

The Impact of Western Centrism on Translation Theory in China: Reflection and Reassessment

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Keywords: Translation theory, Western centrism, Chinese translation theory framework

Abstract: The foundation of a robust framework for translation theory assumes pivotal importance in directing China's external translation initiatives in the current period of building China's discursive system and strengthening its worldwide communicative ability. However, the existing landscape of translation theory in China still exhibits certain deficiencies in terms of comprehensiveness and scientific grounding, largely owing to the profound influence of Western theoretical paradigms. This article critically examines the ramifications of Western centrism on Chinese translation theory and offers reflections on how to emancipate from Western intellectual constraints, with the ultimate aim of establishing a robust framework for translation theory in China.

1. Introduction

Translation practices in China have a rich historical lineage, spanning from the rendition of "The Southerners" during the Western Han Dynasty to the extensive translation of Buddhist scriptures in the Han and Tang Dynasties. These historical endeavors bear witness to the profound tradition of translation in China. Moreover, ancient theoretical treatises such as "The Preface to Dharmapada" and "Exegesis on the Book of Changes" exemplify the abundance of insightful propositions within Chinese translation theory.

Despite the remarkable achievements in translation theory throughout history, the present state of Chinese translation theory faces two pressing challenges: theoretical abstraction and fragmentation. These challenges have hindered the establishment of a comprehensive and normative framework for Chinese translation theory, leading to a lack of innovation and standardization. This situation can be attributed to the long-standing influence of Western centrism, which has dominated and prioritized Western perspectives, ideologies, and methodologies in the field of translation.

To provide a comprehensive understanding of the issue at hand, this article embarks on an exploration of the genesis of "Western centrism" and delves into its operational mechanisms as an ideological apparatus within the state machinery. Additionally, it examines the intricate dialectical relationship between Enlightenment and myth, while also considering the profound influence of freedom and conformity on the translation community. By delving into the historical development and influences of Western centrism, valuable insights can be gained into its impact on shaping Chinese translation theory. It becomes evident that the current state of Chinese translation theory has

been predominantly shaped by Western paradigms, highlighting the need for the establishment of an independent and mature system. Consequently, the primary objective of this article is to thoroughly investigate the essential considerations for constructing a robust framework for Chinese translation theory.

2. "Western Centrism"

2.1 The Genesis of "Western Centrism"

Since the First Opium War, China has undergone a transformative process, transitioning from a semi-feudal and semi-colonial society to a democratic nation, ostensibly breaking free from colonial control. However, it is crucial to recognize that this transition merely signifies a shift from overt colonialism to a subtler form of neo-colonialism. In essence, the era of post-colonialism continues to dominate much of the world today. Post-colonialism manifests as a form of intellectual colonial control [1]. Despite the decolonization of political, military, and economic realms, the colonized countries still grapple with the enduring influence of their colonizers on their ideologies. Western culture occupies the dominant discourse, relegating the East to an assimilated position. Consequently, the insidious infiltration of "Western centrism" has permeated the Eastern discourse system. The formation of this Western centrism can be attributed to two primary factors.

Firstly, it is rooted in the establishment of a hierarchical system of civilizations. At its core, the Western-centric civilization hierarchy embodies a binary opposition that challenges the traditional notion of "cultural equivalence and ethnic parity." By attributing notions of advancement, scientific rigor, democracy, and progress exclusively to Western culture, the East is burdened with negative stereotypes such as "backwardness, authoritarianism, feudalism, and superstition"[2]. Within this hierarchical system, Western "scientific" theories are readily embraced, while perspectives originating from less familiar Eastern nations struggle to gain international recognition.

Secondly, Western historical teleology contributes to the perpetuation of Western centrism. Western societies are depicted as having evolved from primitive to feudal to capitalist societies, suggesting a predetermined model of development. Consequently, advocates of Western centrism propagate Western universal values, positing a deep interconnection between the progress of Western nations and the well-being of their people with these universal values. This narrative overlooks the fact that the development of the West is fundamentally underpinned by the brutal accumulation of capital. Paradoxically, Eastern societies often embrace these universal values, further reinforcing the prevalence of Western-centric consciousness and consolidating ideological control over Eastern social consciousness.

2.2 Operational Mechanisms as an Ideological Apparatus

From a traditional Marxist perspective, society is composed of the economic base and the superstructure [3]. The economic base encompasses the widely recognized productive forces and relations of production, while the superstructure includes various elements such as prisons, law, literature, art, and politics. The diverse theories within the Western humanities domain, in essence, constitute a confluence of ideas and represent a manifestation of ideology. As Marx highlighted, ideology can refer to a particular group or collective, functioning as a form of false consciousness, a means through which the state controls people's thoughts, and a manifestation of conceptual thinking [4]. Althusser further refined this theory by introducing the notion of the ideological state apparatus. He argued that the state apparatus encompasses the military, prisons, and punishment, characterized by their use of violence, intensity, and public nature. However, as society progresses, the ideological apparatus gradually assumes the functions of the state apparatus, serving the ruling class and

legitimizing the ruling consciousness within the consciousness of the people [5].

In today's context of increasing global interconnectivity, the ideology of a particular country or group of countries not only impacts its own population but also extends its influence to the international community. Due to the enduring power of Western countries and the residual effects of colonialism, they have a greater ability to subtly propagate their ideology. Consequently, the international community is predominantly shaped by Western ideology, resulting in a near "one-dimensional" society. In such a society characterized by one-dimensional ideology, individuals tend to lose their criticality, capacity for transcendence, and inclination towards negation [6]. In the present era that advocates for international perspectives and an international academic discourse, Chinese scholars face significant challenges in surpassing Western centrism and achieving transcendence within the prevailing near "one-dimensional" international context.

2.3 Enlightenment, Myth, and Freedom

In a broader sense, "enlightenment" refers to the liberation from superstition, the dispelling of myths, the promotion of rationality and freedom, and the introduction of new knowledge. Within this framework, the introduction of Western knowledge into China can also be regarded as an Enlightenment movement. It played a crucial role in liberating Chinese society from the grip of feudal despotism and the constraints of traditional moral ethics, propelling China into the era of industrial civilization while gradually dismantling the foundations of agricultural civilization. Consequently, people were exposed to a myriad of new ideas and trends.

However, it is important to recognize that Enlightenment itself can undergo a transformation, gradually evolving into a myth and losing its original advanced nature. This phenomenon is exemplified by the tendency within the Chinese translation community to uncritically echo and mimic Western theories, thereby reflecting the shift of Western knowledge from Enlightenment to myth.

The dialectical relationship between Enlightenment and myth was originally proposed by Horkheimer and Adorno in their seminal work "Dialectic of Enlightenment." According to their perspective, Enlightenment can be seen as the catalyst for the emergence of myth, while myth itself represents a particular outcome of the Enlightenment process[7].

Indeed, Western knowledge has brought enlightenment to China. However, the stronger discursive power of Western countries in the East paradoxically leads to the transformation of enlightenment into a new myth, albeit in an anti-mythical manner. Moreover, in today's industrial society, logic and mathematics have emerged as dominant disciplines, highly regarded by the masses, reflecting the prominence of instrumental rationality. This instrumental rationality prioritizes goal achievement but often neglects the reflective nature inherent in a philosophical society. Consequently, as Western translation theory becomes widely applied and proves effective in practice, it gradually assumes the form of a constructed myth. On the other hand, Eastern translation theorists face challenges in breaking free from this constructed myth, finding themselves confined within an anti-mythical myth.

The phenomenon of blindly echoing and imitating western theories can be viewed as a means of escaping freedom. Erich Fromm, in his book "Escape from Freedom," explores how freedom brings rationality and space to individuals, yet it also engenders feelings of anxiety and discomfort[8]. Consequently, individuals may succumb to authoritarianism, displaying destructive tendencies or conforming mechanically. In the context of Chinese translation theorists, the unquestioning repetition and imitation of Western translation theories can be seen as manifestations of succumbing to authoritarianism and mechanical conformity. Intellectuals may relinquish their individuality, seeking refuge in external sources, while sacrificing intellectual freedom and individuality in the process.

The long-term unconditional acceptance of Western translation theories can lead to significant consequences. At the individual level, it results in the loss of personal freedom and the suppression of critical and dissenting voices. At the national level, it can perpetuate the manipulation of one's own

country by ideological state apparatuses and reinforce the legacy of post-colonialism. Consequently, it becomes imperative to construct a robust translation theory system in China that promotes independence, critical thinking, and diversity.

3. Considerations for constructing a robust framework

To transcend the limitations of "western centrism" and cultivate a robust framework for Chinese translation theory, it is crucial to emphasize China's distinctiveness. It's important to uphold the principles of Marxist ideology and the ideology of socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era as the foundational pillars for constructing a strong framework. Additionally, we should prioritize the advancement of Chinese culture and promote the aesthetic value of "goodness" in translation works, emphasizing the ethical dimension of translation practice.

It is imperative to address the practical issues that are specific to China's context. Western translation theories have emerged within their own cultural and historical contexts, making them insufficient to fully address the unique challenges faced by China. Therefore, the Chinese translation theory system should focus on resolving China's specific issues and effectively promoting Chinese culture on the global stage, enabling successful cross-cultural exchanges.

While building upon China's existing theories and experiences, we should also assimilate the essence of foreign translation theories to strengthen our own system. Drawing inspiration from the principle of "Brazilian Cannibalism," we can selectively integrate valuable aspects from foreign theories while discarding undesirable elements. This approach allows us to make foreign theories our own and harness them to our advantage [9]. By assimilating the experiences of other nations, we can enhance our capabilities, enrich the original body of knowledge, and foster a balanced, sustainable, and continuous development of Chinese translation theory.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, a comprehensive analysis of the impact of Western centrism on Chinese translation theory is paramount for the establishment of a translation theory system that embodies distinct Chinese characteristics. It is imperative to acknowledge that Western translation theory operates as an ideological construct aimed at safeguarding the interests of Western nations and augmenting their national influence and discursive authority. The evolution of Western translation theory from enlightenment to myth exemplifies the loss of intellectual freedom experienced by Chinese theorists.

Thus, it is imperative to construct a robust framework for Chinese translation theory rooted in Chinese values, while also embracing diverse perspectives. This will enrich both Chinese translation theory and the global academic community. By fostering inclusivity, innovation, and cultural diversity, we can lay the foundation for a dynamic and intellectually vibrant field of translation theory.

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