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A Comparative and Contrastive Study on Translation Criterion

Thoughts in China and the West

As an ancient Chinese saying goes, “no success can be accomplished without norms or standards”, which means everything has its own rules. It is the same with translational activities. Translation criterion is one of the rules governing the operation of translational activities. In the history of translation, whether in China or the West, translation criterion has exerted its significant influence. It not only governs translators’ translation operation in practice, but also forms an important research issue in translation studies. Though there is different translation criterion thought (TCT) in China and the West, translators do not follow the same translation criterion in translation practice, and theorists have put forward various and varied specific translation criterion, and the terms concerning the concept of translation criterion are widely different, yet it cannot be denied that translation criteria indeed exist as an objective reality. Translation criteria not only constitute an important issue in translation theory, but also play a significant role in translation practice. Yet there are many differences in translation criterion thought between China and the West, and scholars have also discussed or debated a lot about it, which means that people’s understanding of translation criterion is still not adequate and further study is needed. In view of this, the present thesis takes translation criterion thought as its object of study, aiming at making a systematic contrastive study of the Chinese and Western translation criterion thought.

The present research attempts to make a thorough investigation into and comparison of the translation criterion thought in Chinese and Western translation histories in an effort to find out where their differences and similarities lie, and explore the factors that lead to their differences. The research also investigates the influences that the thought made on translation practice and theoretical research in China and the West. On the basis of these contrastive studies, the thesis discusses the implications for further study of the issue in the future. With the above objectives, the thesis mainly intends to answer the following questions. First, what are the main translation criteria in the translation history of China and the West? How did they develop? Second, what are the differences and similarities between the Chinese and Western translation criterion thought? What are the factors that lead to their differences? Third, what are the

motivations of the Chinese and Western translation criterion thought? What are their differences and similarities? Fourth, what influences did the Chinese and Western translation criterion thought have on their translational activities with regard to translation practice and translation studies? Fifth, what implications do the Chinese and Western translation criterion thought have for further study of the issue?

Through investigating the Chinese and Western literature of translation theories, the author finds that translation criterion thought has quite a long history in both China and the West. Since the birth of written translation in ancient times, there were discussions about translation, which reflects to some extent people's thinking and understanding on translation criterion. In China, discussion on translation criterion started in late Eastern Han Dynasty. In the West, it dates back to ancient Roman times. Based on the study of Chinese and Western relevant literature, the thesis draws a year-map of Chinese and Western translation criterion thought, and lists the main translation criteria in Chinese and Western translation histories. The map consists of the time, translation practitioners or theorists, translation criteria, main quotations about translation criteria and their sources. The map shows that scholars in China are much more interested in discussing translation criterion than their counterparts in the West.

Based on a diachronic investigation of Chinese and Western translation criterion thought, the thesis conducts an in-depth analysis and comparison between their translation criterion thought. It begins by exploring the motivations of Chinese and Western translation criterion thought, and comparing their differences. The motivations of Chinese translation criterion thought mainly include four aspects: Chinese traditional philosophical thought, Chinese traditional aesthetic thought, Chinese traditional literary thought, and the characteristics of the Chinese language; while the motivations of Western translation criterion thought mainly include the following aspects: Western philosophical thought, Western theological thought, Western literary theories, the characteristics of Western languages, theories in other disciplines such as linguistics and information science.

It is found out through the comparison that Chinese and Western translation criterion thought share some similarities. The first is the way of discussion: Chinese and Western scholars both tend to draw on their local culture in discussing translation criterion. The second is the trend of development: both Chinese and Western translation criterion thought experience the process of source-text-centeredness to multifoldness. The third is the characteristics of research: both exhibit a tendency of "valuing prescriptivism and belittling descriptivism". The differences of Chinese and Western translation criterion thought lie in the following four aspects. The first is the difference of practice basis for translation criterion. In China, it is mainly the translation of the Buddhist Scripture that triggered the discussion of translation criterion, while literary translation on a certain scale did not come out until the late Qing Dynasty. In the West, their translation criterion thought originated from Bible translation in ancient Roman times. Besides, literary translation occurring quite early in Western history forms another major practice basis for translation criterion. The second is the source of translation practice basis for translation criterion. In China, it is mainly "Eastward translation of Western learnings". In Buddhist Scripture translation, it is the Western learnings of

Buddhism from India, in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, it is the Western learnings of science and literature from Europe. In the West, it is the “mutual translation of Western learnings”, whether religious translation like Bible or literary translation, all are mutual translation within the West. The third is the cultural soil that translation criteria lie in. In China, it is mainly the cultures of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, while in the West it is mainly Christian culture. The fourth is the depth of the translation criterion thought. In China, there is an obvious perceptual tendency, while in the West, by comparison there is an obvious rational tendency.

The differences in Chinese and Western translation criterion thoughts result from the following seven factors. The first is the philosophical tradition. Chinese philosophy shows an obvious tendency of “synthesization”. By comparison, Western philosophy shows a strong tendency of rational reasoning. As a result of such a difference, in Chinese translation criteria there occurred quite a few ambiguous concepts, what’s more, the elaboration on them are often quite brief and short. As for the translation criteria put forward in the West, some also show some kind of ambiguity, but compared with those in China, the Western ones show much clarity. Besides, the elaboration on those criteria is often much more sufficient than that in China. Chinese philosophy also shows a tendency of “entering the world”. Western philosophy shows a strong tradition of “learning for knowledge”. As a result of such a difference, in discussing translation criterion, Chinese scholars show more interest than their counterparts; by comparison, Western scholars show far less interest in discussing translation criterion, but attaches more importance to exploring the essence and nature of translation. The second is the mode of thinking. Eastern mode of thinking in general shows obvious features of wholeness, comprehensiveness and “obscureness”, while Western mode of thinking shows strong features of “analyticalness”, “meticulousness” and “specificness”. Influenced by the two different modes of thinking, Chinese translation criteria in general show obvious “obscureness”, lacking specific and clear explanation. By comparison, Western translation criteria show more clarity, often with clear definition and specific explanation and analysis. The third is the source of thought. The source of thought for Chinese translation criterion thought is mainly Confucianist thought and Taoist thought. The source of thought for Western translation criterion thought can be traced back to the philosophical thought and literary thought of Plato and Aristotle in ancient Greece. The fourth is the social background. Chinese ancient society was in general a society of political centralization by the central state government. People’s thought was much imprisoned. In the society, collective thought is much emphasized. By comparison, Western society in general was not obviously characterized by a strong political centralization like that in ancient China, but it showed a feature of democratism. Freedom of thought and individual thinking were respected and encouraged in the West. One of the factors leading to Chinese scholars’ attaching more importance to translation criteria is the influence of collective thinking, which emphasizes uniformity in translation criterion thought. Western scholars tend to be less interested in translation criterion than Chinese scholars. One of the reasons is the influence of individual thinking in the West. The fifth is the cultural soil. Chinese translational activities were deeply rooted in traditional culture of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, especially Confucianism and

Taoism. As a result, people's translation criterion thought was correspondingly influenced. Western translational activities were rooted in Christian culture. The translation criterion thought in the West was related to the thought of Christian culture, such as word-for-word translation, especially religious translation like Bible translation. The sixth is the influence of differences in languages. Translational activities in China mainly occurred between the Chinese language of Sino-Tibetan family and languages of Indo-European family. Chinese is a typical isolating language, featured by obvious parataxis, which is quite different from the languages of Indo-European family. Thus it is hard to achieve formal faithfulness in translation. As a result, there are few terms about formal faithfulness in Chinese translation criteria. Western translational activities mainly occurred between languages of the same Indo-European family. Compared with languages from different language family, these languages within the same family share more similarities with each other. Thus it is more likely to seek formal faithfulness in translation between these languages. That's one of the reasons why there are many discussions on equivalence or correspondence in terms of translation criterion in the West. The last is the tradition of "emphasizing the techniques versus emphasizing the nature". There exists a tendency of "emphasizing the techniques but belittling the nature" in China; while in the West, there is a strong tendency of "emphasizing the nature of things". Consequently, there are more explorations on translation criteria, aiming at finding out guidelines for translation. Seldom are there any discussions move upward to the metaphysical aspect; while translation criterion in the West is not as hotly discussed as in China. Western discussions on translation criterion often do not stop at putting forward the terms, but move a step upward towards metaphysical level, trying to construct theoretical system.

Chinese and Western translation criterion thought has in some way exerted influence on the translational activities in China and the West, both in translation practice and theoretical research. In terms of the influence on translation practice, one of them is source-text-centeredness, emphasizing target text's faithfulness to original text. Although such a tendency exists both in China and the West, yet comparatively speaking, Chinese translation practice shows more such a tendency. The second is reader-centeredness, emphasizing receptive effect of the target text on target readers. Such a tendency emphasizes the smoothness and fluency of translation, trying to make the expressions in target texts conform to the language habits of the target language. It stresses the language habits of the common people. Such a tendency of reader-centeredness is featured generally more in Western translation practice. The third is translator centeredness, emphasizing translators' aims in translation. In translation with such a tendency, translators exert their subjectivity as much as possible, making proper additions, deletions, alterations when necessary to achieve their aims. Such a tendency is also generally shown more in Western translation. In terms of the influence on theoretical research of translation, it is mainly reflected in the following two aspects. The first is the tendency of "scatteredness versus systematicness". The research of Chinese translation theory in general shows a tendency of "scatteredness", lacking theoretical consciousness. There is often a lack of systematic analysis in Chinese translation research. While western translation research in general shows a tendency of "systematicness", with strong

theoretical consciousness. It often puts much emphasis on systematic and logical analysis. The second is the tendency of “hotness and explicitness versus coldness and implicitness”. Chinese translation theory research lays much emphasis on translation criterion, showing an obvious tendency of “hotness and explicitness”, with many scholars devoted to the study of it and many articles and books exploring the issue. There are also many terms of specific translation criterion. While by comparison Western translation researchers do not pay as much attention to translation criterion as their Chinese counterparts, showing a tendency of “implicitness”, with few scholars writing articles on translation criterion, and specific terms of translation criterion are also much fewer than those in China. Even when scholars in the West discuss this issue, they seldom use the term “translation criterion”, instead, they tend to use the term “translation principle”. What is more, their term “principle” quite often has nothing to do with the criterion of regulating and judging translation quality, but refers to operational aspects such as the methods and skills of translation.

It is found out through a thorough investigation and comparison that though there are various specific translation criteria in both China and the West, yet the definition and explanation of them are often unclear and insufficient. There is a lack of integrated research from a whole perspective. Thus, we believe that the study of translation criterion in the future calls for more attention paid to “systematicness” and “holism”, with clear definition and thorough explanation. The present thesis holds that the study of translation criterion needs to take a multidimensional perspective. The first is the “ontological dimension”, which is about the internal aspects of translation criterion, including mainly the categories of meaning, style and form. The second is the “objective dimension”, which is about the external aspects, mainly including cultural, ideological and poetical factors. The third is the “subjective dimension”, which is related to translation purposes, mainly including the purpose of the translator, readers and patrons, and the relationship between these purposes. In addition, it is believed by the author that there needs to be a cognitive dimension in the understanding of translation criterion based on prototypical category theory, taking translation criterion as a prototypical category. All specific translation criteria are members of this family, with different degrees of similarity with the translation criterion prototype. The thesis has also discussed translation criterion from an ethical dimension, putting forward the concept of “Shan Yi” (appropriate translation) criterion which borrows the concept of “Shan” from Chinese traditional ethics and morality. “Shan Yi” presupposes a harmonious translation based on different criteria from “ontological”, “objective” to “subjective” dimensions.

Structurally, the thesis consists of six chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the research significance, research design and structure of the thesis. Chapter 2 reviews the research on translation criterion in China and the West. Chapter 3 makes a diachronic and comprehensive investigation of the translation criterion thought in Chinese and Western translation histories. Chapter four compares the Chinese and Western translation criterion thought, including their differences and similarities, the reasons for these differences, the influences thus caused, and their motivations. Chapter 5 puts forward the notion of multidimensional study in translation criterion research, including “ontological dimension”, “objective dimension”, “subjective dimension”, “cognitive or prototypical

dimension” and “ethical dimension”. Chapter 6 summarizes main research findings, points out shortcomings of the thesis and proposes directions for future in-depth research.