Translatability is always a matter of considerable concern to both philosophers and translators. Modern literary theory since the advent of structuralism has offered interesting insights into the nature of text and interpretation, all of which have a definite bearing on the translating process. It is the purpose of this article to look at translatability, in terms of both structuralism and post-structuralism, with a view to studying langue, parole and context as the issues at stake. Different kinds of texts will be examined for their translatability from English into Chinese and vice versa.

1. Introduction

1.1 We as speaker-hearers like to believe that what we say and hear is
somehow a true reflection of reality. In this regard, the primary source, or better still, the spoken account given by the experiencer in person is usually given the greatest credence. Likewise, the more circuitous the manner a message is related, such as by word of mouth, from one text to another, and across two different languages, the more susceptible it becomes to suspicion as to its authenticity. The privileging of the author, which many of us have been accustomed to do, has consequently relegated translation, like all kinds of “secondary representation,” to the status of a contingent copy of the original, much to the dismay of any self-respecting translator, and probably his employer as well. In the following sections, however, I will try to re-examine this whole issue of translatibility from the perspectives of structuralism and post-structuralism, with a few supplementary textual examples along the way.

2. Structuralism vs post-structuralism

2.1 Structuralism, based on the Saussurean concept of an arbitrary union of signifier and signified, is in the business of finding permanent structures which regulate human perception and behaviour. It is goal-oriented in the sense that the structure of anything at all is taken to be a closed, and therefore exhaustible, system of synchronically co-existing differential relationships. The ultimate aim is to generalise optimally from the data available so as to enable the investigator to objectively describe, explain and then predict all of the data there are in the physical world we live in. Applied to critical and translating practices, structuralism represents a view of the text as a hierarchy of meaningful signs which is recoverable through certain set procedures. Towards this end, emphasis is laid on language universals at a given point of time, to the exclusion of contextual variations.

2.2 The structuralist approach challenges, basically, the humanist belief that the author is the source of the text which is somehow a reflection of reality. For example, Roland Barthes suggested back in 1968 that the text, which is “always already written,” should be better understood in terms of other texts. The author is excluded for he has only an “instrumental” part to play and is considered “dead” once the text has been written. This line of argument, taken to its extreme interpretation, subsumes parole entirely under langue. The individual is bound so much by his native linguistic perception of the universe that he cannot possibly say the unsayable, or read the unreadable for that matter, through the language
that he operates in. Likewise, it can also be said of the author that he is just an automaton in the Chomskyan speech community. As it turned out, it is precisely this kind of static perception, inconceivable in any case unless in terms of approximation, that has prompted structuralists like Barthes himself to later adjust their position.

2.3 The limitation of structuralism, it seems, lies in its synchronic preoccupation without regard to variation between individual cases and across different time frames. Generalisations may be very insightful, but they also tend to generate the fiction of homogeneity. The arbitrary nature of the signifier is thus diminished by convention and a synchronic methodology. These, ironically, combine to produce an individual who is oblivious to the originally odd state of affairs, having accustomed himself to the order of things, as it were. Items which were originally ordered in a system of differences are now perceived as absolute terms referring to reality. This illusion results from the loss of historical perspective. The synchronic privileging of langue precludes addition of new terms, and disuse of old terms, which will always upset the equilibrium and force a renewed critical appreciation of the resulting alignment.

2.4 Concerned about the misrepresented unity of signification, the post-structuralist seeks to reassert the separation of the signifier from the signified, by way of stressing again that language is a system of differences. The meaning of any given word at all is only understood in terms of its difference from the other words, through a never-ending regress or deferment. This is best captured by the concept of “differance,” a condensation of “differing” and “deferring” coined by Derrida. Put simply, his position is that the signifier cannot have a presence of its own, or be self-refering, because it is a member of a large set of signifiers, from which it is differentiated and to which it relates. The signifier as such is only understood in terms of other signifiers which may not be present in the utterance, so any framing in deference to “presence” or “centre” can only be illusory. It follows that the text can only be understood in terms of the overall context, which then is the summation of all textually constructed realities.

3. Mountain Lu

3.1 The difference between structuralism and post-structuralism, it seems, lies in whether the centre is construed as a static point which holds the answer to all the intricate relationships
within the frozen system, or whether the centre is erased altogether and dynamically equated with the system itself, the overall context of "reality." It has great bearing on translatibility not only because the translator is generally believed to be in the business of representing reality, wholly or partially, but also more importantly, because the static linguistic perception of reality might provide justification for the two popular approaches, namely, semantic and communicative approaches to the translating practice. Meanwhile, interestingly, the proverbial picture of the subject oblivious to the surrounding landscape, not seeing the wood for the trees as it were, is beautifully captured by the Chinese poet Su Dong Po of the Song Dynasty. I quote here two English translations of this nice little poem in the hope of throwing light on the issues at stake.

Original Text: See note (1)

Title of Version 1: Written On The Wall At West Forest Temple
Poet: Su Dong Po (1084)
Translator: Xu Yuan-zhong
It's a range viewed in face and peaks viewed from the side,
Assuming different shapes viewed from far and wide.
Of Mountain Lu we cannot make out the true face,
For we are lost in the heart of the very place.
Title of Version 2: Written on the Wall of Xilin Monastery
Poet: Su Dong Po (1084)
Translator: Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang
This side a range of hills and there a peak:
From different vantage points, a different mountain.
To me it is not given to know the true face of Lushan
Because I am upon it.

3.2 Lushan, or Mountain Lu, is differently portrayed in each translation of the same poem. Notably, Xu's translation seems to read better as English verse with its rhyming effect, syntactic inversion, but nonetheless impeccable grammar. Yang's translation, on the other hand, represents a succession of images, very much in the order of the Chinese presentation, but ends on an abrupt note, as if to signal the "moment of truth." While Xu uses the first person plural pronoun, eliciting a more interactive response from the reader, Yang achieves a more assertive style with the use of the first person singular. The word "lost" might leave one with a feeling of humility after reading Xu's translation; the clear location of the protagonist in the last line, however, has the effect of creating a happy ending in Yang's translation.
3.3 I tend to think of the difference between Xu's and Yang's views of the mountain as being rooted in their different perceptions of reality. The protagonist is portrayed in one as being fascinated by the changing configuration of the mountain, and in the other, he is the happy explorer who finally conquers the peak. The protagonist in the first representation is a poet with a rich imagination who reads the visual impact of the mountain for what it tentatively is; in the second representation he assumes the role of an investigator who is so cocksure of its methodology that he unwittingly becomes a purveyor of the truth he is obsessed to find. The former attitude is reminiscent of the humble, if cynical also, enterprise of deconstruction, while the latter attitude is suggestive of the seemingly definitive, but what could be totally "unreal," structuralist theories about reality.

4. Pleasure of the Text

4.1 It is a measure of the power of dissemination, the instability of the text, that the same popular poem of Su Dong Po has indeed given rise to these two eventually incompatible readings. Meanwhile, ironically, the poetic text has contributed the phrase "Lushan mianmu," literally "Mountain Lu face," to the repository of Chinese idiom. The origin of this idiom is now known only to the more learned speakers nowadays. It tends to be used quite reflectively, as most idioms do, to mean "true face." The original poetic, contextual meaning is completely lost. Textual tentativeness has become ossified in the collective linguistic memory of speakers. And it is in this sense that every reading, or translation for that matter, can be regarded as an attempt to consolidate the fluid meaning of the written or spoken text, according to the linguistic capability of the interpreter. Though representing is rather static, interpreting can be extremely dynamic. The translator hence is in the double-bind situation of capturing reality, with the conventional linguistic tools at his disposal, and releasing it again when the translated text goes on a disseminating circuit of its own, rather like the "purloined letter" in Barbara Johnson's famed discussion of Edgar Allan Poe's short story.

4.2 The pleasure of the text lies in the mischief the reader plays on it. When the British magazine Spectator recently (10.6.89) deplored the "Titanic betrayal of Hong Kong," for example, I obtained the following pleasurable interpretations. I can see the sound resemblance between "Titanic" and "gigantic," which
would point to a big sell-out by the Brits, nothing less. Secondly, the Titanic had only life boats for its first class passengers; similarly in Hong Kong, only the well-off and the well-connected have been or will be provided with passports to exit when things turn nasty. Thirdly, the Titanic was sailing into dangerous waters full of icebergs; similarly, for Hong Kong, the years ahead are marked by great political uncertainty. Fourthly, the skill of navigation which was found lacking in the case of the luxury liner, is often likened to political leadership, which is what Hong Kong lacks, despite its economic prosperity. Fifthly, the Titanic betrayed the safety of its passengers which it was its duty to protect; Britain betrayed the interest, and perhaps the safety as well, of her colonial subjects, which it is her duty and honour to protect.

4.3 My impression, some would say deliberate misreadings, of the *Spectator* headline does not privilege my access to any firmer grasp of reality than any other person who has a different reading of his own. In any case, one’s perception, and expression, can be very much conditioned by the political reality. For example, one may not be able to speak of “betrayal” in a totalitarian state at all, or at any rate, would understand the term in a very different manner, irrespective of the author’s best intention. The labelling of the June 4th “tragedy” (Beijing 1989) as an “incident,” rather than a “massacre,” is another case in point. It is sufficient to say, however, that each reading is act of framing the material under interrogation, as much by the translator as by readers of his translations. Much as language has all of us framed in terms of reference, there is always this struggle for a deliberate way of expression and interpretation, a different frame of reference it might be called, but which may yet be tainted by the influence of the other(s).

5. Tiger Talk

5.1 But interpretation does have its limits in the real world, never mind the issue of “reality.” In the heat of the political debate in Hong Kong a year before Tiananmen, in which the liberals vehemently attacked the Government as a lame duck, the Chief Secretary jumped to the defence of the administration and warned the critics that they were “hav(ing) the tiger by the tail”. The phrase, when translated by the simultaneous interpreter as the Cantonese idiom, “nailing fleas on the tiger’s head,” created a major political row. The Cantonese “equivalent” was considered
to be too strong, being taken literally that is, which is what people are prone to do when presented with a “monumental” statement by a top official. The idiom, of course, does not equal the sum of its parts. More ordinarily, and I hope Chinese native speakers among you will agree with me, it just means, in the context of the Chief Secretary’s defence, that the Hong Kong Government is not to be trifled with. And true to the spirit of the heroic defence, no retraction was made of the English original and the blame went instead to the Chinese translation, which was later amended to read, “critics would find they were picking fleas from the tiger’s head.”

5.2 I think the new translation, baffling as it might be to native speakers, provides a good example of representation being dictated by perceived norms in terms of accuracy. The popular belief is, despite theoretical postulation to the contrary, that while literary texts may be translated rather freely, informative texts, or especially “important” parts thereof, should be translated quite literally, on a structure for structure, idiom for idiom basis. The rationale here is that meaning is fixed in the structure and that the meaning cannot be faithfully communicated unless the structure is somehow reflected also in the translation. It is rigidity such as this that blinds the speaker to the possibility that metaphors, and idioms particularly, are just something we live by, that they bear no natural resemblance to reality as such. In this regard, neither the original text nor the translated text can lay claim to be a truer representation because both are locked in the prisonhouse of their own syntax. In our less than perfect world, however, the original text always reigns supreme.

6. Conclusion

6.1 To conclude, the translating process involves two phases, namely, interpreting and representing, or reading the text and saying it in your own words again, in the target language. To the extent that interpreting is an exercise in reading intertextually, or deconstructing the text before you, then as you approach the representing phase, you have that much more liberty to reconstruct the idea, according to the rules of the target language. Any such freedom is, of course, rather limited. You escape from one prison to go into the other. But the prisons have different rules, as it were. To say one set of rules, or any grammar, is necessarily more elegant than any other, or alternatively, to say
this or that aspect of reality is better captured by one language, unaware of the arbitrary nature of language vis-a-vis reality, is linguistically naive in the extreme, but unfortunately a view quite widely and unconsciously shared by speakers, linguists and translators not excluded, at one time or another.

6.2 Translation is only possible if one takes the view that language only approximates to reality and that reality is by no means the property of one language, and that goes for the source language. The privileging of formal equivalence does violence to the target language and confuses its speakers, without bringing reality closer to the audience. After all, the relief of Mountain Lu is not more transparent in the Chinese poem than in any one of the two English translation. In this regard, I think the greatest contribution of post-structuralism to the translating practice is the case it makes for textual dissemination and the legitimacy it gives to multiple interpretations. Meanwhile, the re-assertion of the separation of the signifier from the signified provides justification for dynamic equivalence as a principle of translation. This, curiously, may help tentatively explain the undesirability of translations as follows.

(i) ... (critics may find they) have the tiger by the tail.
Translation: * zhang hui faxian tamen qishi shi zai laofu tou shang zu zaozi. (See Note 3)
Back translation: They would find they actually were picking fleas from the tiger’s head.

Why undesirable: Re-wording an idiom results in undue prominence. Picking fleas is doing the tiger a service, hardly a provocative act at all. The tiger becomes the unreasonable party, which is clearly not the intention of the Chief Secretary in the context.

Alternative: Zhengfu dei wuli de piping, rongren shi you xian de. (See Note 4)
Back translation: Government tolerance of unreasonable criticism is not limitless.

Justification: Idiom for idiom translation is unwarranted in most cases because idioms seldom co-incide semantically across different languages. Idioms, being dead metaphors, are used unreflectively.

(ii) The terrorist is said to be a disarmingly handsome man.
Translation: neige kongbu fenzi jushuo shi yige ningren jixu wuzhong di yingjun de nanren. (See Note 5)
Why undesirable: Commonplace syntactic order in English can be rather contingent in Chinese. The overloaded noun phrase in Chinese is quite indecipherable.

Alternative: jushuo, neige kongbu fenzi zhang de shifen yingjun, sheiren dei ta ye bu hui you shenme jiexin. (See Note 6)
Back translation: It is said that the terrorist is very handsome (such that) no one will think (he will bring them any) harm.

Justification: The syntactic realignment follows the information structure of Chinese, with the terrorist introduced as the topic, followed by predicate one which says of him that he is handsome, and then by the larger predicate two which tells of his good looks that they are disarming, like three concentric circles.

NOTES

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