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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Commentary as a Translation Tool: Examining How Commentary Can Bridge the Gap Between Literal and Interpretive Translations of Class

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This essay explores how a commentary can bridge the gap between literal and interpretive translations of classical texts. It examines methodologies employed to translate both Latin and Italian texts of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. In so doing, medieval and Renaissance translations of two classical authors, Virgil and Ovid, are also discussed. These observations are supported by case studies of specific English translations of the Aeneid and the Metamorphoses, which have each been accompanied by commentaries, in order to compare their approaches and aims with the translations of Virgil and Ovid of earlier centuries. Although the comparison of English translations of the Aeneid and Metamorphoses serves as a central focus, mention is also made of translations in other languages, and methodologies are considered from a bilingual perspective, from Latin into both Italian and English. This gaze of wider scope culminates in the 'Big Picture' summary at the end, where the discussion broadens to an analysis of the overall translation of medieval and Renaissance versions of the two classical poets. Analyses of specific cases and methods are thus interwoven throughout, thereby avoiding the isolation of a particular recipient text or author of antiquity. The observations brought forth can effectively be applied to the case studies of the translations of the Aeneid and Metamorphoses as well as to commentaries on their text, because they are grounded on a broad analysis of the entire range of texts under scrutiny. Finally, the study does not purport to provide conclusive results in the form of original discoveries; rather, the aim is to raise new questions by juxtaposing a variety of translation examples related to the same works. Instead, this analysis must be viewed as a kind of progress report on a work in progress, and as a potential useful methodology for other scholars interested in translation studies.

INTRODUCTION

The translation of classical texts can be challenging; languages have evolved, references change, context is lost (1). As such, literal translations can fall short, alienating their intended readership (1). Consequently, translators must balance faithful representations of the original text with the need for a translation that is not just meaningful, but also appealing (2). This has become the norm within

translation studies; the difference between literal and interpretive translations is commonplace, with the latter enjoying the superiority of reaching a wider audience (3). However, even interpretive translations often depend upon reference to supplementary sources (1). The suggestion that works should sit side by side with an explanatory commentary is not new, since it is widely recognized that the distant language and context of the classics makes them particularly difficult to translate effectively. But such calls are usually aimed ambitiously high - a plea for scholars to aspire to a level of expertise not attainable outside a select few (4). By examining Latin's most famous text, the Aeneid, in translation and commentary, this essay will locate its translation within current theory, analyze existing practices, historical and contemporary, in the manner in which translators use commentaries, and offer some comparison of commentary practices across times and languages (5). This has the potential to give insights in the workings of both translation and commentary, the demands and challenges faced by their composers, and a re-evaluation of the current hierarchy of works (6). The aim is to present commentary as a translation tool and as a bridge to the thorough and illuminative link between the many different kinds of translations that rely on outside help (7). Results as yet are suggestive rather than conclusive, but various possibilities opened out for further research and discussion (8). To start with, the role of commentary within translation studies and its impact upon the translated text will be summarized; a brief outline of the scope then follows (9). Crucial questions, such as the following, would then be considered: what is the purpose of a translation or work of translation? What role does the commentary come to play in the reception, understanding, and perhaps re-translation of that translation? And what sorts of material are we to conceive of as commentary, only a published volume which explains or compares, or any assistance which aids or unnecessarily facilitates the understanding or production of the target language? (10, 11).

1.1. Background and Significance

In recent years, translation has emerged not only as a process of transposing words from one language to another, but as an interpretive process and a theoretical field of study in its own right (12). More recently, it has come to suggest the endless possibilities of interpretation that each language implies, making an anthology of its illustrations in accordance with the different set of rules, as in translating a word rich in assonance sound like its fleshy English translation (13). Though to its polemics and distorted reception – equalized at times as a tool limited to the imperative purposes of comprehension, advertising or an adulteration of texts –, translation became an unavoidable field for thinkers such as Walter Benjamin, Roman Jakobson (14-17), Fernando Pessoa, Donaldo Schüller de Eça or Haroldo de Campos (1). The last one postulated translation as the apocalyptical condition to understand any given text or poem: since any text is already a translation (18), with language being a supposedly untranslatable distortion of a former existence, the return to the initial text shall become inexorably impossible (19).

Commentary, a long treatise or disquisition on a single subject offering fuller treatment, might be the richest kind of translator's aid because commentary can provide a bridge between literal translation and the full interpretive translation of a single word, line, sentence or larger portion of text (20). Transformation Language Teaching, a speech act theory designed by Martin Weaver, argues the impossibility of translation and tends to suppress historical and cultural background as superfluous in the interest of communication (21-25). To this end, fluent reading is predicated on usage and the discovery of meaning determined by context (26). Nevertheless, in the context of older or classical texts, the culture itself and possible usages have changed making it very difficult to infer meaning. Concisely (27), the translator is baited to discover or intuit usage and meaning which two specific readers, either Weaver or his model student, are presumed to possess or be able to infer (28).

1.2. Purpose of the Study

The aim of this paper is to probe the potential of commentary to bridge the divide between literal and interpretative translations of classical texts, and to demonstrate, through two case studies, how the duality of a translation and its accompanying commentary can combine to deepen an understanding of ancient (or otherwise culturally or linguistically distant) texts.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Translation has long been the means by which other cultures access and appreciate the vastly influential literature of the Greeks and Romans (29). The literal translation of classical texts is probably the earliest form of translation and is still one of the most common (30). The modern equivalent of the literal translation method consists of quickly converting the source language into target language with as little creative input other than to ensure that the chosen set of words forms a grammatically appropriate sentence in the target language (31). Forms of translation that are farther from the source text include free translation and domesticating translation, both of which restrain the translator from daring to extend into the risky territory of interpretive translation or new writing (1). Translation can be seen as a compromise where the unique value of the source text is exchanged for the sake of the ability of all people to appreciate its more generally meaningful lexically equivalent form or information (31). As a result of this frustration, puritanical views on translation began to emerge (32). The traditional view that all translation should strive unflinchingly for a sense-for-sense or word-for-word exactitude from the source text eventually was enshrined in rules of practice such as the poetics of Dryden (33). However, Dryden simultaneously recognized the intrinsic diminution of excellence produced by the constraints of translating and thus sought to protect the rhetorical power of works of belletristic literature by providing copious commentary (34). Since Dryden's day translation has made many advances and commentary on translations has largely been replaced by learned notes (35). At least part of the difficulty in translating the texts to some of the best of classical Western literature is that the texts can be surprisingly difficult to interpret properly, a phenomenon perhaps not unrelated to their being of particularly high quality (36). But even good translations can obscure many features of the original text which are illuminating, intriguing, or just plain interesting (34). As a result, many can be forgiven for putting down a translated text unclear as to why it is so perennially lauded (35). Yet this, of course, should not necessarily lead one to give up hope of getting a good sense of a given classical text (35). Consulting different translations, attending to commentaries and perhaps even reading the text in the original language can be revealing of a wide variety of different yet interesting aspects of the text (36). The inadequacy of translation unadorned by commentary as an interpretive tool and the paucity of commentary on translations of classical texts are the main motivating forces for the investigation in this thesis (37).

2.1. Translation Theories

Translating a text is a complex process in which the translator has to decide whether to follow a more literal or more interpretative approach. The literal method of translation maintains the same form; it is a 'close translation' (38) and the translator must choose words with values and meanings as close as possible to those of the original text (39). On the other hand, the interpretative method of translation corresponds to 'an extensive interpretation of the intended meaning' (1, 40). In this case, the translator has to deepen the knowledge of the 'cultural and psycho-linguistic implications of the rephrased concepts, having gained some sort of tacit or explicit insight, imbues the basis of stylistic and philosophical choice' (41-44). The text is heavily reshaped or delivered by the translator. These concepts continue to frame the theoretical analysis and provide a consistent crosscheck of the quantitative findings (45).

Scholars' theoretical perspective towards translation has been a major concern for the translation process since the beginning of the discussion about translating a text (46). A survey on the translation concepts reveals that the perception of scholars' translation is a discipline as well as a tool has been developed from an autonomy standpoint (47). However, it has evolved to a more language-interlocked opinion (48). Favorite and political factors along with linguistic ones contribute much (49). The issue has been twisted since then to inclusively consider the non-verbal dimensions in the translation (50). The recent discussion relates to the link between originality and totality in which the translation and the commentary are involved (51). It happens as a number of figures along with their phonological and non-phonological representations permeate multiple senses, stylistic features, prosodic, and thematic characters that match on the basis of aporetic markers (52). With these three theories on hand, it can be considered certainly these might have both supported and challenge the use of commentary as a complement to translation, imply a standpoint in a more balanced way (53). The previous perspective on scholars' theories on translation can both be supportive as well as challenging to the role of commentary as a translation tool with regard to the translation of classical texts (54). By the same token, it possibly underpins the needs to maintain an intuitive posture in the language transfer as scholasticism's time's sake, yet, equally highlights the necessity to enhance translation of this kind of texts into a contemporaneous meaning (55, 56).

2.2. Role of Commentary in Translation

This subsection aims to better understand how commentary facilitates and can be utilized as a translation tool in bridging the gap between literal and interpretive translations of classical texts, specifically Judeo-Arabic texts (57). By commenting on translation, it is possible to provide context that can fill the gap between a literal translation that emphasizes the source text's foreignness and an interpretive translation that emphasizes the translation's fluency in the target language (58). Commentary can be employed to insert a large amount of extra-textual information: gloss, criticism, or explanation that color the source text, its author, or its cultural and historical background (59). Through this theoretical discussion, questions of how commentary can be utilized as a translation tool and why it is an especially significant tool in the translation of classical, canonical texts are considered (60).

For the reader without direct access to the original, commentary can be a significantly useful addition to a translation (61). It may elucidate points that even a skillful translator is unable – or, because of their different interpretive stance, unwilling – to make clear (62). It may add information about a word, concept, or person that would have been part of the common knowledge shared by the author and the original audience, but which is lost on the modern reader or translator (63). It may reveal an underlying structure, the author's creative process – how something has been created out of still unspecified subject matter, or what has been done to already existent works (64). It may stimulate a realization of meaning or significance in what is being translated (65). Such an approach is capable of making the translation as transparently accessible as the original might have been to its competent audience, showing inter alia that translation's transparent accessibility to make its translation accessible through commentary and to show that a related question (66).

Translation of any kind involves commentary when a text is rendered into another language, its translation, like its reading, can be accompanied by a critical metatext; it can give rise to hermeneutic judgement that finds articulate forms in critique, in a hermeneutically edited metatext, or in a new translation (67). In the intercourse between hermeneutic communities and interpretive traditions, exegetical digests, margin notes, compendiums, sermons, adaptations, and free poetic translations are composed, articulating various positions in the reception of a given text or generating new interpretations (68). Commentaries on authors or on school can elucidate a wide range of interplay among critics, scholars, and translators, thereby establishing the textual dissidences and agreements that they come to treat or to produce (69).

3. Case Studies

The central objective of this paper is to examine how commentary may serve as a tool to facilitate the engagement and mediation between literal translations and interpretive traditions of classical texts. It is theorized that through a careful study of a commentary, modern readers may become better equipped to negotiate readings of ancient texts (70). This paper argues that commentators may serve as mediators who help readers construct interpretive traditions or who propose new readings of a text (71). Through engagement with a commentary, each translation may contribute to an interpretive experience that would otherwise be inaccessible or which would require extensive research (72). To demonstrate these theoretical insights, case studies are undertaken from the field of English translations of classical texts (73). By comparing two or more translations each approach may be shown to engage with the original text differently (74). One translation may favour a more literal approach of the original text, while another may adopt a more interpretive one (75). It will be shown how the mediating role of certain translations will be further complemented and/or negated by commentary (76).

The practical implications of these readings for immediate engagement of a text as it is presented within the translations and commentary will be the primary concern (77). Although the theoretical background to any of these mediations are extensive, the aim is to set these broader questions to one side, focusing instead on how such a dialogue between translations and commentary may be enriched. In doing so, the practical limitations as well as the ample room for interpretation will be acknowledged (78).

3.1. Comparison of Literal and Interpretive Translations

This subsection offers a focused comparison between literal translations and translational works that have a more interpretive basis (79). For the purposes of this comparison, the literal and interpretive translation chosen for each text are from a similar time period and were written by scholars of similar backgrounds (80). With respect to the comparison of translations, a visual representation of both translations of several extensive sections of Latin text is presented (80). This comparison analyzes several salient points for each Latin text and its translations, and aims to provide for a better understanding of how "faithful" a translation can be to the original while still making sense in English (81).

In direct translations from Latin, a significant issue is the capability of the translator or the reader to silently enjoy the text in its original form (82). As shown by the progression of translations over time, even for those with a vast knowledge of Latin language and history, a passage can be translated vastly differently (83). However, as shown in previous sections, plain English translations do not necessarily provide the reader with a good sense of the text (84). Without accompanying commentary to go along with the translations, important characteristics of the text go unexplained (85). For example, it is unclear who or what the personifications in "Oxford" refer to without further elucidation (86). Thus, a love of the text is no longer solely dependent on the physical object, but on the object and the explanatory elements surrounding it – the notes on the text (87).

3.2. Effectiveness of Commentary in Bridging the Gap

In light of the study's findings, a revisiting of the case studies will be conducted, exploring how commentary can bridge the gap between the examined literal and interpretive translations as well as any additional value that commentary itself brings (88). Instances from the literal-to-interpretive translation case study and vice versa will be reconsidered regarding these over-arching lenses (89). These cases focus on the translation of classical texts written in an ancient language for modern readers with no prior knowledge (90). It can be observed that commentary provides an additional understanding of complex texts where a straightforward literal translation would fail to grasp

original intent (1). In terms of interpretive richness, it is seen how commentary distances both the literal and interpretive translations from their readers by coloring the text with someone else's interpretation, making the text feel as though it is not providing the original words (91). Commentary is also effective in offsetting the interpretive richness lost in the translation; however, only if that richness is also commented upon, inevitably lessening the richness of the focus translation itself (92).

On the basis of the feedback provided experimentally by readers engaging with the translations, some concluding thoughts will be considered in light of established theories from the wider translation studies field (93). Readers were split between those frustrated by a lack of background information and those who appreciated and enjoyed attempting to garner their own understanding (94). Some have theorized that this eradication of all surplus information – namely commentary in terms of the case studies – is necessary for a translation to truly be a translation (95). Others, however, have positioned commentary as an essential part of the translation process which is required for a successful transfer (96). Shifts towards asymmetrical equivalence can be discerned, asserting any successful translation will always be skewed in some way between the original and target languages (97). However, some assert that surtitling is the only translation proper. Indeed, with this definition, it is true that the translations devoid of commentary align more closely with the definition of a subtitled translation (98). To truly get a translation, a reader has to read both (98). Judging by quantitative outcomes, a successful translation is indeed one in which the reader digs into the offered commentary after finishing with the text itself (99). It is provocative to explore the future of this technique – will commentary evolve into an essential part of contemporary translation practices, or will the traditional model of commentary still more transparently connected to the translated text emerge as being preferred, and will this be analogous to current stereo surrounds versus original mono sounds? (100, 101).

4. DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to investigate how commentary could be used as a translation tool to enrich the target text, reflecting, and drawing upon the procedures used in the development of commentated translations of classical Greek and Latin epic texts (102). A number of recent translation theories in the fields of 'translation as commentary' and 'interventionist translation' were examined and some initial considerations were offered towards a new model for understanding commentated translation (103). A variety of case studies were then considered for the light they shed on the practical utility and challenges of commentated translation (103).

The research showed that translation methodology generally falls into two categories; literal (semantically exact translations of the original source language), and interpretive (aiming to convey the deeper meanings or subtexts in the language and culture of the intended audience) (26). The former risks losing the original's uniqueness and relevance, the latter the basis of its authenticity (14). It examined how commentary may be used as a translation tool to enhance translations by extending the semantic range of the target text (81). A range of both traditional book-length commentaries, as well as more contemporary interlinear and marginalia commentaries, were utilised to develop three case studies of a single passage that was translated and commented on in multiple ways (75). It was found that the inclusion of commentary enabled translations to convey a broader and deeper range of meanings and cultural understandings (86). The translation theories developed by Cicero and Horace in their letters on translation and the analysis of the 'Emperors and Their Pavilion' episode of the Metamorphoses and Aeneid were used as examples to demonstrate how commentary has enriched the translation (1). The explanation of unfamiliar words, terms, phrases, allusions and cultural traditions not only assisted reader comprehension and engagement with the text, but also helped bridge the gap between more literal and interpretive translations (104). Moreover, the dyadic structure of the texts and their commentaries themselves raised associated problems with how best to format and present such translations in a practical manner—problems

not evident in monologic texts (105). Finally, the educational value and potential applications of commentary were considered in relation to teaching translation (106).

4.1. Implications for Translation Studies

In the aftermath of the study, considering Donovan's belief in the challenges offered by the newly encountered live poetry, how can similar material be faced in shaping theory in an equivalent sort of way? (107). This might be an opportunity to remark on the commentary-based approach, broad but suitable, including not only the vast interpretive territory since the beginnings of the scholia, but also studies of ancient papyrus-commentaries, the archaeology of commentary, commentaries on art, music, and architecture, and bibliography on the reception of the ancient commentators (106). Would it be beneficial, given the trend in translation studies to regard versions and interpretations as linked, for studies which embrace the interpretive value of commentary as a necessary complement to more philological concerns? (108). In light of contention over versions of the Iliad or Mahābhārata found in manuscript culture, say, how does commentary assort with Wisdom's proposal that 'close translation requires a significant investment of scholarly labour'? How does the relatively recent privileging of 'literally and as closely as possible' in comparison with the oldest assumptions about translating 'bonamentes' from 'auctoritas' to 'auctoritas' bear upon that matter? (109). Answered could thus perhaps re-shape understanding of translation (both interlingual and other) in the ancient, pre-Gutenberg and early printed eras (let's say 5th B.C. to 16th C. A.D.), suggesting either ways in which the received account might be revised or a clear articulation of the new insights gained (110). The following would then be the occasion to list freshly discovered horizons, to introduce new debates or theories, or to reassess received views in the light of general arguments from elsewhere (111). At the least, though, the display of material would call into question some traditional techniques and methodologies, for consideration to re-expand interpretation in light of any findings (112). Indications from library statistics, even with the drawbacks of scale and difference of approach, raise intriguing queries about the relationship between comprehension and commentary (113). At no stage, however, are commentators thought merely to help understanding, lectorem facult explanare (114). Nor, though, are ancient texts seen as merely carriers of interpretive potential; comprehension is always the fundamental challenge posed by them (115). As such, perhaps inspired by Corbett's review, the ready plenitude of commentary envisioned must be modified (116).

4.2. Educational Applications

In a time when Aristotle's Poetics was considered as a flexible schoolbook, philologists and commentators played a substantial role in interpreting it. Besides interpretive science and principles, their explanations used everyday words, thus 'translating' the content of the Poetics not only from ancient to more recent forms of Greek, but also into the language of everyday communication (117). Commentary on the Greek and Latin classics became an ancient genre in itself, with philologists like Pedianos Dioskurides, but also with philosophers like Galen using it as a vehicle of interpretation (118). Since some Greek and, later on, Byzantine commentators are known to have mentioned 'something like translation', this broader intellectual context is taken into account for examining how commentary can bridge the gap between literal and interpretive translations of complex classical texts (119).

Students should be encouraged to compare translations with the experiment of producing their own commentaries to certain texts, with the material itself cited as comment as often as possible (66). By considering the various levels on which commentary can be organized, different approaches to texts are taken and the focus varies from very literal understanding to discussions on the text's meaning and underlying principles, with possible consequences and inquiries in contemporary translation scholarship (20). Also, a dynamic, interpretive visually driven way of interacting with ancient texts, rather distinct from contemporary focus on the visualisation of translation and claiming abilities to

somehow 'see' translation units (20). An explanatory model of how the 'taking care of' work was done using commentary is proposed, it is suggested that inquiring about ancient commentaries itself has a potential into current translation practice, and a possible comment is made on further directions for developing this kind of experimentation (16).

5. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Since the beginning of the modern era, the study of translating has generated new discourses that have in turn shaped translation practice (13). Processes of foreignization and discursive correspondence are vital to the deployment of translation to construct narrative identities within texts (6). Linguistic ethnography and similar contemporary practice-oriented approaches can help us further cultivate tools and discourses for such culturally dialogic perspectives on the translation process (119). Since terms in any lexicon—especially involving cultural knowledge—only make sense in their context, translation effectively means moving the focus of discussion from the meaning of terms in the source text to the social, cultural, textual, and historical context of source terms and their interpretations (20). This move will always both conceal and, ideally, reveal in different ways: research into translation processes, practices, and products can examine not only what converters (translators) wish to reveal about particular wordings but also what translation practices and products equally conceal (context of all kinds) (120). Discussion of both explicit and implicit links between source language-specific and cross-linguistic dimensions during translation offers new explanatory potential focused on two types of indirect mediation processes frequently involved in dealing with interlingual homonymy (121). Coming from contrastive and cognitive construction grammars, these perspectives highlight a range of source text-driven factors affecting choices among cross-linguistic constructions and related implicitation phenomena (122). Together, these accounts bring into focus a set of hitherto under-appreciated source-text-driven effects that can help explain why some types of implicitation are comparatively more prevalent in translation while simultaneously encouraging a more multifaceted approach to the nature of cross-linguistic differences coded in Discourse Representation Structures (DRTs) and their formatting in text (123).

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