Theme Statement: The Making of a Translator

Though an age-old profession, the professionalization of translation is a relatively recent development. The translator has long wont to traverse the territories of different languages and cultures, assuming a number of changing roles historically, from prophet to collaborator, eminent writer to comprador, and missionary to the provider of professional services today. And whereas in the past translation was in demand only at the frontiers of cultural contacts, today its demand is infinitely magnified, so much so that there is hardly an aspect of modern life, be it mass communication, science and technology, trade and business, scholarship and entertainment, or the daily routine of eating, clothing, housing and transportation, that is free of its intervention.

Despite this strong presence, however, translation is perceived by the general public primarily as a finished product, often without any awareness of its maker, thus reinforcing the preconception of a faceless, invisible translator in the popular imagination. But modern translation studies has taught that the transparent translator is a mere pipe dream. And if we also realize that, with the death of the author, there, too, is no transparent and stable text, then it is not only justifiable but also legitimate, and a realistic necessity, for the translator to generate a subjective reading of the source text. Instead of faceless, the translator is a translated author.

Translator subjectivity is further underscored by the “linguistic turn” in post-structural epistemology and the postcolonial preoccupation with the reconfiguration and reconstitution of diasporic subjectivity. The post-structural insistence on the constructedness of nature and the post-Babelian regrouping of forces in disarray, through the invention of translation, for a sustained resistance are both acts of defiance as civil disobedience that reconfirm, reshape and re-fuse translation and the translator, much as Yeats’s dancer and the dance, into a new, translational subjective self.

We are well aware that translation is never impervious to the infiltration of power. Very often a dominant culture provides the source texts for its “subaltern” cultures to turn into target texts, thereby consolidating and expanding its sphere of influence. China, for example, has traditionally been a dominant culture, and translation has never been a historical priority for the Chinese. Except for the translation of the Buddhist scriptures—and even here most translators, at least in the early stage, were non-Chinese foreigners—there was hardly any other translational enterprise that is of significance until the modern time. Historically, the office of the petty official of interpretation, the Sheren, or mimicker Tongueman, is but a compromise to the expediency of barbarian affairs. Things changed drastically, however, after the Opium War. The translator, now Chinese national, as a mimicking go-between began to transition and transform, metaphorically becoming a bridge that bears cultural load and moral weight. And with the hegemonic rise of English the translator, especially those who work with English, is thrust in the raging tides of globalization onto the frothy crests to make his day.

In Taiwan, as elsewhere, the greatest number of translators congregate around English simply because it is the most powerful global language, a status officially sanctioned by our Ministry of Education whose only translator certification program is in English. Yet the increasing influx of guest workers and brides from Southeast Asia has created a new
need for translators in their languages, a need much neglected because their languages are much less privileged, and there is hardly a certified translator to serve them, not to mention official endorsement and social attention. The pervasiveness of power, however, makes it all the more necessary for us to pay attention to matters of justice and human rights. EU nations have made translator and translation agency certification mandatory to insure that critical human rights are not compromised by translator incompetence, especially in cases involving court, medical and immigration matters. This is where we in Taiwan have a lot to catch up with, and speaks loudly for the need of the state to intervene, in the form of enlightened policy guidelines, to safeguard human rights.

On the basis of these observations, we have chosen the translator as conference subject, hoping that by revisiting the path of a translator’s making we may offer some useful insights into the nature of translation and the role of the translator. Should our efforts contribute to the making of a more enlightened and comprehensive language and translation policy, we would have also rendered a good service to local translation studies. On this note of hope, we welcome submissions that look at the topic from these angles:

  Education of the Translator
  Certification and Evaluation of the Translator
  History of the Translator /Translators in History
  Corpora and Computer Assisted Translation
  Translation Policy: Challenges and Prospects
  Translation and Cross-Cultural Theory
  Literary Translation