readers and authors. It promotes the balance between translation research ecology and translation environment, and constructs a new ecological science model of “translational ecology”. In the mode of eco-translatology, translation is the product of translators’ “adaptation” and “selection”. In the constant “adaptation” and “selection”, the ecological environment of translation tends to become stable.

It should be noted that the original existential relationship between translator and text life, translational ecology, and translation life is not compulsive and controlling, but symbiotic and harmonious (Dijiang & Jie, 2017, p.59). It can be seen that translator centeredness neither puts translators in a “sacred” position, and nor ignores other factors in the ecological environment of translation. Instead, it emphasizes the rational translation through translator’s subjective initiative and creative ability. Translated works are interconnected with translator, reader and author, and translators are obliged to maintain all factors in the ecological environment of translation balanced and stable.

4. Embodiment of Translator Centeredness from the Perspective of Eco-Translatology

Eco-translatology defines translation as translators’ selection and adaptation to the ecological environment of translation. It can be seen from the definition that translators play a central role in the process of translation, and they are the fundamental factor for the success of translation. The translator’s subjectivity embodies the “dominant” role of translators in the whole translation process, including how to deal with source text, target reader, and target text. Eco-translatology describes translation as an alternate process of translators’ adaptation and selection.

The process of translation is roughly divided into two stages. In the first stage, translators have to adapt to the ecological environment of translation with source text as the typical element. Based on the ecological principle of survival of the fittest, translators who cannot adapt to the ecological environment of translation will not be chosen for translation. “In order to survive in the first stage, translators have to become good readers, critics and partners.” (Gengshen, 2014, p.34) Although they are in the dominant position, translators are still subject to the restriction of factors in the ecological environment of translation, such as different cultures of source and target texts, and linguistic style of source text. Therefore, translators have to select source texts that they are adept in before translation, or enhance their capabilities comprehensively so as to adapt to the source texts to be translated. Translators carry out selective adaptation in the stage.

The second stage refers to translators’ selection of final translation in the ecological environment with themselves as the typical element. Based on the ecological environment of translation, translators play their own initiative and make their own selection on the final translation strategies and forms of target texts. In this stage, translators carry out adaptive selection. From the perspective of eco-translatology, the selection of translation strategies is reflected in the three-dimensional transformations of language, culture and communication. Therefore, the author will analyze the embodiment of translator’s subjectivity in the three-dimensional transformations in the following part.

4.1. Embodiment of Translator’s Subjectivity in the Adaptive Transformation from Linguistic Dimension

Adaptive transformation from linguistic dimension refers to the adaptive transformation of linguistic form in the process of translation. Due to their different origins, English and Chinese have great differences in vocabulary and syntactic structure. How to deal with these differences is the key to the success of translation. In terms of vocabulary use, the most significant difference between Chinese and English is that the former can be used in conjunction with verbs, while the latter can only have one predicate verb, and other verbs can only be used as predicates. As far as the language structure is concerned, Chinese pays attention to parataxis, and expresses the meaning it wants to express through the logical relationship of contexts and word order; on the contrary, English pays attention to hypotaxis, which mainly combines different elements of a sentence through connectives, thus requiring correct grammar and complete expression of meaning. As far as the language style is concerned, Chinese is gorgeous, with elegant wording, frequent four-character structure, parallelism and antithesis; while the English language is simple, and easy to be understood, with concise and clear, accurate information. Therefore, during translation, translators need to select words and sentences with high degree of adaptation according to the ecological environment of the target language, so as to match the ecological context of the target language to the greatest extent, and make people in different language backgrounds able to understand and accept the information to be conveyed without difficulty. (Guan, 2018, p.20) For example:

Source text:

这儿的峡谷又是另一番景象：谷中急水奔流，穿峡而过，两岸树木葱茏，鲜花繁茂，碧草萋萋，活脱脱一副生机盎然的天然风景画。各种奇峰异岭，令人感受各异，遐想万千。

Target text:

It is another gorge through which a rapid stream flows. Trees, flowers and grass, a picture of natural vitality, thrive on both banks. The weird peaks arouse disparate thoughts.

The source text uses a large number of four-character and parallel structures, producing the pleasant rhyme and giving people a sense of beauty. Based on the theory of translator centeredness, the translator restructured the sentence in translation, divided the first sentence into two, and described the river and trees, flowers and grass separately, thus making the sentence clear and concise. In addition, the translator deleted some characters describing the scenery, such as “葱茏”, “繁茂” and “萋萋”, thus making the target text adapt to the linguistic features of English tourism text.

4.2. Embodiment of Translator's Subjectivity in the Adaptive Transformation from Cultural Dimension

Adaptive transformation from cultural dimension refers to the fact that translators pay attention to the transmission and interpretation of bilingual cultural connotation in the process of translation, with the focus on discovering the cultural differences between source text and target text so as to prevent translators from misinterpreting source text (Jun, 2019, p.37). Translation not only is the simple transformation of two languages, but also involves the combination and conflict of two different cultures. During translation, translators should not just stick to transformation at the linguistic level, but properly deal with culture-loaded words in source language and target language. Therefore, translators should familiarize themselves with not only languages but also cultures so as to make adaptive transformation from the ecological environment of translation. Translators are also the disseminators of bilingual cultures. An excellent translator should have cultural awareness in the process of translation and realize that translation is cross-cultural communication, so as to protect the cultural ecological balance of two languages and also the successful transmission of information. For example:

Source text:

螳螂捕蝉，黄雀在后。

Target text:

When the shepherds quarrel, the wolf has a winning game.

To achieve the adaptive transformation from cultural dimension, translators are allowed to select the word with the equivalent cultural connotation as the replacement. If the translator selected literal translation, foreign readers might be confused because they did not understand the relationship among mantis (螳螂), cicada (蝉), and siskin (黄雀).

4.3. Embodiment of Translator's Subjectivity in the Adaptive Transformation from Communicative Dimension

Adaptive transformation from communicative dimension means that translators pay attention to the adaptive transformation of communicative intention in the process of translation, which requires them to attach importance to the communicative level in addition to the transformation of linguistic information and the transmission of cultural connotation (Huili, 2020, p.20). Any kind of text is endowed with certain communicative intention when created. Therefore, translators must be clear about the author's creative intention and the information to be conveyed, and accurately carry out the adaptive transformation from communicative dimension for the accurate transmission of communicative intention. Target text should produce the same emotional feeling among readers and convey the same information as source text.

Source text:

鼻敏灵

Target text:

Nasalin

Based on the cognitive environment of foreign consumers, and starting with the communicative dimension, the translator rendered the traditional Chinese medicine into Nasalin by referring to English names of drugs such as Penicillin and Aspirin. With Latin word nasal as the stem, Nasalin can clearly tell consumers the function of the medicine, thus achieving the communicative purpose.

5. Conclusion

Eco-translatology studies the relationship between translators and the ecological environment of translation, places translators into the central and dominant position of translation activities, and provides the possibility for people to have a more comprehensive understanding of translator's subjectivity. If translators do not respect the ecological environment of translation, and also do not make effort to adapt to the environment and accept its constraints, their translation will be eliminated by the ecological environment; on the contrary, if translators constantly pursue the holistic adaptation and selection, and actively optimize the three-dimensional transformations, they will surely produce the most suitable translation. An excellent translator should know how to seek advantages and avoid disadvantages in the complex ecological environment, give full play to the subjective consciousness, integrate himself into the multi-dimensional ecological environment, and finally achieve the dynamic balance, harmony and unity with other factors in the ecological environment of translation.

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