

A Semiotic Approach to Literary Translation

—with Emphasis on Motivations Underlying Literary Language

符号学翻译研究

——文学语言的理据及其再造

蒋晓华 著

外语教学与研究出版社

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PROF. SHEN'S FOREWORD

Translation studies has enjoyed a rapid development since the beginning of the 1960s in the West and since the beginning of the 1980s in China. The progress of translation studies for the past two decades has been much invigorated by developments in cultural studies, literary studies, anthropology, information science, cognitive science, psychology, semiotics, textual linguistics, discourse analysis, among others (in China, also by a revival of interest in classical translation theory). Despite the multiplicity of the approaches, two trends of development seem to have been prominent in recent years: one is based on "scientific" approaches, aiming at constructing an empirical science of translation; the other is marked by a historical-descriptive orientation, aiming at revealing the cultural and political values implicit in the practice and study of translation.

Dr. Jiang Xiaohua's *A Semiotic Approach to Literary Translation* belongs to the first trend. It is a pioneering attempt to apply semiotics systematically to the study of literary translation. "Semiotics and translation theory", says Dinda L. Gorlee in *Semiotics and the Problem of Translation* (1994), "have until recently virtually ignored each other's existence, led by the (fixed idea) that their ontological differences and the divergence of their respective researches would forbid a productive rapprochement, let alone the possibility of a systematic joint exploration of problems which translation studies and semiotics have in common". As Dr. Gorlee's and Dr. Jiang Xiaohua's books demonstrate,

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such ignoring is very much a mistake, and a “rapprochement” between semiotics and translation can be productive and fruitful. While Gorlee’s *Semiotics and the Problem of Translation* is marked by a theoretical orientation, not much concerned with practical problems in translation, Jiang Xiaohua’s monograph displays a fine balance between theory and practice, with its main thrust focusing on “motivations” underlying literary language.

Jiang Xiaohua’s book has grown out of his doctoral dissertation completed at Peking University. He was the first Ph. D. student I supervised in the field of translation studies. He entered the Ph. D. Program in 1993 and his growing concern over the theoretical foundations of translation studies led him to turn to semiotics, which proved epistemologically and methodologically helpful to his research. On the whole, the monograph is well-founded, with comprehensive theoretical discussion and insightful practical analysis. I think it is a good contribution to the field and I hope its fresh perspective will arouse more interest in interdisciplinary approaches to translation.

Shen Dan

Professor and Director of the Center
for European and American Literatures,
Peking University
September 7, 2002

DR. SUN'S FOREWORD

This book is a revised and updated version of the author's doctoral dissertation that represents an attempt to establish a compelling case to show the relevance of semiotics to translation studies. As one of the intellectual fashions first as a major approach to cultural studies in the late 1960s, semiotics is engaged in a search for "deep structures" which can help to illuminate how meaning is made and, more importantly, transferred in the process of translation. The semiotic perspective allows the author to make relevant and revealing connections between the signifier and the signified. The mystery of semiotics is that it works synchronically not without considering the role of ideology and socio-cultural context. Indeed, this study's primary emphasis is, rather appropriately, on the interdisciplinary nature of translation studies, and more specifically, of literary translation.

Any discussion of literary translation such as the one conducted here must invariably be related to the elusive nature of literary language. The literary language of source text is a decipherable form to the source language reader, who has mastered the code of the community and is therefore able to decode it, but for the target language reader, largely due to cultural barriers, the indeterminacy of literary language can be a real, possibly insurmountable challenge. The author of this study, however, refuses to surrender to the nihilistic notion of total semantic indeterminacy, and is rationally determined to tackle it head-on. In terms of what is merely semantic, comprehension is not often a problem for the

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target language reader, but the characteristic richness and ambiguity with which literature is associated may fail to be transposed into something reminiscent of literary language in the target language system, thereby amounting to the so-called untranslatability. And it is precisely the complexities of literary language and their implications to translation that this study sets out to probe.

Dr. Jiang's *A Semiotic Approach to Literary Translation* is a lucid, comprehensive account of how translation problems related to literary language can be analyzed and resolved. The author expresses an impatience with the fact that semiotics has made only marginal inroads into translation studies over the years and reacts with great urgency in undertaking to rectify this lamentable situation. Translation studies is a subject, which is currently characterized by a host of competing theoretical assumptions, but semiotics as a method of textual analysis and an approach clearly applicable to translating literary texts is shown to work successfully. This book is a timely contribution to translation studies by providing an in-depth and systematic analysis of semiotic characteristics of literary translation.

Sun Yifeng (Ph. D. , FRSA)

Lingnan University

September 10, 2002

PREFACE

This book, which grows out of my doctoral dissertation completed in Peking University in 1996, is the outcome of an increasing personal concern over the theoretical foundations of translation studies. Taking semiotic theory as its underlying rationale and motivation as its thematic concern, this study examines, mainly by way of practical analysis, literary translation at three levels: phonological, syntactic, and semantic, all of which being considered in relation to the pragmatic contexts concerned. "The great advantage of semiotics over other approaches to interlingual communication is that it deals with all types of signs of codes, and especially with language as the most comprehensive and complex of all the systems of signs which humans employ. **No holistic approach to translating can exclude semiotics as a fundamental discipline in encoding and decoding signs . . .** One distinct advantage of a semiotic approach to meaning is the requirement that equal attention be given to designative and associative meanings, since signs of whatever nature must be understood in terms of the total context of communication and in relation to any and all other signs which combine with verbal symbols" (Nida, 1993:164. *Emphasis, mine*).

Semiotics, with its great epistemological and methodological values to social sciences, is of great significance to translation studies, including literary translation studies. In fact, not a few scholars at home and abroad have already approached translation studies from a semiotic or quasi-semiotic perspective. Yet semiotic

approaches to literary translation have so far, in relation to Chinese and English at any rate, been scarcely made, let alone systematically undertaken.

With the aim of making a systematic investigation of literary translation from a semiotic perspective, this monograph consists of five chapters:

Chapter 1 attempts a critical survey of quasi-semiotic and semiotic approaches to translation (literary translation included) both at home and abroad.

Chapter 2 examines the semiotic differentia of literary language, which points to the semiotic characteristics of literary translation.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 explore at three different levels the motivations underlying linguistic choices in literary language, and the ways to preserve them in the target text (TT).

In this book I also tried to provide pointers for further research since there is much that remains to be done.

“Motivation” in this study refers to what underlies a) the un-arbitrary or motivated relationship between the signifier and the signified, and, significantly, b) the contextually-motivated relationship between the linguistic form taken to be an additional or complementary signifier and the extra-propositional meaning it conveys, i. e. the complementary signified. It must be noted that the “context” contained in the alleged “contextually-motivated relationship” refers both to immediate linguistic context and socio-cultural context. This monograph lays emphasis on the preservation of motivations, and may serve as an alternative perspective to the investigation of literary translation and help sharpen the translator’s awareness of or sensibility to some literary significance that might otherwise be overlooked.

This monograph tries to make the following contributions to literary translation studies: a) it is a pioneering attempt to investigate literary translation in terms of motivations underlying literary language; b) it puts forward a distinction between socio-cultural (communal) motivations and contextual (personal) motivations, a distinction that enables us to see more clearly the nature of literary language and of problems of literary translation; c) through practical analyses of contextual motivations, which have been very much neglected by semiotics (including literary semiotics), it points out that contextual motivations function to turn linguistic forms *per se* into “signs”, establishing additional or complementary signifying relations, which generate literary significance over and above the propositional meaning, and which the literary translator should fully take into account; d) it not only demonstrates the usefulness and advantages of applying semiotics to literary translation, but reveals the limitations of semiotics when applied to literary studies.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that, although many people—my teachers and friends—have helped me academically in my work on this book, it goes without saying that I alone am responsible for any defect or problem that may remain.

Jiang Xiaohua

September 22, 2002

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CHAPTER 1

A Critical Survey of Quasi-Semiotic and Semiotic Approaches to Translation

1. 1 The *Status Quo* of Translation Studies: Interdisciplinary and Multidisciplinary

Translation studies is and is not a new field; though it has existed only since 1983 as a separate entry in the *Modern Languages Association International Bibliography*, it is as old as the tower of Babel (cf. Gentzler, 1993:1). In the long history of Western translation theory and criticism, the disputes over translation principles and methods (i. e. mainly over literal versus free translation) find a close parallel to those in the Chinese tradition (cf. Kelley, 1979; Ma Zuyi, 1984). After a long period of theoretical stagnation, translation studies in the West has finally moved on to a new stage of interdisciplinary development since the late 1950s (cf. Gentzler, 1993), and has now become, as it was, a hybrid of multidisciplinary approaches. Furthermore, both the process and the product of translation have become the objects of study by scholars from a variety of disciplines (more of them linguists, scholars of literary studies, etc. than semioticians). As De Waard and Nida put it:

Translation... is an activity which may be systematically described and related meaningfully to various disciplines

...it is built upon a number of scientific disciplines, including psychology, linguistics, communication theory, anthropology, and semiotics. (1986:185)

This insight also echoes with Bassnett-McGuire's "General Editor's Preface" to Gentzler's monograph *Contemporary Translation Theories*. She states apropos that

translation studies brings together work in a wide variety of fields, including linguistics, literary study, history, anthropology, and economics. (Gentzler, 1993: viv)

More recently, this position is reiterated by Gorlee, who, while addressing the "plurality of methodological and conceptual frameworks" in translation studies, points out in a matter-of-course tone that

...translation (studies) is an "interdiscipline" (or rather "transdiscipline") combining an approach from (general and applied) linguistics with an approach from (general and comparative) literary studies, in addition to contributions from such disciplines as information theory, logic, and mathematics on the "scientific" side, and social anthropology, sociology, and theology, on the more humanistic side. (1994:133)

Undoubtedly, a number of significant or seminal achievements have been obtained in translation studies from an interdisciplinary perspective (see, for instance, Kade, 1968; Neubert, 1968; Nida

and Taber, 1974; Reiss, 1976; Newmark, 1986; Savory, 1957a; Hatim and Mason, 1990; Hewson *et al*, 1991; etc.), especially from the perspective of modern linguistics: that of contrastive linguistics (cf. Mounin, 1963), of TG (transformational-generative) grammar (cf. Nida, 1964)¹, of Halliday's systemic grammar (cf. Catford, 1965), stylistics (cf. Vinay and Darbelnet, 1958), pragmatics (cf. House, 1981; Hickey, 1998), relevance theory (cf. Gutt, 1991), text linguistics (cf. Wilss, 1982), structural linguistics (cf. Fedorov, 1953; Jacobson, 1959), contrastive text linguistics (Barkhudarov, 1975), applied linguistics (cf. Newmark, 1991), etc.. This sketchy list tellingly reveals that linguistically inspired approaches to translation are prosperous and fruitful. When advocating a procedural and systematic investigation of translation equivalence, Bassett contends that

translation equivalence must be considered a semiotic category, comprising a syntactic, semantic and pragmatic component, following Pearce's categories. These components are arranged in a hierarchical relationship, where semantic equivalence takes priority over syntactic equivalence, and pragmatic equivalence conditions and modifies both the other elements. (1980:27)

Semiotics and translation studies, at first sight, are drastically different disciplines and do not seem to be connected with each other, yet, a second thought would surprise us into finding that the two disciplines underscore, though from different epistemological viewpoints, aspects of communication, and both deal with the interpretation, manipulation and use of meanings of signs. Homogeneous as they seem to be, they