

# Translating Style: Constraints and Creativity

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**Abstract**—Style is an important factor to be considered in cross-cultural, cross-lingual translation. There are three factors that work subtle constraints on the style of the translated text: competence for analyzing authorial style, weighing “manner” against “matter”, and literary traditions in target culture. Despite such constraints, the translator’s artistic pursuit finds expressions in creativity. The style of the target text is, therefore, a product of both the original author and the translator, a fact that qualifies the translator to share with the original author the authorship to the work he has helped transplanted into the target culture.

**Index Terms**—style, translator, constraints, creativity, authorship

## I. SIGNIFICANCE OF TRANSLATION STYLE

The earliest study in literary style in Chinese literature is recorded in Liu Xie’s *Dragon-Carving and the Literary Mind*, in which eight styles are differentiated, namely, “the elegant, the recondite, the plain, the ornate, the sublime, the exotic, and the frivolous” (Liu Xie 2003: 395, Yang Guobin’s translation).

Leech and Short distinguish two different styles: transparent style and opaque style. The former shows the meaning of the text easily and directly (Leech and Short 1981:19), and the latter means that the meaning of the text is obscured by means of foregrounding and its interpretation is hence obstructed (ibid:29). Applying the terminology to semantic analysis in translation studies, Snell-Hornby maintains that in transparent style “the sense of individual lexemes is often deducible from the context in which they are embedded”, whereas in opaque style words “are often used so idiosyncratically that the reader has to be familiar with all the semantic implications of the lexeme concerned before he can appreciate its impact on the text” (Snell-Hornby 1988/1995:122).

The earliest document that mentions the importance of style in literary translation in the West is Cicero’s *The Best Kind of Orator*, in which he says (Robinson 2006: 9-10):

I translated the most famous orations of the two most eloquent Attic orators [...] and I did not translate them as an interpreter, but as an orator, keeping the same ideas and forms, or as one might say, the ‘figures’ of thought, but in language which conforms to our usage. And in so doing, I did not hold it necessary to render word for word, but I preserved the general style and force of the language. For I did not think I ought to count them out to the reader like coins, but to pay them by weight, as it were.

In this statement Cicero argues that he aimed to preserve “the general style and force of the language”, to give the target readers the same “weight” of the speeches as they were delivered in its original Greek language, by making use of his own idiomatic Latin. In his eye, individual words, like individual coins, are not important in their own right, so long as the overall weight of the original is maintained, the coins can be changed, and therefore word-for-word rendering is not necessary.

Goethe, the German literary master, also maintains that in style is manifested the highest level of literary artistry, saying that style is based on the most profound principle of epistemology, which can be perceived in tangible forms (Zhou Zhenfu 2006:1). Without style, a piece of writing is not valued as an art, nor is the writer an artist. Indeed, how could the readers possibly distinguish Du Fu from Li Bai, or Li Qingzhao from Xin Qiji, if these poets did not have their own distinctive style?

A translated literary work, as the name suggests, is expected to read as a piece of literature. In Mao Dun’s words, a literary translator should reproduce in the target language the artistic flavor of the original, and thus the translation can excite, delight and inspire the target language reader the same way as the original work has excited, delighted and inspired the source language reader (Mao Dun 1980, in Luo Xinzhang 1984:511). If a translation is to be invested with such artistic attributes and functions, the translator must always be mindful of stylistic features, both at the stage of comprehension and at the stage of re-verbalization.

The history of translation in China and abroad sees the contention between translating the *sense* and translating the *style*, a continual tug-of-war, as it were, and the war ends mostly in the triumph of *sense* over *style*. This is because loyalty to the meaning of the original text has always been regarded as a law to observe ever since the translation of religious texts. Qian Zhongshu asserts that the great Buddhist translators of the 3rd to the 7th century “took care of the sense of the original and to a great extent let the style of the translation take care of themselves” (Qian Zhongshu 2005:39). The version may be insipid, however, when style is neglected. Kumarajiva, for example, was recorded to express his perturbation that in the Buddhist scriptures thus translated, the elegance of style in the original Sanskrit had been totally lost to the Chinese reader, making the version as unpalatable as chewed foods (Kumarajiva, in Luo Xinzhang 1984:32). In highlighting the importance of style in literary translation, Boase-Beier says that style exerts its

effects upon translation in at least three ways (Boase-Beier 2006:1):

Firstly, in the actual process of translation, the way the style of the source text is viewed will affect the translator's reading of the text. Secondly, because the recreative process in the target text will also be influenced by the sorts of choices the translator makes, and style is the outcome of choice (as opposed to those aspects of language which are not open to option), the translator's own style will become part of the target text. And, thirdly, the sense of what style is will affect not only what the translator does but how the critic of translation interprets what the translator has done.

This summary of the importance of style best answers the question about whether style should be translated. In the first place, style is an integrated part of the source text, because a form without soul is merely a walking skeleton. No literary translation that fails to bring out the soul of the source deserves a place in the literary world.

## II. CONSTRAINTS ON TRANSLATING THE STYLE OF THE ORIGINAL AUTHOR

Compared with the original text, every translation is characterized by some differences, slips, changes and elisions, and Gentzler affirms, "Indeed, it is within such a notion of comparison that social and subjective factors can be seen to operate as constraints." (Gentzler 2004:149). What, then, are the constraints on the style of translation? And how does the translator bring his creativity into full play under such constraints, and why?

### A. *Competence for Analyzing Authorial Style*

The first factor that determines the style of the translation is the translator's knowledge of stylistics and competence for analyzing the stylistic features of the original author as manifested in the source text. Tytler claims that a translator must have "the most correct taste"; otherwise, the translator (Tytler 2007:74-75):

will be in continual danger of presenting an exaggerated picture or a caricature of his original. [...] The grave style of the original becomes heavy and formal in the translation; the elevated swells into bombast, the lively froths up into the petulant, and the simple and naïf degenerates into the childish and insipid.

A translator with stylistic knowledge will do better than one without. Boase-Beier (2006:29) declares that "a translator who is stylistically aware is likely to be able more fully to appreciate both stylistic effects and the state of mind or view that informs them." This holds true for literary and non-literary text types, but the distinction is more conspicuously manifested in literary works, because style is a more subtle and creative factor in the literary genre than in others. Stylistic knowledge is a prerequisite for literary translation because stylistics is a study that explains "the relation between language and artistic function" (Leech and Short 1981:13). The time and efforts that a translator spends in reading, understanding, and appreciating the author's work will pay off, because only by so doing will he possibly have a thorough grasp of the spirit of the author and the work to be translated. Only with this prerequisite can he take the next step, namely, to choose a word, phrase or sentence structure in the target language that best reproduces the style of the original. It goes beyond dispute, therefore, that negligence in understanding the original style would never bring out a reproduction that resembles the original in spirit. A well-trained literary translator, before setting about the task of translation, needs to have a literary critic's competence of aesthetic appreciation, with a linguist's sensitivity to the nuances of language traits. As Leech and Short put it, linguistic observation stimulates or modifies literary insight, and literary insight in its turn stimulates further linguistic observation (ibid). Whether these two faculties are perfectly developed demarks the line between expert translators from amateurs.

When analyzing the stylistic characteristics of the author's language, the translator is actually making an attempt to interpret the author's artistic motivation. Style, as a choice of a particular mode of expression, is a reflection of the author's intention. The author may explain his intention after the literary work is finished, but his explanation is no more than an interpretation among many others. Readers have the freedom to interpret the work in their own way because reading is seen as a personalized "constructive activity" (Scholes 1989:49). The open-endedness of literary discourse and the plurality of readings it allows (Watts 1991:27), however, does not mean that all analyses of the work have equal explanatory power. To achieve the maximal explanatory power, Gutt suggests referring to "communicative clues", that is, clues to the communicative intention of the speaker, provided by stylistic features (Gutt 2000:101).

### B. *Weighing "Manner" against "Matter"*

If the first factor—the competence for analyzing authorial style—determines how sensitive the translator is to style in the original text, the second factor—weighing "manner" against "matter" testifies how sensible the translator is of the relation between form and content.

There have long been controversial viewpoints, mainly between the dualists and the monists on the concept of style, and the controversy has not yet been settled (Leech and Short 1981:15). The dualist holds that form and content are separate; style is a "way of writing", a "mode of expression", and a choice of "manner" rather than "matter". This idea has a strong tradition, dating back to Pope and Lyly, and found its recent expression in French stylisticians such as Bally and Riffaterre, who hold that "style is that expressive or emotive element of language which is added to the neutral presentation of the message itself." (ibid:18).

The monist views that form and content are inseparable. As Flaubert said, "It is like body and soul: form and content to me are one." (ibid:15). Many authors have a strong sense of artistic integrity and inviolability of their work. James Joyce attached so much importance to his artistic integrity that he admonished the Danish translator of *Ulysses* not to

change a single word. David Lodge claimed that the general appreciation of a literary work cannot be divorced from the appreciation of its style (ibid: 26). Halliday's view that style is "motivated prominence" (Halliday 1973) also relates form with meaning, hence the stance of monism.

A translator who regards style as a sign that possesses its "material substance", that is "never fully distinguishable from its signifying properties", as Jakobson put it (Bradford 1994:3), will treat it more seriously than one who posits it as "ornament" (Püschel 1980:305-6), which is something to be sacrificed when necessity claims. In other words, a translator who holds a monist view on style keeps more of the authorial style than a dualist.

### C. *Literary Traditions in Target Culture*

The socio-cultural contextual factor that influences the style of the target text is the literary tradition in the recipient culture. Literary tradition is the literary tradition shapes the target reader's reading experiences and aesthetic expectations, which will exert influences on the translator's literary choices and the critic's quality assessment of the translation. Holmes asserts in "Rebuilding the Bridge at Bommel: Notes on the Limits of Translatability" (1994:47):

The basic problem facing the translator of a poem, or at any rate the translator who takes it as his goal to create a text that is not only closely enough related to the original text to be called a translation but also meets the basic requirements for being called a poem in the new language he has taken as his "target", is that he must somehow "shift" the original poem not only to another linguistic context but almost without exception also to another literary intertext and socio-cultural situation.

The "literary intertext and socio-cultural situation" with which the target reader is familiar is often quite different from those the original author depicts in his literary work for his readers. The case is especially true as far as Chinese and English-speaking communities are concerned. As Liu Miqing put it, "Every language contains words, idioms and phrases which are ethnocentric expressions that reflect the values, history and the world outlook of the language speakers" (Liu Miqing 2001:19-20). The full moon, for example, is such a favored image in ancient Chinese poetry that the mere mention of these words arouses poetic associations in the minds of Chinese readers, an aesthetic experience that seems almost exclusive to the Chinese. The heterogeneity of language determines the alienation of transformation from one language into another. The gap between different literary intertexts and socio-cultural contexts cannot be easily bridged, therefore the translator has to weigh carefully the two cultures he must negotiate and strike a balance between them. This strategy to adapt culturally alien words to familiar expressions in the target language is a domesticating translation, which can result in transparent and fluent style in the target text. Transparent style has long been advocated in the history of translation. As early as 1840 in the preface to his translation of Aristophanes' comedy into English, John Hookham Frere wrote (Lefevere 1992:40):

The language of translation ought, we think, as far as possible, to be a pure, impalpable and invisible element, the medium of thought and feeling, and nothing more; it ought never to attract attention to itself; hence all phrases that are remarkable in themselves, either as old or as new, all importations from foreign languages, and quotations, are as far as possible to be avoided. (Lefevere's translation)

Most translators anticipate that their efforts spent on translation can be rewarded with higher acceptability among readers, which will do justice to the work of original author, to the translator and to the publisher. Domesticating is the way to ensure easy readability, since it has filtered through and normalized those lexical, syntactical, and textual elements that the translator assumes alien to the target reader, determined by the translator's estimate on the expectation from the target culture. This strategy, however, does not contribute much to the progress of the target language. When the translator "disturbs the reader as little as possible and moves the writer in his direction", as Schleiermacher expressed (Robinson 2006:229), he imports few fresh and creative language expressions and exotic cultural knowledge. By adopting the domestication method and eliminating any linguistic or stylistic peculiarities in the foreign text, the translator makes efforts "to insure easy readability by adhering to current usage, maintaining continuous syntax, fixing a precise meaning", thus giving an appearance that the translation is not a translation, but the "original" (Venuti 1998:1).

An opaque style may be the result of a foreignizing translation, which is a "resistant strategy" that gives the translation "a different, and perhaps more intense, strangeness in the target-language culture" (ibid:300). The translator who is not content with the ready-made expressions of the target language and wishes to broaden readers' visions to the outside world is likely to adopt the foreignizing method. He "disturbs the writer as little as possible and moves the reader in his direction" (ibid). Lu Xun and other intellectuals during the May Fourth New Cultural Movement in China followed this path, importing new expressions from western works with a view to compensating and complementing the inadequate expressions and grammar in the Chinese language, and introducing foreign cultures home to the then self-ostracized Chinese people. Foreignizing, as a more radical translation method than domesticating, tends to result in opaque style of the target text, hence runs a greater risk of being rejected by the target culture, a reaction like a "foreign body" in an organism. Therefore, it demands more wisdom of the translator to mark off the boundaries between opacity and unreadability. A foreignizing method may encounter lower acceptability but the efforts to input new expressions into the target tongue are laudable, as Vives, the Spanish humanist, confirmed (Lefevere 1992:50):

Languages benefit greatly if skillful translators dare to give some foreign figures of speech or style to their nation, as long as it does not deviate too much from that nation's customs and general way of life. They can also imitate the language of the original, using it as a kind of matrix, and invent or construct new well-formed words to enrich the language they translate into.

By doing so, translators have, over the centuries, enriched their native languages with new vocabulary as well as an abundance of stylistic figures and resources.

### III. CREATIVITY OF THE TRANSLATOR IN TRANSLATING STYLE

Despite such constraints, the translator's artistic pursuit finds expressions in creativity. The style of the target text is, therefore, a product of both the original author and the translator. The text producer, be he an author or a translator, builds his style through his choices of words and structures, like an architect cultivating his style of building with bricks and patterns to his tastes and purposes. Boase-Beier's remark is insightful, for she distinctly articulates that the translator inevitably leaves his stylistic trait in the translation. In the target text there is the translator's visible presence in the words he favors, the structures he prefers and the rhetoric he likes.

Since the target text manifests the styles of two producers—the author and the translator, a very tricky question must be addressed: what if these two styles are in conflict? Ideally a translator should be able to imitate the author's style and reproduce it in the target language as if it were the author's own writing if the author knew the target language. This, as everybody knows, is impractical, because no language is rich enough to match another in all its stylistic traits, a fact that makes translation an art of regret. Because of the different forms of languages involved in translation, it is reasonable to assume that the translator may not follow the author's step at every turn. He may sometimes take a shortcut, sometimes a winding road, but always keep the author in sight, and finally get to the same destination as the author. However, it is also possible that, by taking another quite different road, the translator ends up in getting lost and failing his journey. Then, how close can a translation be to its original in stylistic effect?

Yan Fu, the great translator, unsatisfied with translating the sense alone, wrote in the preface to his translation of Huxley's *On Evolution and other Essays* to justify his advocacy on "elegance" of style (Lian Shuneng 2009:4):

...Besides faithfulness and expressiveness, I also aim at elegance. I strive for elegance not just to make my translations travel far, but to express the original writer's ideas better, for I find that subtle thoughts are better expressed in the vocabulary and syntax of pre-Han prose than those of the vulgar writings of today. Using the latter often leads to distortion of meaning, which, however slight, results in vast misunderstanding. Weighing the pros and cons, I opted for the former, as a matter of necessity, not trying to be different...

The western classics translated by Yan remain a source of delight to read even today, owing not to the ideas he enthusiastically transplanted to modernize China, but to the elegant style of writing in its true sense. Readers of the Chinese translation cannot but appreciate Yan's mastery of his mother tongue. The style is indeed "elegant", judging from the standard Yan aimed at reaching in the preface to this translation. Prose of such good writing ranks among the best of its genre in Chinese, be it a translation or an original. Yan's translation won praise from Wu Rulun, the celebrated man of letters, who wrote an enthusiastic foreword to Yan's version, saying (Qian Zhongshu 2005:41)

One can translate books only with such a style as Mr. Yen's (Yan's)...As a man of letters, Huxley is not a patch on our Tang and Sung prose masters, let alone Ssuma Ch'ien and Yang Yung. But once dressed up by Mr. Yen, Huxley's book would not suffer much in comparison with our Pre-Chin philosophers. How important style is! (Qian's translation)

While admiring Yan's elegant style as exemplified earlier, for example, some readers of the translation may ask themselves a question: is the elegant writing style Huxley's or Yan's? This ineluctable question must be addressed by a translation critic who must pass his translation quality assessment. To this question Qian Zhongshu answered (Qian 2005:37-38):

I for one have never ceased to marvel at the skill which Yen Fu "transmutes" the original author. One would never suppose Huxley, for example, to be the virtuoso of plain style as Mr. Mencken happily calls him, if one reads him in Yen Fu's translation. Here is no master of effective assertion, no gladiator of pen, and above all no Darwin's bulldog, but a sweetly reasonable gentleman persuading in mellifluous and jeweled phrases. Of Huxley's unmistakable hard ring there is not a trace; we find only subtle overtones to make for the "other harmony" of prose.

This statement clearly shows that, in the case of Yan's translation, the style of the translator is different from the style of the author. Yan actually had doubts about such a divergence. In a letter to Wu Rulun, he expressed his misgivings (Qian Zhongshu 2005:40):

The style should be refined of course. But in the original, there are expressions which are not of good taste and ought to be left untranslated to keep the style pure. Hence the dilemma: if I alter those expressions, I am not faithful to the original; if, on the other hand, I let them stand, I spoil the style of my translation.

It was Wu's advice that reassured Yan to "transmute" Huxley to his own literary taste and artistic pursuit. It is admirable that Yan had the courage to pursue a consistent style of his own in literary production. This example manifests the translator's awareness of his authorship to the work he has helped to transplant into the target soil. Although it is generally agreed that a translator's task is to reproduce as closely as possible the style of the original, it is impossible for the translator to completely expunge his presence in the text, into sheer "invisibility", to borrow Venutti's word (Venutti 1995). It seems that there are two causes that prevent a translator from being as faithful to the original as one might expect, of which one goes much deeper than the other. The first cause is related to the text itself. When the text constitutes a feature that is unique in the source language, it will become resistant to be translated into another language. The failure to find similar formal correlation governed by social acceptability in the target culture results in the loss of that feature in the target text. Such textual and linguistic constraints in the source and target socio-cultural

contexts are the first cause that obliges the translator to re-inscribe the original text. There is, however, a deeper cause for the translator's presence in the translational work he has produced, and that is the re-creativity disposition in the translator. In "Lin Shu's Translation" Qian Zhongshu discussed such an itching urge in the heart of the translator to write his own lines instead of translating the original author when he sees any chance to improve the original (Qian Zhongshu 1979, in Luo Xinzhang 1984:705).

No matter how willing the translator is to reproduce the authorial style, he will inevitably leave traces of his own style in the translation. Baker compares these traces to translator's "fingerprints". Baker questions the demand on the translator to reproduce exactly the style of the original, because "it is as impossible to produce a stretch of language in a totally impersonal way as it is to handle an object without leaving one's fingerprints on it" (Baker 2000: 244).

The fingerprints metaphor reveals Baker's point of departure to be descriptive translation studies. What Baker concerns is not what a translator should do, but what he does do. Such a study approaches the translator's style from translation products already existing in socio-cultural reality, rather than from translation theories idealized in vacuum. Since it is a person, not a machine, who gives the source work its second life in the target socio-cultural context, it has inhaled the creator's breath, and become a life of its own features, who, though in most aspects similar to its other self in the source culture, is, anyway, a re-created being. In the process of the re-creation, the translator's labor is felt through his selection and organization of words, his long or short sentence structures, or his plain or oratory way of speech, thus leaving his fingerprints on the newly created being. All such labors deserve praise and appreciation.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Translation is a communication between the source-language author and the target-language reader mediated by the bilingual translator confined within source and target language and culture. The role of a mediator requires the translator to make decisions under the tension of different forces, textual and extra-textual, personal and environmental. The constraining factors discussed in this paper shows that, on the one hand, the greater the knowledge the translator has about the authorial style, and the more important role he ascribes style to play in his translation, the more stylistic features of the original will he willingly preserve for the reader; on the other hand, this willingness is checked by the acceptability of the target reader. The factor of the target literary intertext and socio-cultural situation is a lasting factor that works its influence on the translator's stylistic choice from the beginning to the end, and has the final say to the acceptability of the work the translator has endeavored to do.

It has been argued that translators are tied down by the source text in their creation of the target text and that their work is re-creative rather than creative. Of course, translators are not as free in their productions as writers are. The function of translation demands of the translator a basic humility, a submission of his creative being to another's. Whereas authorship is generally respected for its originality, self-expression in a unique text, translatorship is derivative. A translator may hope to represent the authorial originality by virtue of identification and emulation with the author, but this hope often ends up with disappointment. Because the imitation, however realistic, is inferior to the original. The factor that may be of assistance for a translation to achieve its artistic integrity is the translator's creativity under constraints. Facts also prove that a slavish translation does not win the heart of the reader, nor of the author.

It is true that although confined by many constraints, the literary translator's initiatives for creativity are never to be curbed. This is because all artists, literary translators included, are urged by a strong motivation, a hidden deep desire, to bring something new to the world. This urge for creation is the driving force that empowers him to look for the best way of expression for his conceived idea, and he is convinced that he will find it, despite all the hardships and setbacks. The birth of anything new must be accompanied by the pang, yet the reward crowns all the suffering. Walter Benjamin is convinced that translation is about revealing the vibration within each language. Language, in his eye, is a living process. In the dialectic of language movement over time a translation is privileged with "the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own" (Baker 1998/2001: 195). Because of the translated work, the original work is renewed into an "after-life", and in so doing new linguistic forms are created within a variety of target languages. Viewed this way, the presence of the translator with his creative style in the translation is bliss rather than a curse.

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