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Recategorizing Walter Benjamin as Non-deconstructivist based on a Comparison of Aspects of Jacques Derrida's and Benjamin's Views on Translation



Martin Woesler^{1*} & Yang Chen²

^{1,2}Foreign Studies College, Hunan Normal University, Changsha, China

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Abstract

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According to traditional Western views on translation, conveying the meaning is the first aim. In Benjamin's eyes, this is an acceptance of the "non-identity of languages", harming linguistic development. With his understanding, Benjamin challenged ideas viewing language as a tool. For this challenge, he has been regarded by many scholars as a forerunner, rebelling against Western logocentrism. He also contributed to the development of translation studies, e.g. with his concept of a "pure language". Another dominant figure of deconstructivism is Derrida, who also challenged logocentrism. He has created many concepts like "la différence", dissemination, trance etc., which serve not only linguistics and philosophy, but also translation studies. In the history of Western translation, Benjamin has often been classified as a member of deconstructivism, even being compared with Derrida in regard to their deconstructive architectural concept of "absence" (MacArthur 1993). However, Benjamin's understanding of translation differs from Derrida's. This paper compares their comprehension of translation mainly regarding the aspects of "pure language" and "la différence", metaphrase and relevant translations, "afterlife" and "rebirth" of the original. Their attitudes towards the five dimensions original work, author, translator, translation work and translation criterion respectively are explored. It is concluded that Benjamin does not belong to deconstructivism.

¹Corresponding Author's Email:
wmt@hunnu.edu.cn

“Pure Language” and “La Différence”

When translation studies became self-aware as a discipline in the late 1950s, translation was understood mainly as part of linguistics with issues like contrastive comparison (Vinay & Darbelnet 1958) and linguistic-systemic issues (Mounin 1963, Nida 1964, Catford 1965). Therefore, many translation theories involve linguistic aspects. Benjamin has presumed an ideal ‘original’ language he called “reine Sprache” or “la langue pure” (pure language) as the origin of subsistent languages in the real world after summarizing the defects of subsistent languages (Benjamin [1916] 2019:14).

This original language was from God, and had full creativity and cognition. In it language and spirit, meaning and form, signifier and signified were united to show the truth through self-manifestation. Benjamin has pointed out that with the corruption of the human, the language had no longer been one, but multiple. The deriving languages were corrupted into abstract conceptual languages (Cao Danhong, 2012:6). In this way, script descended to instrumental signs. It referred to things in various manual systems, but it could never convey the universality through self-manifestation, so the relationship between the human and the world has changed from the intersubjectivity into subject-object dichotomy where the human dominates (Wei Jianguang & Sun Yingchun, 2013:75). In other words, due to the presumption that language descended from the original “being” into lower “having”, it has become a synonym for “abstract”, “judgement” and “meaning”. Language has never been a medium, but a kind of means used in communication of “subjects” (Wohlfarth, 2003:27). As a result, meaning has been the external reference out of the signs themselves, instead of the spirit of self-manifestation of pure language. Accordingly, the relationship between signified and signifier is actually external instead of being original, direct and internal. As Paul De Man has claimed, we think we use our language freely. We feel comfortable and are familiar with the dwelling place within our language, in which we think not to be alienated, but we do not notice that this kind of alienation has been shown strongly in our relationship with our original language. It has been disintegrated already, which brings a special alienation, a peculiar pain (Paul De Man, 2003:99).

Benjamin has assumed the transcendental existence of pure language in order to make the path

of salvation to human clear, that is to say, to find the lost pure language is to unite the world together. Benjamin thinks that all practical languages have a common origin and among themselves a kind of affinity that goes beyond history. As Benjamin once said, “all suprahistorical kinship of languages rests in the intention underlying each language as a whole - an intention, however, which no single language can attain by itself but which is realized only by the totality of their intentions supplementing each other: pure language.” (Benjamin, 2004:78). In other words, if we want to reconstruct pure language, we have to eliminate the external relationship of linguistic intentions and restore the identical relationship between spirit and language, which means to promote the linguistic intentions of various languages to form an integral complementary. This integral complementary is linking the languages together. It is through translation that the mode of intention of the source language can enter into the target language. Therefore, to Benjamin, the significance of translation is not to convey the basic meaning and content of the source language, but the changes to both languages after translation; thereby, translation can teach us about the differences and complementation of each language. Benjamin states that the translator’s work should “ultimately serve [...] the purpose of expressing the central reciprocal relationship between languages” (Benjamin, 2004:77).

A difference between Benjamin and Derrida is that Derrida has invented the concept of “la difference”, which uses the image of an infinitely flowing stream of meaning to overthrow western logocentrism. Therefore, it has assured the translation view that advocates difference and opposes identity. Derrida has pointed out that *la différence* is the precondition of possibility of multiple meanings, so that meaning is the result of its moving. While meaning cannot precede *la différence*, there would be no existence of pure and completely identical origin of meaning, just like what the Babel story reminds us of. (Davis, 2004:10) In other words, the meaning in *la différence* does not allow any conceptual or theoretic system no matter if it is in one language or in several languages. Meaning always presents its fluidity, uncertainty and diversity. We cannot make meaning independent of language, nor can we make language independent of meaning. On the contrary, meaning is already in the language, so meaning can be understood being of linguistic nature.

Language is complicated, fickle, ambiguous and different for any speaker; thus, meaning is also unclear, ambiguous and even mysterious (Cai Xinle, 2007:200). What we can discuss is only the relationship of difference instead of the transcendental identity. In Derrida’s view, a word is in a

dynamic state, we can only understand it, describe it or listen to its sound in such a dynamic condition. If there is a fixed starting point, the meaning will flow from the very beginning. How about the origin of meaning? Derrida has regarded *la différence* as the origin, aiming to explain that in the very beginning meaning was formed, so at the source we had already an initial difference among meanings. The so-called purity thus was contaminated and the source appeared rather complicated. (Zhu Gang, 2006:20)

Derrida and Benjamin all oppose structural linguistic views. The difference is that Benjamin opposed the human control and domination of language by emphasizing the identity of language and spirit. We would rather say that it is not opposed to structuralism, but to the opposite relation between subject and object. In essence, Benjamin is not against concepts like structure, order, centre, etc. He just opposes the structure, order, center, etc. that are based on the interference with language, created by the subject-object relationship, emphasizing that language will not be constrained by the fetter of any subject-object relationship. If we consider it more carefully, he does not disapprove the logocentrism completely as he just emphasizes that logocentrism cannot be constructed and understood through subject and object relation. It must be built and realized by the way of unintentionality or the “presence” of logos, which will be delusive. On the contrary, Derrida is refusing any metaphysics during the process of his deconstruction of any conceptual system. In his opinion, Benjamin has not cast off the set pattern of logocentrism because Benjamin’s *pure language* is still a constructed concept, no matter of how transcendental and absolute identity it is. Of course, if God were the person who deconstructs, we would see that rationality dominates everything and logos would be the deconstruction in the speaker’s status and would not be the deconstruction of deconstruction. Once there is an unshakable center, logos will become dominant and everything will obey to this central authority. Therefore, in order to avoid constructing any central system or structure, Derrida takes the difference as the origin of everything. There is no identity and everything is constantly reproducing and differentiating, so nothing but difference is presented. At any moment, it is different from others as well as itself in such a way that identity does not exist. All we can observe is dynamic stuff, which constantly changes.

Metaphrase and Relevant Translation

As Benjamin and Derrida have different linguistic views, their understanding of translation criteria is also different from each other. Benjamin thinks that in various languages, the ultimate essence *pure language*, “is tied only to linguistic elements and their changes, in linguistic creations it is weighted with a heavy, alien meaning. To relieve it of this, to turn the symbolizing into the symbolized, to regain pure language fully formed in the linguistic flux, is the tremendous and only capacity of translation.” (Benjamin, 2004:81).

In other words, real languages, without exception, refer to external things. To recover the identity of language and spirit, we must let the language break the shackle of meaning while the effects of translation are to make the two languages free of the heavy burden by making the modes of intention of the two languages complementary of each other. According to Benjamin, to judge whether translation of a work is successful or not, it is necessary to observe the combination of signifier and signified of language. Benjamin thinks Hölderlin’s translation works are almost perfect transition of texts because they are absolutely literal translations and metaphrases - but they are also not readable. The literal translation dismembered the sentences, leading to the consequence that meaning got lost (De Man, 2003:104). To Benjamin, the translation that gets the language out of the shackle of meaning, and makes the language manifest itself to convey the spirit is the best translation. Anyway, translation has to turn back to language itself, to the intention of language, to reach pure language commonly shared by the two languages by complementing the modes of intention of the source language and the target language. Benjamin declares that the interlinear version of Babel is the prototype of all translation due to the reason that Babel is the words of God, which are so true that language identifies with spirit.

Derrida is totally different from Benjamin’s proposition in that he proposes the relevant translation. In general, “relevant” is the best translation in Derrida’s view, which is also the sort of translation expected by people. It is a kind of translation that fulfils its duty and finishes its mission. It’s that kind of translation that finds the most comparatively accurate words for the expressions in the source text, that language used is the most correct, appropriate, relevant, direct and apropos... Obviously, Derrida is trying to use a series of words to set standard for the best translation or the ideal translation. What remains a pity is that many scholars believe the literal meaning as set by Derrida; ignoring its implications (Wang Yingchong, 2011:15). However, if we reflect on the “relevant”, we can hardly make what it means clear, and Derrida himself has made

no ostension on “relevant”, thus, this is actually the word game of Derrida that meaning being not assured makes translation impossible. With the trick of the untranslatability of the word “relevant”, Derrida implies the deconstruction of his standard of translation. What Derrida really wants to express is that if there was a standard of translation, and the standard would work as the same, then would the standard still support itself? The untranslatability of “relevant” has already told us the untranslatability, not mentioning the translation standard. In Derrida’s point of view, meaning is already the delayed presence, leading to the result that translation is a debt that translator can never pay off, a mission that translator can never finish. Therefore, can text really not be translated?

Derrida says that we have to know what relevant translation is, what relevant translation means and what the essence of translation is, its mission, ultimate purpose and final mission. On one hand, relevant translation, no matter wrong or right, is generally better than irrelevant translation, and is likely to be viewed as the best translation. The main idea behind the functional translation theory, especially skopos theory (Reiss 197# Translation Criticism – The Potentials and Limitations, Vermeer 1978 Ordinary Translation Theory, Nord) and the definition of the essence of realization in translation are contained in the definition of relevant translation. Therefore, the question that what relevant translation is goes back to what translation is or what should the translation be. While what the translation should be seems to be equal to what the possible best translation would be (Derrida, 2004:429).

Therefore, Derrida’s discussion about the standard of translation goes back to the translatability and untranslatability. Actually, what Derrida wants to prove is that translation itself is a paradox, that is, just in the untranslatability can translation exist and go on. The original text always owes to translation, and constantly summons translation, and in a larger sense, anything meaningful calls for interpretation (Wang Yingchong, 2011:17). On the contrary, the good translation or the translation standard can only be discussed in absolute translatability; pursuit of translation in absolute untranslatability will be nonsense, and it can only be infinitely approached but never reached as once it become absolute translatability, which means translation presents the meaning in limitless difference in presence, the identity occurs, then the translation will be unnecessary.

In short, Derrida and Benjamin have different view on translation. Benjamin worships metaphrase through which two languages can supplement each other’s referential pattern to manifest the pure language, whose spirits are the best translation. While Derrida plays a small

fraud that he sets relevant translation as translation criterion but he doesn't make it clear, in which way he indicates his ideas of untranslatability and that pursuit of translation in absolute untranslatability will be nonsense, and it can only be infinitely approached but never reached. .

Afterlife and Rebirth

Benjamin also differs mostly from Derrida in the insight of the relationship between the original work and translation work. In Benjamin's perspective, the purpose of translation is to promote the complementation of modes of intentions of different languages so as to restore the identity. Therefore, translation work is never the copy or reappearance of the original work, but the supplement and succession of the original work and in turn, original work can only rely on its translation work to refresh its vitality and go on its subsistence. The relationship of the two can only be understood in the whole purpose of realizing "pure language".

What Benjamin expects is, that through constant translation we can make the referential modes of original work and translation work interflow until we exhaust all the referential modes to realize the final identity of language and spirit in entity. Benjamin understands the relationship between the original and its translation like a natural relation of an organism and its afterlife or rebirth. In his understanding, various aspects of the translation process closely correlate with biological phenomena. Translation work grows out of an original work and it originates from the afterlife. Due to the fact that original work precedes the translation work, and in the range of world literature, no great works meet their perfect translator when the original author is still alive, so translation work only marks the continuity of the original work (Benjamin, 2004:76).

Benjamin regarded the original works as vigorous organisms so that he viewed their translation as the continuity of the original works. He also called it the afterlife of original work. Benjamin stressed that life was a historical rather than an existential concept. Life was not limited within a biological body. According to him, only if we view life as a historical process of survival of organisms, could the concept of life be understood correctly. Flashy translations would become corrupt and fashionable ones would become obsolete. Also, the linguistic form of the original work would die with time passing by, but the life of the original work would not die, but only be transformed, because of its existential form. With the help of the translation, the life of the original work would continue, it would be updated and extended, thus being constantly succeeded in its

life history. Hence, translation was like a source of rejuvenation (Kramer, 2008:24). So, in Benjamin's view a translation was the afterlife of an original work. It does neither mean it was the end of the original work's life nor did it mean the translation replaced the original to be an independent organism. Benjamin stresses that continuity of life does not pay much attention to the survival of organisms, which means that translation is a medium that pushes the original's life process, a medium that provides a chance for the continuity of the life of an original instead of substituting it. According to him, the mission of translation was to promote the original work's linguistic life, to grow it until it ripens and the fruit was the *pure language*.

Translation thus ultimately served the purpose of expressing the central reciprocal relationship between languages. It cannot possibly reveal or establish this hidden relationship itself; but it can represent it by realizing it in embryonic or intensive form (Benjamin, 2004:77). Accordingly, translation is not the birth of an original work nor its death, but the living on of the original. It is the birth after death and death after birth. In this way, Benjamin has assured the position of the original work being higher than the translation work. The original work depends on the translation work to continue its life. Translation can never be equal to the original work because only the original language has the vigor to embody the fruit of *pure language*.

In comparison, Derrida thinks that translation work is the rebirth of the original work and notes that there are two implications in "rebirth", which are given by "Fortleben and Überleben" in Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator" (Benjamin 1923), indicating that life will continue, be consistent and that survival continues, but it also indicates resurrection after death. Derrida emphasizes that the original work has an equal and independent position in relation to the translation work. Both works are complementary for each other; as a result, if the original text calls for supplement, it is due to the fact that it is not flawless, complete, all-encompassing and does not possess a self-identity. The original texts to be translated fall into exile from the very beginning (Derrida, 2004). Starting from such complementary relationship, Derrida abolished the original position of the original work, since the original work does not differ from the translation work in that the original work is the translation work of the former texts, and the translation work can be translated into the original work for later texts. *La différence* of meaning is infinite, meaning that all the texts are the limited understanding of semantic difference. They supplement and substitute each other, constructing a constantly flowing semantic chain. A text that depends on

other texts, but differs from other texts at the same time constantly waits for supplement and substitution in the semantic net. Text is a claiming process that goes beyond meaning in itself; it is the trace of a sequence of movements. The ultimate text that can cover the infinite semantic *différence* does not exist and the ultimate meaning is intangible as meaning is mobile and infinite.

All in all, Derrida and Benjamin have shown their distinctive understanding of the original work and the translation work. Benjamin has claimed that translation work is the afterlife of the original work and that the original work depends on translation to continue its life. Due to the fact that only the original work can deliver birth to *pure language*, in spite of the fact that the relations among languages can reoccur in the translation work, the original work ranks first. Derrida holds another opinion, that the two, original work and translation work are equal and complementary. We may ask, why Benjamin insists that the fruit of *pure language* is on the original work's side, as we mentioned in the beginning that Benjamin wants to realize the identity of language and spirit through exhausting all the referential modes of all languages, and making them melt with each other. However, translation is the living-on of the original work, a relation just like the baby and the mother, the translation is affiliated to the original. Why the final result will be on the original side still needs our attention. During the *différence* of texts, the original text can become the translation of the former text, while the translation can be the original text of later ones, thus the chain of textual *différence* is built.

Conclusion

Summing up, through the comparative study of Benjamin's and Derrida's views on translation, we can find that they have something in common, but the two still clearly differ from each other and have their own unique perspectives and ideas.

First, on the aspect of the original work, translation theories of deconstructivism emphasizing infinite *différence* of meaning, relativity and fluidity of text, deny the originality of the original work with intertextuality. A huge number of texts appear, one differing from the former a little bit; all of them are the translation(s) of translation(s). Each text has its unique features, and at the same time, it is the translation of another text, thus, no text is the absolute original work and language itself is a kind of translation. In the first place, it is the translation of the non-linguistic world and in the second place, every sign and phrase are the translation of another sign and phrase (Basnett,

1990:112). Nonetheless, Benjamin insists on the originality of the original work, emphasizing that the linguistic core is contained only in the original work and the function of translation is to liberate the relationship between the signifier and signified. Hence, if Benjamin denies the originality of the original work, he will lose the ground of his translation view.

Second, on the aspect of the author, deconstructivism emphasizes the intertextuality instead of the author, declaring that God was already dead and tried to overthrow the concept that the author is the source of meaning from the ground level, so translation views of deconstructivism deny the originality of the author and even the copyright of the author (Jiang Xiaohua & Zhang Jinghua, 2007:42). However, Benjamin advocates the originality of the author. Though he has not mentioned any issues related to the author's copyright, we can infer from the emphasis of originality of original work and creativity of the author that he may not question that the author owns the copyright of his original work.

Third, on the aspect of the translator, the translation view of deconstructivism places the translator in an equal position to the author, but at the meantime, it denies the creativity and copyright of the translator. What Derrida does, is to completely ignore the subjectivity of the translator, instead he focuses on the text. On the contrary, Benjamin does not only emphasize the position of the translator and considers that both translator and author contribute creativity. Both just differ in the way of their work. Derrida also points out that the success of translation depends on the ability of the translator.

Fourth, on the aspect of translation work, the deconstructivist translation view has eliminated the difference between the original work and the translation work, believing that original and translation supplement each other and coexist with each other; the original work lives on with the help of the translation work, while the translation work becomes an independent text because it succeeds the semantic *différence* of the original work. Benjamin stresses that translation is the continuity and supplement of the original life, but at the same time, he disapproves the independence of translation work, since the effect of translation work is only to promote the growth of *pure language* existing in the original work. Translation itself does not contain any organism of *pure language*. As a result, translation work is not equipped with translatability.

Fifth, on the aspect of translation evaluation criteria, the deconstructivist translation view has deconstructed the traditional translation view that seeks loyalty and equivalence and it has

deconstructed the comprehension, extraction and transmission proposed by itself (Wang Yingchong, 2011:18). As a result, it has treated the translatability and untranslatability equally, indicating that any text can be translatable and untranslatable. Accordingly, the criterion of translation has been dissolved. Compared to Derrida, Benjamin prefers literal translation, advocating that we should promote the supplement of the referential modes of the original work and the translation work in the general purpose of realizing *pure language*.

The most obvious distinction between the two is that the former has no intention to provide a solution or a conclusion after dissolving the criterion of translation, which is a little bit puzzling while the latter has set the transcendental body of *pure language* to declare the existence of absolute translatability, with an intensified mode to present what is not in presence and to bring things from afar nearer to us than distant things (Derrida, 2004:79).

To sum up, Benjamin cannot be classified as a member of the deconstructivist translation school, no matter from the perspective of ideas nor the structure of his theories. Although Benjamin has many points of view that are similar with those of the deconstructivist approach, his theory system differs completely.

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