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A Review of George Steiner's Translation Theory

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Abstract: George Steiner is a representative of the hermeneutic School of translation theorists. His monograph on language and translation theory After Babel, published in 1975, is a breakthrough milestone in the history of translation. Focusing on the theories of "translation is understanding" and The Hermeneutic Motion put forward by George Steiner in After Babel, this paper explains Steiner's main translation thoughts, discusses the detailed essence of The Hermeneutic Motion, and makes a critical analysis on this basis.

Keywords: Translation theory, George Steiner, The translator's subjectivity, The Hermeneutic Motion, After Babel.

1. Introduction

George Steiner (1929-2020) was a contemporary translation theorist. He was born in France and later became a naturalized citizen of the United States, where he held professorships at various prestigious institutions worldwide. In 1975, he published his seminal work on language and translation theory, After Babel (1975), which marked a groundbreaking development in the field from a hermeneutic perspective. This book, rooted in the history of Western language studies, employs theories from disciplines such as philosophy, linguistics, and poetics to explore language. In After Babel, George Steiner lays the foundation for Translational Hermeneutics. According to Steiner's '"totalizing" designation' (p. 293), the terms communication, understanding and translation are almost interchangeable. Communication relies on understanding, and understanding can only be achieved through translation processes that transcend time, space, and various boundaries. These transformative processes are inherently interpretive and creative, granting enduring vitality to all forms of expression beyond their initial utterance. Therefore, translation should not be considered a peripheral aspect of language theory but rather the central focus and criterion for every theory of language. Steiner argues that not only the translation between two languages but also the process of understanding in making dialogue and communication can be regarded as translation. This is his breakthrough concept of "understanding as translation." Based on this concept, interlingual, intralingual and even intersemiotic communications are all part of translation, which expanding the scope of translation and endowing it with a broader significance.

Drawing on hermeneutics, Steiner interprets the process of translation into four stages: Trust, Aggression, Incorporation, and Compensation. "Trust" stressed the initiative of the translator, suggesting that prior to translation, the translator possesses their own judgment and understands that the source text carries meaning, thus making translation valuable. Next is "Aggression," which explains the aggressive and violent nature of the act of "understanding." The translator, based on their cultural and spatial distance, intrudes upon the source text, inevitably causing deviations in the interpretation of its meaning. "Incorporation" refers to the translator bringing the source text back into the target language's semantic domain, incorporating the meaning and form from the source language. Finally, "Compensation" refers to the translator's efforts to rectify any damage incurred in the translated text compared to the original. This article aims to interpret and analyze George Steiner's major translation theories presented in After Babel while attempting to reveal the values and problems existing in these theories.

2. Understanding as Translation

Different translation scholars have different understandings of how to define translation. Linguistic scholars like J.C. Catford and Roman Jakobson view translation as the conversion between two systems of symbols. Peter Newmark, on the other hand, includes interpretation within the scope of translation. In Steiner's view, translation encompasses not only interlingual, intralingual, or intersemiotic activities but also all forms of communication. Language is a product of historical development and evolution, making language phenomena temporal in nature. The use of a word signifies its historical background. For sentences, in order to fully understand them, one must restore all the values and intentions associated with their utterance. Therefore, Steiner considers the process of listening to others as a form of translation, specifically the understanding of others' discourse within the same language. Since people are constantly engaged in communication, this type of intralingual translation, similar to Jakobson's concept, occurs more frequently than translation between two different languages. Communication activities imply the understanding of others' speech, thus understanding itself can be seen as a form of translation, where understanding the past is equivalent to "translating" it into the present. This is the main narrative theory presented in the first chapter of After Babel: "Understanding as Translation".

Steiner expands the traditional concept of translation to the level of understanding, broadening the scope of translation. In traditional linguistic translation theories, faithfulness to the source text or the original is considered paramount. Translation involves reproducing the source language within the target language's context, requiring the translator to closely adhere to the source text and the author's intentions. However, readers also need a target language that is smooth and comprehensible for easy reading and understanding, which puts translators in a dilemma and restricts their personal agency. This is precisely why Steiner puts forth the idea that "translation is understanding." In contrast to

traditional translation theories, Steiner's most notable aspect is the emphasis on the subjectivity of the translator. He places the translator above the original author, the source text, and the reader, acknowledging that the translator's era, personal experiences, and other factors influence their understanding. Consequently, during the process of translation, the translator makes these influences explicit and translates based on their own interpretation.

3. The Hermeneutic Motion

In *After Babel*, Steiner drawing upon hermeneutics, divides the act of translation into four parts and establishing a universal operational framework for all acts of understanding and communication. This framework is known as the Hermeneutic Motion. The motion involves four stages: Trust, Aggression, Incorporation and Compensation. The purpose of this process is to reach “equilibrium” at the end of the translation project. The theoretical contribution is to overcome what Steiner calls “a sterile triadic model”, which is identified as the distinction between literalism, paraphrase and free imitation.

3.1. Trust

The first step of The Hermeneutic Motion in translation is referred as "Trust." In the original text, Steiner explains it as follows: "Based on past experience, we can trust that the work in front of us has substance, that it is a serious work. We believe that there is indeed something here for us to understand, something worth translating." The academic community has different opinions regarding the object of trust, divided into trusting the text itself or, further, trusting the "translatability" of the text. The latter is then further differentiated into "the text has meaning and therefore has value for translation" and "the text has meaning and that meaning can be conveyed."

In epistemology, there is a concept known as "prior experience," which is the first form of trust in translatability based on. Steiner here refers to the translator as an individual with initiative, cognitive experience and paradigms. The translator can assess the value of the text, thereby determining whether to engage in the act of translation. The second form of trust is based on "the coherence of the world and the diversity of symbols." In other words, Steiner believes that the cognitive abilities of humans and the commonality of language systems outweigh their specific characteristics, enabling the "meaning" of a text to be conveyed across different languages.

3.2. Aggression

The second step of Steiner’s model is aggression. In this dynamic step, the translator aggressively takes over, and captures the foreign text with a view to comprehending it and extracting all possible nuances and subtleties of meaning from it. Steiner's description of the second step is filled with metaphors and abstract generalizations, leading to different interpretations by scholars. Jeremy Munday believes it refers to the translator "intruding into the source text and capturing its meaning." Douglas Robinson sees it as the translator's "construction of the source language text." In *Contemporary Theories in Foreign Translation Studies: An Introductory Reader*, it is explained as "the conflict between two languages and cultures that occurs during the understanding of the source text."

Apart from the interpretations, it is worth noting that starting from the description of the second step, Steiner incorporates military terminologies into the description of the translation process. Besides the explicit term Aggression, he also uses words like incursive, inroad, encirclement, captive, invade, and penetration. Steiner's purpose is to employ war as a metaphor for the translation activity. The source text and its meaning together form a nation, and the translator, as a general, must lead the native semantic field to attack the source text. Through this vivid metaphor, the core of Steiner's "Aggression" viewpoint is that when translators encounter the source text, their understanding, influenced by "Trust," becomes a violent and invasive decryption of the original meaning. This inevitably leads to deviations and misunderstandings.

3.3. Incorporation

The third step of translation is called "Incorporation," which is also a concept from war. It refers to "the act or an instance of incorporating," such as "the incorporation of a conquered territory into an empire" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). From this perspective, "Incorporation" means importing the meaning and shape from the source language into the target language. Since the native semantic field is already exist but overcrowded, the translation needs to merge and assimilate many factors and components. Some assimilated translations may be completely naturalized, while others always remain foreignized. The best example of the former is Martin Luther's translation of the *Bible*, while the latter can be seen in Vladimir Nabokov's *Eugene Onegin*. Both naturalization and alienation modifies the native semantic field and can result in changes in the target language.

3.4. Compensation

The fourth step of translation is called "Compensation," derived from Claude Lévi-Strauss' structural anthropology theory: "All capture calls for subsequent compensation." This step also continues the war metaphor. In the third step, the translator needs to consider the meaning and form of the source language, but this can result in the loss of distinctive features in the target language. In order for readers to fully understand, sometimes a domestication strategy needs to be employed, which leads to a certain loss of the original text's characteristics. As a result, readers cannot appreciate all the styles and aesthetics of the original work as native language readers would. Therefore, the translator needs to exert subjective agency and strive to balance the relationship between the original work and the translation. Through "compensation," they try to make up for the untranslatable aspects of the original text as much as possible while amplifying the influence of the source text.

For a long time, translation theory research has primarily revolved around the trichotomy of literal translation, free translation, and imitation. Steiner believes that understanding translation as a process of trust, aggression, incorporation, and compensation can break traditional approaches and emphasize the subjectivity of translators, highlighting their role and position in the translation process.

4. The Limitations of Steiner's Translation Theory

In Steiner's translation theory, he expands the scope of translation and affirms the role of the translator as a subject. At the same time, Steiner breaks away from the traditional

three-point theory of translation from the perspective of hermeneutics, freeing translation theory from the constraints of whether to prioritize literal translation or free interpretation, and thus has significant theoretical value. However, Steiner's translation theory has also faced criticism from many scholars.

Firstly, Steiner expands the concept of translation to the extreme, stating that all understanding is translation. However, understanding itself is constrained by individual backgrounds, social factors, and historical causes, and possesses a historical nature. Therefore, individuals with different backgrounds will have different understandings of a given text. Furthermore, the issue of the author's and translator's interpretation over a work remains a subject of ongoing debate. An excessive reliance on the historicity of understanding can lead to nihilism, creating a situation where everything can be interpreted.

Secondly, with such a broad concept of translation, there is a question of whether research on translation should also be specific and classified into different categories. Steiner, however, does not systematically discuss basic issues such as the purpose and nature of translation, nor does he provide specific methods for practicing translation. As a result, some scholars believe that he has not developed a complete translation theory, and his viewpoints are not comprehensive enough. Additionally, there is confusion in the sequential order of Steiner's four translation steps. For example, "aggression" and "incorporation" may occur simultaneously in practice, and the fourth step of "compensation" does not necessarily follow after the other steps but rather takes place concurrently with the second and third steps. This is because compensating for the missing meaning of a text can only occur before the translation is generated, and the third step marks the formation of the translation. Thus, the fourth step may appear somewhat like an attempt to remedy a situation after the fact.

5. Conclusion

George Steiner's Translation Theory has made significant contributions to the field of translation studies, sparking debates and influencing scholars in various ways. His perspective, which expands the concept of translation and emphasizes the subjective role of translators, has challenged traditional approaches and opened up new avenues for understanding the complexities of the translation process. One of Steiner's key insights is the broadening of the translation concept to encompass all forms of understanding. By considering interpretation as a form of translation, Steiner recognizes that comprehension is influenced by personal, social, and historical factors, adding a historical dimension to the act of translation. This recognition highlights the inherent subjectivity of translator in interpretation. However, Steiner's theory has not been without criticism. Some scholars argue that his approach lacks systematic discussion of fundamental issues such as the purpose and nature of translation, as well as specific methodologies for translation practice. Despite these criticisms, Steiner's work has undeniably had a profound impact on the field of translation studies. His translation theory from a philosophical hermeneutic perspective has injected fresh vitality into the field of translation studies.

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