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Death of the Translator and Birth of the Interpreter

Yong Zhong

Liberation and play of meaning

In the course of his transition from a structuralist to a post-structuralist, Roland Barthes (1977) announced the "death" of the author. This was his rhetorical way of asserting the "independence of the literary text and its immunity to the possibility of being unified or limited by any notion of what the author might have intended, or 'crafted' into the work" (Barry 1995: 66). Barthes also said in his essay that the corollary of the death of the author was the birth of the reader, who was free to interpret the dead author's work in whatever way s/he chose to. The assertion of the death of the author and birth of the reader involves the following arguments:

a. Meaning is produced not by the author, but by the reader.
b. A single piece of work can have as many meanings as the number of its readers.
c. In the absence of an author, any efforts to decipher a text become futile.
d. Because of a., b. and c., there are no guaranteed facts, only interpretations, none of which can claim to an exact version of the original truth.

In short, meanings float freely and allow readers to have free play with them. The word "play" (of meaning) actually appeared in the title of a lecture "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" given in 1966 by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, also a prominent post-structuralist. His lecture challenged the classical belief in the existence of a

norm or centre in our intellectual universe, for example in the authority of the author as a central source of meaning. Furthermore Derrida even celebrates this free play of meaning — decentred production and validation of meaning — as liberating.

However, if a text is so permissive of various meanings, a consequence will be that any efforts to locate any absolute or stable meanings should be given up. It also means that whatever is spoken or written can be interpreted in so many unpredictable ways that communication will be rendered virtually impossible even within a language, even though we know this to be not true from our social experience. It appears more sensible to adopt an approach which allows a more disciplined and austere decentring and identification of meanings rather than a totally permissive one.[1] This means that, while meanings can be potentially unlimited in number, the scope of their play tends to be restrained by their sociocultural contexts and even their actual play can proceed in different but predictable ways. Thus, according to Umberto Eco (1981), a text is open to a number of potential readings but normally 'prefers' one (or a few, occasionally). Stuart Hall *et al.* (in their television studies) (1980) also take the view that a text is neither closed nor totally free in readings. They propose three main types of decodings which correspond to the reader's response to his or her social condition in interaction with the discourse of the text, viz. the dominant/hegemonic reading, the negotiated reading and the oppositional reading.

The death of the translator

This decentred universe of meanings and their (free) play challenges some mythologised notions (or self-perceptions) of the translator and threatens to have his/her duty description rewritten. In this section of the article, we shall discuss some of these notions in relation to translation and how they are challenged. But let us look firstly at the definition of the translator.

According to Peter Newmark (1981), translation is a practice in which the translator must attempt to replace a message in one language by a message in another, but success cannot be guaranteed. Different dictionaries seem to be more optimistic about the translator's effectiveness and emphasise the importance of the *reproduction* of the original text. To translate is "to express (sth spoken or esp written) in another language" (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*, 1989); "to put into the words of a different

language" (*Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language*, 1979); or "to turn (something written or spoken) from one language into another" (*The Macquarie Dictionary*, 1989). The practice of translation is made to look like a process of seeking equivalent words or versions across different languages.

First of all, many authors and translators alike, and some readers as well, believe that the author's original intention, creativity and stylistic excellence can only reach people of another language via a great translator. Nida thinks that "a good translator must possess some of the artistic capacities which literary authors must have. The best translators are often themselves first-rate writers" (1982: 12). In China, the criteria for a good translation are "to be exactly the same as the original in content, expression and style (信 [*xìn*], 达 [*dá*] and 雅 [*yǎ*])" (Zhang 1980: 3 & 7). Translators in other countries and languages observe very comparable criteria. The criteria are established on the assumption that authors survive through translators.

But can the author who dies at the moment of completing his/her work be revived by the translator? The answer is negative because the birth of the reader (or the translator in this case) is concomitant with the death of the author. As a reader, perhaps a better gifted or trained reader, the translator's interpretation of the original text cannot possibly match exactly what the author means. Nor is there any guarantee that the particular decoding by a reader of a translated text will be an exact duplicate of what the translator means. We can further deduce that there is even less guarantee that the reader of a translation will, through the intervention of the translator, arrive at the exact meaning of the original author. This is the case even though the translator may have produced what s/he regards as the most faithful reading of the original text and, in turn, the reader may decode the translated text and derive what s/he regards as the most faithful reading of the rendition. I have not included here for consideration human errors committed by the translator as well as by an ordinary reader (nobody naively believes nowadays that anyone is infallible!) in the process of understanding the original text (e.g.,mistaking the meaning of certain words) or in the process of producing a rendition (e.g., syntactic errors, inappropriate choices of words and bad spelling)

Secondly, a very important principle of translation till today is, to quote Eugene Nida (1982), to "translate the meaning". The author can survive if the translator is sure that s/he is able to "translate the true meanings, only the true meanings, nothing but the true meanings" of the author.[2] But when absolute truth is widely problematised in the critical circle, when a text is open to a plenitude of interpretations and when meaning is a matter of free play; what or which meaning should s/he translate? How can s/he be sure that the meanings in the translation are the true meanings intended by the original author? S/he surely cannot claim to translate the original author's meaning because it is simply as "dead" as the author. If the translation is based on the translator's own interpretation of the text, the translation at its best is a **production** of anything between a hegemonic reading, a negotiated reading and an oppositional reading, but not an exact **reproduction** of the original meaning. Whichever reading is produced is determined by the interaction between the original text's discourse and the translator's social condition. Furthermore, even when the translator claims to translate a certain type of reading of a text (e.g., the hegemonic reading), s/he cannot be sure that the translation will achieve exactly the desired results. This is a logical result of his/her own "death", which liberates the readers from the rendition. For example, a reader may derive an oppositional reading of the translation which is itself based on an oppositional reading by the translator of the original author.

Thirdly, translating the meaning has become a magic power that leads to the claim by some translators that they can render anything from one language into another. It is believed that "human experience is so much alike throughout the world" that "effective equivalence of meaning can be communicated both within a language as well as between languages" (Nida 1982: 9). But I would support the opposite argument by Winter (1961), Mounin (1976) and Wilss (1982) among others that ultimately translation is impossible. Certainly there are things that are extremely difficult to translate and, of a range of potential meanings that can be made of one text, some are impossible to translate. As Winter (1961:98) says:

> Even the simplest, most basic requirement we make of translation cannot be met without difficulty: one cannot always match the content of a message in language A by an expression with exactly the same content in language B, because what can be expressed and what must be expressed is a property of a specific language in much the same way as *how* it can be expressed.

Among other things, the maturation of many literary critical theories, including cultural studies, post-structuralism, post-colonialism and feminism, has brought about terms that challenge the translator's claim to be omnicom-

petent. For example, to many people, history is just a term that means, among other things, "1. an account of what has or might have happened, esp. in the form of a narrative, play, story, or tale; 2. a) what has happened in the life or development of a people, country, institution, etc.; b) a systematic account of this, usually in chronological order with an analysis and explanation (and) 3. all recorded events of the past...".[3] But to many feminists who read and write in English, history signifies his-story, i.e., men's history. They would argue that history is a cultural construct typical of the western patriarchal society and that the English word contains a semiotic morphemic component (i.e., his) which reflects the gendered bias of the culture.[4] By translating the term *western history* into 西方历史 (*Xīfāng lìshǐ*) in Chinese, which is the commonly accepted translation, the term is rendered neutral in gender. The Chinese translation fails to convey the connotation that is originally implied by the gendered morpheme. Hence even this straightforward translation cannot be considered satisfactory.

Many other basic concepts which are often used in western literary theories have not been precisely translated into Chinese and I would argue that some of them cannot. The failure should not surprise us for at least two reasons. Firstly, translation of literary theories has always been extremely difficult, even between generically not too distant languages. Peter Barry has noted that an English translation of a French academic text will contain many longer Latinate words which are "always perceived as a source of difficulty by English-speaking readers" (1995: 7). This would lead us to think that a translation of English academic texts will be even more difficult for Chinese-speaking readers. Secondly, some people, including many translators, may argue that the theories themselves are difficult to understand not only for readers of translation but also for readers of the original language in which they are expressed. For example, the conscious-unconscious dichotomy of the human psyche in psychoanalysis is extremely difficult for Chinese readers (and may be as difficult for the translator). But this does not preclude a second argument that it is much more difficult for an English-background theory to be understood by Chinese learners through translation than by English learners. As a Chinese speaker, my own academic pursuit and experience suggest that it is far more difficult to understand western theories through Chinese translation than through the original works. The second argument, if it is true to any degree, would at least challenge the mythologised omnicompetence of the translator.

Following is a brief discussion of Chinese translations of a few other English theoretical terms that are commonly found in contemporary western humanities such as linguistics, literary criticism, post-structuralism, semiotics and feminism. I intend to use them to illustrate the impossibilities of cross-language translation. I have chosen single concepts rather than theoretical writings at and above the sentence level because I can only manage analysis of the former within the scope of this article. Analysis of sentence or passage translation would necessitate a much lengthier and more detailed analysis. I have also made an effort to choose four somewhat related terms, hoping to make it easier to follow my argument. Thus, **discourse** is about the fixing of meanings, **construction** the process of meaning-fixing, **deconstruction** how the constructive process can be undone and **gender** an example of a discourse which is constructed and which can be deconstructed.

Discourse 话语 *huàyǔ* (speech•language), 篇章 *piānzhāng* (text•chapter) or 语篇 *yǔpiān* (language•text)

The English word discourse is a widely used term which is translated by Chinese scholars into 话语 *huàyǔ* (speech•language), 篇章 *piānzhāng* (text•chapter) or 语篇 *yǔpiān* (language•text). In linguistics, it refers to utterances of greater magnitude than the sentence. In post-structuralism and semiotics, where it is currently more visible, it is used in place of language to "account for the historical, political and cultural 'fixing' of certain meanings, and their constant reproduction and circulation via established kinds of speech, forms of representation, and in particular institutional settings.... Unlike 'language', the term *discourse* itself is both a noun and a verb. So it is easier to retain the sense of discourse as an *act*." (O'Sullivan *et al.* 1994: 93) The various Chinese translations seem to be acceptably close to the original term in its linguistic use but very distant from its post-structuralist or semiotic senses. One main reason that different Chinese translations have emerged is that none of them is widely accepted as *reasonably correct* by people who use the concept. Especially, they have altogether missed its original sense as a verb describing an *action*.

Construction 结构 / 构成 *jiégòu* / *gòuchéng* (structure)

According to semiotics and cultural studies theories, many notions including man, woman, discourse and the English language which are considered immanent categories are actually culturally or, according to Barry (1995: 34), "socially" constructed. *Construction* refers to the discursive process in which

their meanings have been gradually fixed. The morpheme *con-* highlights the collective, though not necessarily conscious, participation by members of all ages, sexes, social status, etc. Hence, I once attended a seminar entitled "Did Women Participate in the Con-struction of Women?" The Chinese translations 结构 *jiégòu* (structure) or 构成 *gòuchéng* (formation) signify the result, i.e., a structure or a formation, rather than the process and do not make *collective participation* an issue.

Deconstruction 解构 *jiěgòu* (dissolution or division of structure)

According to Barry (1995), deconstruction is an attitude of mind as well as a practical method of criticism that is most often associated with post-structuralism. To borrow a well-known definition by Barbara Johnson, "deconstruction is not synonymous with 'destruction' (1980: 5). It is in fact much closer to the original meaning of the word 'analysis', which etymologically means 'to undo'." The emphasis is on *to undo*: something can be undone only after it is first done, and can be *de*-constructed only after it has been *con*-structed. The Chinese translation is more *synonymous* with the 'destruction' of an already existing structure than with the 'undoing' of a construction.

Gender 性别 *xìngbié* (sex)

Current western theories make a distinction between sex (i.e., male and female) and gender (e.g., man, woman, gay, lesbian, transsexual, etc.), arguing that the former is biological and the latter culturally constructed and therefore floating (Moi 1985). While Chinese has terms roughly equivalent to male, female, man, woman, etc, it does not have the same categorical term for gender. Both gender and sex are translated into 性别 *xìngbié* (sex) in Chinese. Thus *Engendering China* becomes 性别与中国 *Xìngbiéyǔ Zhōngguó* (*Sex and China*).[5] While the title *Engendering China* signifies one issue — the process of dissecting or analysing a gendered nation; the Chinese translation implies two distinct issues — sex and nation.

The above discussion points to the impasse of translation, suggesting not only the "death" but also the "dystocia"[6] of the translator. Some people may argue that the above failures can be avoided by those translators who are knowledgeable about the theories and by recourse to special technical devices such as paraphrases and footnotes. There are no doubt good translators who are also versed in theoretical issues, but they must be far rarer than people who are preoccupied with either translation or theoretical pursuit but not with both. Devices like paraphrases and footnotes, which are often

characterised by rewording, adding explanations, giving examples, providing contextual information and the like, are undeniably artificial interventions by the translator and actually change the nature and principles of translation: being exactly the same as the original in content, expression and style. Xiao and Wen's Chinese translation of James Joyce's *Ulysses* includes as many as one hundred and thirty-three footnotes in the first chapter alone provided by the translators.[7] Even if the translation were exactly based on what Joyce had meant, it is difficult to imagine that a translation encumbered with so much extra information and language would still equal the original novel in content, expression and style. However, the impasse facing the translator should not be an excuse for despair or capitulation. It merely leads to a brave and honest proclamation: the birth of the interpreter.

The birth of the interpreter

In the preceding section of this article, we have discussed challenges made to the mythologised roles of the translator. I have argued that the translator does not have unlimited control over the reading of the translation, that whichever meaning to translate is largely an individual choice not necessarily determined by the intention of the original author and that even translating meaning will not make everything "translatable". I have also provided examples of western theoretical concepts that are impossible to translate "correctly" into Chinese before concluding that the principles of translation cannot be sustained. The conclusion I am drawing is the "death" of the translator.

I concede the possibility, however, that even these concepts can be made clear in another language with some artificial devices used by a cross-language expert. The point that I am emphasising is that the language expert who does this and who benefits by doing so is not a translator but an interpreter. According to *Webster's New World Dictionary*, an interpreter's roles are:

> 1. to explain the meaning of; make understandable *[to interpret* a poem*]* 2. to translate (esp. oral remarks) 3. to have or show one's own understanding of the meaning of; construe *[to interpret* a silence as contempt*]* 4. to bring out the meaning of; esp. to give one's own conception of (a work of art), as in performance or criticism.[8]

The corollary I am proposing of the death of the translator is the birth of the interpreter, who not only *translates*, but also avoids the impasse of

translation by having or showing *his/her own understanding of the meaning*, by *construing*, by *giving one's own conception* and by *explaining*. Xiao and Wen's translation of *Ulysses* is a failure if it is judged by the principles of translation, but it may be regarded as a work of excellence if judged by the principles of interpretation. As a matter of fact, many of us who call ourselves translators invariably assume some or all of the four roles of the interpreter in our translation practice. In other words, we in reality not only translate but also interpret — a secret which we share among translators but try to hide from outsiders. We do not admit to any acts of transgressing the boundary of the translator for fear of arousing suspicion over the quality of our translation. Also we prefer the title of *translator* to that of *interpreter* because the former tends to have a greater halo. I would like to suggest that this is why we often speak of "translating something orally", but we seldom admit that our translation is a kind of interpretation of the original text.

By calling ourselves interpreters, we may risk losing some of the credit and much of the prestige, a justified concern. But I believe the loss is more than offset by our "liberation". When we are liberated from the shackles imposed on the translator, we as interpreters are free from the futile pursuit for the original author's exact meaning and free to construe, to express our own understanding and to explain. Our indispensability as communication facilitators is not guaranteed by our being the mere transmitters of the meaning of the original author but by our training and sophistication as bilinguals and by our exposure and sensitivity to cross-cultural and cross-language matters. But the birth of the interpreter is not unconditional. In a sense, we as interpreters are condemned to the freedom. We may have to assure the original author, our clients and the public that we, like ordinary readers, are interpreters but that we, in our freedom, are better interpreters than general readers because our interpretation is more intelligent and reliable.

Conclusion

By analogy with Barthes' "death of the author", this article discusses the "death" of the translator from three perspectives. Firstly and more importantly, even the translator is not and cannot be an exact transmitter of the meaning of the author who has "died". Like all other readers, the translator does not have a "royal passage" to the author's original intention in spite of all his/her cross-language and cross-cultural knowledge, training and sensitivity. Secondly, the translator does not have control over how the translation is read by the readers and what meaning different readers make of the translation. Thirdly, there are concepts that cannot be translated into another language without compromising the principles of translation.

But the rhetorical "death" of the translator should not be cause of scare or despair to the members in the profession. While conceding that we do not have a "royal passage" to the author's original intention, we can be confident that our cross-language and cross-cultural knowledge, training and sensitivity do make us better interpreters than ordinary readers. While we are not the reincarnated soul and body of the author, we are more capable than any other people of offering the most intelligent interpretation possible of the original work. While huge linguistic and cultural differences make translation and transliteration impossible, we can resort to many technical devices forbidden to the translator but available to the interpreter to make cross-language communication possible.

I would not be surprised if one day the profession felt the need to change its general title designation from translator to interpreter. Thus, instead of saying "to translate a text" and "to translate orally", we might think it more appropriate to say "to interpret a written text" as well as "to interpret a speech/dialogue". Before that happens, we must be tolerant with its misappropriation. But we must remember that we have the mandate to interpret and are thus not bound by the requirement of "translating the truth, only the truth, nothing but the truth". And after we complete a translation, we should think twice about certifying our translation to have been "true to the original text in both word and spirit". Instead, we may honestly and more realistically claim that "our rendition is what we believe to be a true interpretation of the original text".

Notes

1. I would think that Barbara Johnson (1980) means the same thing when she says that deconstruction is not a hedonistic abandonment of all restraint, but a disciplined identification and dismantling of the sources of textual power.
2. An interpreter working in a western court takes the oath: "I will interpret/translate the truth, only the truth, nothing but the truth."
3. David B. G. Editor in Chief, 1980. *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language*, 2nd College edition, Simon and Schuster,

4. According to de Beauvoir, cited in Butler (1990, 9) "the universal person and the masculine gender are conflated, thereby defining women in terms of their sex and extolling men as the bearers of a body-transcendent universal personhood."

5. The 1992 conference "Engendering China: Women, Culture and the State" held at Harvard University, Wellesley College and Massachusetts Institute of Technology led to the publication of a book in two versions. Its English version was entitled Engendering China (Gilmartin, Christina, K. *et al.*, eds, 1994, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London) and its Chinese version Sex and China (性别与中国 *Xìngbiéyǔ Zhōngguó*) (Li Xiao Jiang, *et al.*, eds. 1994. Beijing: Life, Books and Knowledge Publishing House)

6. Dystocia is a medical term referring to slow and difficult labour or delivery of a baby. I borrow the term to mean the impossible birth of the perfect translator.

7. Xiao, Qian, and Wen, Jiruo, trans., 1994, Yilín Translations Publishing House, Shanghai.

8. David B. G. Editor in Chief, 1980, *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language*, 2nd College edition, Simon and Schuster, p. 737.

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Abstract

In the spirit of the post-structuralist announcement of "the death of the author", this article discusses the rhetorical "death" of the translator and birth of the interpreter from three angles. I shall start with a discussion of the *fluidity* of meaning which results from the "death" of the author. I will then argue that the translator, as author of the translation, will also "die" and have no control over the production of meaning from the translated text. There will also be a brief discussion of translation failure, to support the notion that, technically, translation in the sense of *precise reproduction of meaning* is impossible. The last section of the article will announce the "birth" of the interpreter and discuss what inspiration his/her birth will provide to the profession. I am concerned with translation as a process of *precise reproduction* of meaning from one language to another and with interpretation as a process of *presenting one's own understanding of the meaning* by such means as *active reading*, *construing*, *paraphrasing* and *explaining*.

Résumé

Dans le même esprit que l'annonce post-structuraliste de "la mort de l'auteur", le présent article aborde, sous trois angles, la "mort" rhétorique du traducteur et la naissance de l'interprète. L'auteur aborde en premier lieu la *fluidité* significative qui résulte de la "mort" de l'auteur. Ensuite il argumente que le traducteur, en tant qu'auteur de la traduction, mourra à son tour et n'aura aucun contrôle sur la production de signification dans le texte traduit. L'auteur aborde aussi sommairement les échecs de la traduction pour soutenir la thèse suivant laquelle la traduction, en tant que *reproduction précise de la signification* est impossible du point de vue technique. Dans la dernière partie de l'article, l'auteur annonce la "naissance" de l'interprète et l'inspiration qu'elle représente pour la profession. La traduction l'intéresse surtout en tant que processus de *reproduction précise* de la signification d'une langue dans l'autre, et l'interprétation en tant que processus consistant à *présenter sa propre compréhension de la signification* au moyen des auxiliaires suivants: *lecture active, construction, paraphrase* et *explication*.