

Translating Translation: Deconstructionist Approach Towards Translation

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Abstract: *This study contends for the development of the deconstructionist approach towards translation studies, grounded primarily in the contributions of Jacques Derrida. In order to achieve this goal, this paper first tries to problematize the notions underlying the traditional translation theory; namely, the idea of the semiotic transfer of meaning, the supremacy of the source over the target text, and the author over the translator, which are so often taken for granted. It then goes on to draw on Derrida's idea of indeterminacy of text meaning, and his neologisms, différance, iterability, and the limit as a way to open up new perspectives in translation studies. In the end, this paper concludes with the discussion that by challenging the traditional translation theory and incorporating the deconstructionist perspectives towards translation, the status of both the translation and translator will surpass the original text and the author which will lead to breathing a new life into the dead theories of translation studies and providing the chance to look at translation studies from a different prism.*

Key Words: *Translation, Meaning, Pre-deconstruction, Deconstruction, différance*

1. Introduction

The value of deconstruction as a revolutionary approach, provoking the rethinking of the central tenets of the traditional translation theory, is of particular pertinence to the contemporary translation studies. With this in mind, this paper attempts to examine the possibilities and new perspectives offered by applying the deconstructionist approaches towards translation studies. The paper consists of two main sections. In the first section, the central tenets of the traditional translation theories; namely, the notions of meaning transfer, Platonic metaphysics of presence, and Aristotelian non-contradiction logic are examined. In the second part, a critique of these traditional approaches is presented and an attempt is made to supplant these with Derrida's neologisms like différance, iterability, and the limit. In the end, the impact of Derrida's approaches on changing translation studies' landscapes and bringing up new perspectives is

discussed. As the method of presentation and discussion of information, this paper mainly draws on Jacques Derrida's ideas, the founding father of deconstruction.

2. Discussion

2.1. Deconstruction and Translation Studies

Etymologically and historically, the term translation, which by the way has its roots in Latin for two words *trans* meaning "across" and *ferre* meaning "to bear" together meaning "to carry across" or "to bear across," is embroidered on the conceit that translation is the transfer of meaning or truth across language borders. While restoring to the etymological roots of a word is the conventional way of grasping the meaning of the word, not all the etymologies reveal the essential truth about the actual meaning of a word (Bellos, 2011). This argument actually holds true for the term translation, too. In a similar vein, Theo Hermans (1999) maintains, "if the etymology of the word 'translation' has suggested, say, the image of responding to an existing utterance instead of transference, the whole idea of a transfer postulate would probably never have arisen" (as cited in Davis, 2001, p. 18). And that is because the term translation is wrapped up in a blanket of ambiguities and confusion that this paper deems it apt to gauge and establish the relationship of the concept of transference, which boils down to the metaphorical usage of translation, to the actual truth about the term. In doing so, let us first make it clear that the majority of the contemporary discourse about the phenomenon of translation and generally the whole mainstream western traditional thought about translation have been based on the etymological meaning of the term translation, which itself pledges allegiance to Platonic metaphysics of presence. This conventional view of translation puts meaning before and beyond language and considers language merely as the vehicle serving to transmit meaning and sense. Armed with the unparalleled confidence in the ontological status of meaning independent of language, translation scholars generate many formula-like proclamations to the effect that translation is "the transport of a semantic content from one into another signifying form" (Davis, 2001, p. 39). Premised on this notion, they decree that all a translator--as an ideal reader--should do is to delve beneath the textual layers to uncover the sense of the text, which has been cloaked and then transfer it without any essential harm being done to it. The proponents of this view of translation further explain the relation of the source text to the target text in terms of the concept of equivalence and reduce the aim of translation to producing a target text that is equivalent to its original text; that is, the source text and the target text have a one-to-one relationship with each

other. This theory of meaning transfer and its purported mainspring--equivalence--has been considered as the leaven in the loaf of western traditional thought about translation until the twentieth century. However, such basic assumptions concerning the translation and the metaphysical conceptualization of meaning as an entity that has an ontological status outside or before language and that can be exchanged unaltered between the languages were soon encountered with a pall of substantial doubt against their legitimacy and validity by the principles espoused by what has been dubbed deconstruction (Davis, 2001). The deconstruction inaugurates its school of thought by deconstructing the main basins which have for century-long constructed the core of western traditional thought about translation; namely, signification, meaning, intention, purpose, and relevance. Each of which will be explained later on in section three. Derrida--the founding father of deconstruction--has engineered his school of thought by coronating Saussurian concept of difference. In Saussure's words, "in language, there are only differences without positive terms" (Davis, 2001, p. 15). Which is to say, meaning is not before or beyond language rather language creates meaning through the spatio-temporal play of difference. In other words,

The sign is usually understood to be put in the place of the thing itself. However, if the language has only differences without positive terms, then the sign marks the place not of some positive spatial presence, but of the differential relations to other signs in the language system. Moreover, the gesture of signification cannot refer to the present: it must rely upon already constituted relations even as it moves to instate a not-yet-fulfilled meaning. The sign in this sense is deferred [spatio-temporal] presence. (Derrida, 1972c/1982, as cited in Davis, 2001, p. 13, italics in the original)

To explain the spatio-temporal differential mechanism through which language makes meaning, the deconstructionists have allied themselves with the twofold concepts of *différance* and *trace*. *Différance*, which is Derrida's modified form of the French verb *différence*, accommodates both senses of to differ and to defer, the former refers to the spatial sense and the latter is related to the temporal sense (Davis, 2001). Explaining how the meaning evolves through the language, Derrida also resorts to the term *trace*. According to Derrida,

In the interpretation of meaning, any signifying element that seems "present" (both in the spatial and the temporal sense) is related to something other than itself, thereby keeping within itself the mark of past element, and already letting itself be vitiated by the mark of

its relation to the future element. These relations to past and future are often called retentive and protentive characteristics, and the trace is where the retentive/protentive relationship with the other is marked. (Derrida, 1972c/1982, as cited in Davis, 2001, p. 15, *italic in the original*)

Since its inception, the Derridian perspective of language and meaning has heralded as the real game-changer for the field of translation studies. Armed with the unparalleled confidence in the idea that meaning does not pre-exist and precede language; that is, it is not before and beyond *différance*, the proponents of deconstruction posit that seeking after meaning is not a matter of uncovering some concealed presence that is already there ; rather, it is relentless tracking through the perpetual moving play of differences. Hence, the deconstructionists frequently talk not of the signifier, but rather of the trace (Davis, 2001). This crackdown on the Platonic metaphysical presence, which according to Derrida has strayed philosophy from its true path, has provided the chance to look at the translation from a totally different prism. It therefore, comes as no surprise to say that, this newly conceived view of meaning renders many previously held ideas about translation obsolete and archaic, especially the most important one constituting the conventional sense of the translation based on the extra-linguistic meaning which Derrida refers to as the "transport of semiotic content into another signifying form from one language to another without any essential harm being done" (Davis, 2001, p. 38). Rebutting this conventional view, Derrida postulates that, "meaning--not only the meaning of what we speak, read and write, but any meaning at all--is the contextual event, meaning cannot be extracted from and cannot exist before or outside of a specific context" (Davis, 2001, p. 9). Imbued with the idea that meaning cannot precede *différance*, the deconstructionist scholars theorize that meaning cannot precede translation; that is, meaning has no anchorage in the source text and the source text no longer provides the logo or center of meaning (Kruger, 2004). As the result of this stance of the deconstructionist scholars on translation, the long-held idea that the original text is the center or source of meaning and the translation is just the second-hand communication activity which represents and supplements the source text is thrown out of kilter. The inauguration of this idea further puts the traditional binary opposite of the original/translation into the process of erasure and reverses this hierarchy by letting translation reign supreme. According to this new perspective, translation does not owe to the original text for its existence; rather, the original is in translation's debt for its survival

(Benjamin, 1923), this idea will be explained in detail in section two. Although this destabilizing the original/translation hierarchy cracks open the infinite arrays of possibility towards the translator, even still it does not give the translator the green light to any goes paradigm, as this is the exact recurring misunderstanding that many critics of Derrida's philosophy fall into its trap. Indeed, Derrida further reins back this free play of meaning by exerting the twofold leverages of limit (singularity and generality) and iterability (stability and instability). Contrary to the common sophistry--anything goes--that has been gnawed at the deconstructionist approaches towards translation, Derrida emphatically stresses the necessity of both the structural stability and the delimiting the context for a text to have meaning. In this vein, Derrida postulates that the meaning of a text evolves through forming the symbiotic alliance between textual stability and instability. According to the Derridian school of thought, every element of a text inherits its meaning partly from the certain stable institutionalization of meaning which is the results of that particular element's previous codifications and repetitions. While these stable structural elements allow access to the text and enable translation and interpretation, they can never conclusively exhaust the possibility of the meaning of a text. Although by professing the existence of stable structural elements, Derrida has managed to rein back the free play of meaning, this does not block the pathway for the different interpretations to come; rather, it paved the path for them. This stable/unstable structure of the text to which Derrida (1992) refers to as iterability, simultaneously prevents and offers the text to be read and interpreted in many different contexts and that is what referred to as the double bind feature of translation. At its simplest, the iterable structure of a text " both puts down roots in a unity of a context and immediately opens this nonsaturable context into a recontextualization" (Davis, 2001, p. 76). This in effect undermines the aim of translation to create the target text that is equivalent to the source text because the relationship between the source text and the target text is no longer linear; rather, the source text can have the infinite number of interpretations (Kruger, 2004). In Delabastita's (1997) words, since the meaning of any sign "has no absolute anchoring in the 'original' context, every sign is repeatable, or iterable but as it can be repeated in the different contexts, the possibility for its meaning remains open" (as cited in Davis, 2001, p. 34). Closely aligned with the notions of the textual stability and instability--the iterability of the text--is the structural interdependence of singularity and generality of the text, which in effect enacts the limits of translatability and untranslatability. According to Derrida, "Any language event is an irreducibly singular

performance with the meaning that effectuates from a systematic play of differences in a specific context" (Davis, 2001, p. 21). This systematic movement of difference among the signifiers is not just confined to the linguistic signifiers; rather, it hosts a wide range of the cultural, socio-institutional, economic, etc. signifiers, too (Davis, 2001). According to Benjamin (1923), each language has a specific manner of meaning which reverberates through its systematic difference of meaning and this means that it is not feasible to extract meaning from one language system and transfer it to another, as each language has a unique manner of meaning. These statements point in turn to one of the core tenets of deconstruction, holding that due to the irreducibly singular performance of each language event and the myriad of the contextual factors which the translator must be aware of, the ability to find the final, exhaustive interpretation is the utopian ideal since every interpretation or translation of a text inevitably curtails some contextual factors. To put it differently, the text's meaning does not precede it; rather, the text accrues its meaning only when every and each strand of the text comes into play with the cultural, social, economic contexts of the language and that is exactly why the deconstructionists have always attached the greatest importance possible to the context. In effect, every language event enjoys a special amount of uniqueness and singularity; hence, for the text's meaning to occur, it must conform to and repeat already established codes and laws. In sum, each text is the consummation of both singularity and generality and stability and instability which gives away to the limit of translatability and untranslatability (Benjamin, 1923). Derrida (1972) himself depicts this interrelationship of singularity and generality and its impact on translation by positing that,

A text lives only if it lives on [sur-vit], and it lives on only if it is at once translatable and untranslatable [...] totally translatable, it disappears as a text, as writing, as the body of language [langue]. Totally untranslatable, even within what is believed to be one language, it dies immediately. (as cited in Davis, 2001, p. 22)

2. 2. The Binary Opposites in Translation

According to Derrida, the western metaphysics of presence is built on an infrastructure, which is the mosaic of the vast arrays of the binary opposites or operations in which always one element succeeds to the throne while the other one gets dethroned. Such manner of thinking has its roots in the Aristotelian principle of "non-contradiction: A thing cannot both have a property and not have a property" (Bressler, 2010, p. 110). Taking this statement as the building block,

Derrida maintains western metaphysics " has developed an 'either-or' mentality or logic that inevitably leads to the dualistic thinking and to the centering and decentering of transcendental signified" (Bressler, 2010, p. 110). In Derrida's words, one of the orthodox hierarchies that has been taken shape under the Platonic and Aristotelian influence is the establishment of the binary operation between speech and writing, in which speech is being understood "as the direct expression of this presence and the truth of its meaning" and is, therefore, being privileged and writing has been understood "as a derived system that simply represents speech, because it functions in the absence of the speaker/writer" (Davis, 2001, p. 26). With the advent of deconstruction, Derrida invalidates this and other oppositional models. This rethinking of the traditional binary opposites has a huge impact on the way translation is viewed. Granted that, writing is one step removed from the pure signified and reality and is a second-hand representation of truth functioning in the absence of the speaker or writer, then translation as a kind of rewriting is two steps removed from the reality. In a sense, the translator's work is "an inferior who marries an inferior and has inferior offspring" (Bressler, 2010, p. 21). In sum, the presumptions of the Platonic metaphysics of presence--the extra-linguistic meaning and the speech/writing binary operation--places into action one of the backbone hierarchies in the field of translation studies; that is, the original/translation hierarchy. With the advent of the unorthodox, deconstructionist school of thought, its enfant terrible, Derrida questions the metaphysical presence and its mainspring--transcendental signified--and asserts that the western philosophy's proclivity for the concept of pure signified and Aristotle's either or logic spawned the myriad binary opposites. Derrida then sets to dismantle and deconstruct the very foundation giving rise to such binary operations. Starting with the speech/writing structure--the backbone of western metaphysics--Derrida reverses the elements of this hierarchy by postulating that writing, contrary to Saussure's belief is not just the recording mechanism for speech; rather, writing--in its new redefined sense--is the general structure of the differential traces lying at the heart of any system of communication. In effect, Derrida's redefinition of the term writing allows him to refer to speech as a kind of sub-category of writing, named arche-writing. The point worth noting here is that, while Derrida has managed to turn the western metaphysics on its head by reversing the elements of its backbone hierarchy, reversing the elements of the hierarchy in a way to claim privilege this time for writing and put speech in an unprivileged position is not the ultimate ambition of Derrida, since it is still operating under the umbrella of the same transcendental

signified and non-contradiction assumption. Derrida further suggests a way out of this deadlock by positing that,

if meaning emerges as a relation of differences, then speech and writing in the narrow sense, along with all other forms of signification, participate in a movement of differences ('general' or arche-writing), rather than in a system of pure oppositions such as natural/artificial, in which one term allows direct, transparent access to the 'real'. (Davis, 2001, p. 28)

Briefly put, Derrida postulates that the elements constituting the hierarchies should not be viewed as the opposite poles of a continuum or a binary dichotomy; rather, these elements should be viewed as operating in the symbiosis relationship with each other. In effect, the Derridian movement, which goes a long way to rock the very foundation of the western traditional thought about translation, calls for the complete rethinking and restructuring of translation studies' infrastructure, especially the operation of the binary opposites in the field of translation. Indeed, the reversing of the original/translation hierarchy has been adequately mirrored in many translation scholars' new perspectives about translation. According to the new perspective, proposed by Benjamin (1923), the translation does not owe the original text its existence; rather, the original calls for the translation for its survival. The impact of this statement and the elimination of the extra-linguistic meaning go a long way to dismantling all the other hierarchies in the field of translation studies. To name a few, original/translation, author/translator, content/form, and many others. However, like Derrida's musing on the language, we are looking far more than just reversing these hierarchies. It is actually intended to demonstrate that in translation studies, the elements constituting its binary opposites are not the opposite poles between which the translator has to make a compromise; rather, these elements have the relationship of mutual transformation. For instance, the symbiotic relationship between the author and translator will lead to " the recognition of the 'author' and the 'translator' as mutually participating in a textual system of citations and traces" (Davis, 2001, p. 45).

2.3. Translating Decision, Intention, and Relevance

With deconstruction spelling, the death knell for western traditional thoughts about translation, which has been based on the concept of meaning as presence, the field of translation studies has entered into a whole new chapter with the underlying motif of lack, absence, and *différance* as the essence of meaning. This major rethinking of western traditional thought, which

has a huge impact on the field of translation, has led to the deconstructing the very foundation on which many translation scholars have constructed their theories. With this in mind, this paper, in this section, is going to redefine and revise the key terms constructing the jargon of translation studies since its inception.

2.3.1. Relevance

In Derrida's words, the pre-deconstructionist translation scholars naively presume the relevant translation as the one constructing the most relevant equivalence of the source text in the target text. In effect, the relevant translation would, therefore, be a pertinent, adequate, univocal, and idiomatic translation; that is, the benchmark of a good translation. With the advent of the Derridian deconstruction, Derrida, in his insightful article, *What Is a "Relevant" Translation?*, questions the old and naïve axiom of the relevant translation postulated by the pre-deconstructionist scholars of translation by holding that the relevance in translation operates under the wing of the economy of translation which can be further subcategorized into two contradictory rules of property and quantity. According to Derrida, the law of property signifies "an attempt at appropriation, aiming to transport home, in its language, in the most appropriate way possible, in the most relevant way possible, the most proper meaning of the original text" (Derrida, 2001, p. 179). Derrida then goes on defining the law of quantity by stating that "when one speaks of economy, one speaks of calculable quantity" (Derrida, 2001, p. 179). Derrida further postulates that these two laws are mutually exclusive and are always defying each other, for instance, whenever a translation tries to obey the law of property by restoring to such translation techniques such as explications, detailed explanation, amplification, compensation, generalization, and alike, this translation is unwittingly in defiance of the law of quantity that requires translations to "be quantitatively equivalent to the original, apart from any paraphrase, explication, explicitation, analysis and the like (Derrida, 2001, p. 179). Contrariwise, whenever a translation intends to be equivalent to its original text in terms of quantity by translating with the great economy; that is, by resorting to such translation techniques like implication, omission, specification, and the like, it is actually flouting the law of property. In other words, the definition of the optimal relevance in the sense that Gutt and the other pre-deconstructionist scholars have conferred on the term is pursuing an ambitious plan, since the twofold laws of property and quantity like the opposite ends of a magnet are constantly defying each other and there is no way they will ever be reconciled in any translation. As this is the case, translation

needs decision-making in the strongest sense of that word and these decisions should be made in a way to negotiate the inherent contradiction of Gutt's optimal relevance concept, since relevance is not before and beyond translation decision-making; more rather, it is evolved through these decisions. (Davis, 2001).

2.3.2. Decision

According to the pre-deconstructionist translation studies, the concept of decidability has been locked for centuries in the dual opposition with the concept of undecidability. Leaning against this oppositional model, the traditional translation scholars posit that the decisions, which are made in translation, are the act of oscillating between the choices pre-existing translator's decision making. This view of the decision-making in translation is actually propped against logocentrism par excellence; however, with the advent of Derridian deconstruction, the deconstructionists pick the lock, which has kept decidability in the dual opposition with undecidability, by rethinking and redefining the senses of the two terms of decidability and undecidability, which made them wind up in the dual opposition with each other in the first place. According to John Caputo (1997), "The opposite of 'undecidability' is not 'decisiveness' but programmability, calculability, computerizability, or formalizability (As cited in Davis, 2007, p. 51). In the same vein, he also posits that, only when a decision surpasses this calculability and programmability, it can pass muster accordingly, since if a decision-maker is to follow the pre-established and pre-determined course to reach a decision, it can be called anything other than a decision. Following the deconstructionist perspective on decision-making, it is the undecidability of the meaning of the text that sets the stage for a translator to make a decision; that is, only when the translators face with an impossible decision for which there are no possible choices that they actually decide. In sum, the deconstructionists' standpoint on the concept of decidability is quite contrary to the traditional view, which holds that decision-making is the choice between already established options. Derrida himself assigned the term aporias- " non-passage or impossible passages" (As cited in Davis, 2001, p. 93) to alleviate the confusion surrounding his definition of the term decision. He then further states that "There is no passage and so the translator must decide the undecidable, arrive at a translation without having passed through an open, already determined passage" (As cited in Davis, 2001, p. 94).

2.3.3. Intention

By the same token, the deconstructionists invalidate the traditional translation studies' perspective of the concept of intention: The speaker's meaning or sense beyond language which the author wants to communicate to their audience. In this model, the language just provides the vehicle for transmitting and transferring the author's intention. However, this traditional view was soon to be challenged by the principles of the Derridian deconstruction. According to Derrida, meaning and in this case, intention cannot precede the language. This, of course, does not mean that, the author has no intention; rather, it means that, the author should wait until its meaning inhibits itself in the language, then by differing from itself through the systematic play of the traces in the context and in the text reveals itself. Indeed, although the author has an intention for writing a piece, his intention has no commanding role on the meaning of the text plus the translator would never be able to diagnose and transfer the meaning or intention of the author without doing any harm to it. Therefore, it would mean that, since the translator cannot transfer the meaning or intention of the text, then all translation would come under the umbrella of interpretation. More importantly, since no interpretation cannot fully exhaust the meaning of the text, there can be an infinite number of interpretations but this should not be considered as the green light to anything goes paradigm. As it is explained above, under the issues of iterability and limit, each language has the elements of the structural stability, which are the sedimentation of the previous usage of language, more commonly known as the institutionalization. Therefore, for the meaning of the text to be evolved, it is inevitable to first intercourse with these elements. In sum, the deconstructionists posit that an author's last stroke of the pen is not the coup de grâce of his or her work; rather, the text accrues its meaning by differing from both the context and the text in the broader sense. This is actually why the deconstructionists emphatically emphasize the importance of the contextualization and re-contextualization. According to the main tenet of the deconstructionists' school of thought, meaning is the contextual event, it is not an entity before and beyond the language. In response to the possible accusation that, deconstructionist paradigm effaces the concept of the author's intention, Derrida puts it well when he states that "the category of intention will not disappear; it will have its place, but from this place, it will no longer be able to govern the entire scene and the entire system of utterances" (Davis, 2001, p. 56). At the simplest, the deconstructionists make the point that the "intention is not a prior determinant of textual meaning, intention emerges as a textual effect" (Davis, 2001, p. 59). It actually implicitly

implies that, since the translator cannot replay and represent the intention of the author, he or she must make the performative decisions in the strongest sense (Davis, 2001).

3. Conclusion

According to the pre-deconstructionist translation scholars, the source text is the logo or centre of meaning and the target text, as its supplement, represents the source text. Viewing the relationship between the original text and the target text as such, these scholars go further by postulating the binary opposite between these two in such a way to claim privilege for the source text over the target text. This oppositional model, constituting the backbone of pre-deconstructionist view of translation, has, since its emergence, led to the chains of the other binary opposites such as author/translator, form/content and the like. However, with the advent of deconstruction, its founding father, Derrida brings to task the unproblematic, naïve theory of meaning transfer and the binary opposites and calls the Sassaurian structuralism the totalitarian system taking the translator as the slave and assigning the second-status to the target text. Deconstruction disavows this long-held view of the translation studies by destabilizing the position of the source text as the origin of meaning and rebutting the heresy that by the close reading of the text, the translator will reach the kernel meaning. Meaning, in the deconstructionist school of thought, has no ontological, extra-linguistic status; rather, the meaning of the text evolves through having the differential relations with an infinite number of the textual, contextual factors. The deconstructionists also supplant the transcendental signified, lying at the heart of western translation theories, with the new concept of Différance; that is, the essence of Derrida's perspective of translation. Indeed, the deconstructionists' questioning of the notion of meaning, as the pre-existing entity independent from any language system, goes a long way into the undermining and reversing the oppositional models, that many translation scholars on which have constructed their theories. In sum, the Derridian deconstruction by breathing the new life into the dead theories of translation studies, premised on the fallacy of logo-centrism, begets the need to once again renew and rebuild translation studies' infrastructure if it is to cope with challenges lies ahead.

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References

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