

On “The Task of the Translator”

—A Critical Interpretation of Walter Benjamin's Views on Translation

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Abstract: Driven by a salvationist complex, Walter Benjamin proposed that the core of “The task of the translator” lies in returning to “pure language” through translation. While his spiritual pursuit is commendable, his methodological approach is fundamentally flawed. By overemphasizing the mysterious power of language and neglecting the primacy of human thought and spirit, Benjamin fell into the cognitive error of inverting the primary and secondary elements. The “translator” in Benjamin's writing is not a translator in the true sense; the extreme literal translation he advocated, which aims solely at reproducing the complementarity of modes of intention between languages and approaching pure language while completely abandoning the transmission of meaning, is drastically different from traditional translation theories and holds no practical value. This paper argues that the core responsibility of translation (and translators) remains “converting words to achieve mutual understanding.” It is noteworthy that the phenomenon of “creative benevolent distortion” in the interpretation of Benjamin's translation thoughts within the domestic academic circle runs counter to the objectivity and rigor inherent in academic research.

1. Introduction

“The Task of the Translator” (Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers), originally the preface to Walter Benjamin's translation of Baudelaire's *Tableaux Parisiens* (1923), has, since its rediscovery in the 1960s, become a significant classic in translation studies, continually spark academic debate with its profound philosophical speculation and inherent obscurity.

Compared to the West, the study of Benjamin's thought in Chinese translation circles started relatively late. Zhuang Yichuan (1987)[1] was the first to introduce the mystical characteristics of this theory; subsequent contributions made by scholars such as Tan Zaixi[2] have led to the evolution of relevant research through three distinct phases: initial introduction, basic interpretation, and absorption and innovation (Wei Jiangang, 2024)[3]. To this day, this research area remains a prominent focus in academia.

However, the text's opacity poses an enormous challenge to understanding and interpretation. Both Gershom Scholem (1975)[4] and Jacques Derrida (1986)[5] have commented on its abstruseness. In the Chinese context, this single essay has spawned at least nine different Chinese translations, most of which are retranslated from controversial English versions, undoubtedly exacerbating the risk of misinterpretation. Although the translator Hu Gongze (2009)[6] emphasized the essay's tight structure and focused themes, its convoluted style has objectively led to diverse and divergent interpretations.

Against this backdrop, this paper, drawing primarily on Hu Gongze's translation which is rendered directly from the original German text, undertakes a critical re-examination of Benjamin's view of translation. It seeks to ask: It seeks to address two core questions: Is “pure language”, the theoretical cornerstone, a valid concept? Is “The task of the translator”—which abandons meaning transmission in favor of linguistic complementarity—tenable both theoretically and practically? Furthermore, this paper will reflect on the prevalent phenomenon of “creative benevolent distortion” in domestic academic interpretations of Benjamin, aiming to provide a critical perspective for the objective

evaluation of his theory's value.

2. Pure Language: An Unattainable Ultimate Goal

Walter Benjamin's translation theory is fundamentally rooted in his theological conception of language. He argued that the “pure language” (reine Sprache)—the language God used to create the world—constitutes the most supreme and perfect form of language, and serves as the unity of names, knowledge and reality (Chen Yongguo & Ma Hailiang, 1999: 283)[7].

In his essay “The task of the Translator,” Benjamin argues that the ultimate mission of translation is not the conveyance of information but rather the convergence of the complementary “modes of signification” inherent and hidden in different languages—achieved through translation, thereby facilitating a restoration of the “pure language.”

However, the theoretical premise is open to doubt. First, the concept “pure language” itself may be nothing more than a presupposition. Cao Minglun (2007: 82) [8] traces the evolution of human languages from a genealogical perspective, pointing out that what Benjamin refers to as “pure language” is similar to the Greek “Logos” and the ancient Chinese “Dao”. Just as Laozi stated in *Dao De Jing*: “The Dao that can be told is not the eternal Dao, the name that can be named is not the eternal name.” It’s highly questionable that the “pure language”, posited as the ultimate goal of language and translation, may defy the description of human language, or even may not exist at all. So, how can it be reconstructed through the fragmentary language of human beings?

Second, its theological assumption is challenged by modern scientific discoveries. Citing evidence from archaeology and anthropology, Cao Minglun (2007: 83) [8] argues that the diversity of human languages actually stems from the independent and natural evolution of ancient peoples across disparate geographical regions over the past thousands of years, rather than from the divine retribution depicted in the myth of the Babel.

Third, the theory does not withstand rational scrutiny; the effort to restore “pure language” through translation is idealized, illusory and impossible. Benjamin himself likened the traces of “pure language” to “fragments of a vessel” scattered across the various languages around the world. Then, logically speaking, to mend such a vessel would require a comprehensive and reciprocal translation of all human languages, integrating their mutually complementary modes of signification. Yet it’s obviously out of the question. Languages vary vastly and remain in a process of constant evolution, with some even teetering on the brink of extinction. Consequently, this endeavor is nothing more than a fantasy. That’s why Paul de Man sardonically observed that the German word “Aufgabe” signifies both “task” and “surrender”—the translator, he implying, is fated to fail this mission from the very outset (De Man, 2002: 80)[9].

Although Benjamin pins his hopes on “the growth of religions” allowing the seeds of pure language to “mature slowly” (Hu Gongze, 2009: 229)[6], this stance resembles what has been termed a “heroism on the ruins” (Liu Lin, 2014: 74)[10]. As Wei Jiangang and others have pointed out, the essence of his theory lies in “the means and methodology of salvationism” (Wei & Sun, 2013: 75)[11], rather than a serious inquiry into the ontology of translation. When the ultimate goal of a theory is neither verifiable nor actionable in terms of its realization path, the stability of its entire theoretical edifice becomes questionable.

3. Commendable Spirit, Erroneous Method: A Misplaced Path to Salvation

Although Benjamin’s theory arises from his sincere concern for spiritual redemption, which is undoubtedly commendable, the redemptive approach he proposes, that achieving linguistic salvation through translation, suffers from evident methodological flaws. He wrongly overemphasizes the mystical power of language and neglects the foundational status of human thought.

Benjamin’s view of translation is confined by his elitist view of literature. He endorses “pure language”, yet he only limits it within the context of a select few “great” literary works, such as the Bible and poetry, as he writes: “For all great works, and the Bible in particular, contain between the lines the possibility of translation.” (Hu Gongze, 2009: 245)[6] This point of view not only offends

the traditional, widely acknowledged consensus that the divinity or verity universally exist, but also overlooks the value embodied in non-literary translation, which accounts for the vast majority of human translation activities. Benjamin's philosophy of translation is also profoundly shaped by his religious views. By exalting the line-by-line translation of the Bible as the "prototype and ideal paradigm of all translation" (Hu Gongze, 2009: 245)[6], Benjamin reveals a distinctly Eurocentric religious bias. Were we to adopt his opinion of "fragments of a vessel" into religious sphere, all religions ought to embrace the seeds of "pure language." As An Lun (2009: 5)[12] observes, various religions share fundamental commonalities despite superficial differences. Benjamin alone holds the Bible in high regard. This stance, however, contradicts his core belief that all languages share an equal status towards "pure language". Ultimately, Benjamin's theory inverts the hierarchical relationship between thought and language, pinning the hope for redemption on the complementarity of linguistic forms rather than on the transformation of human consciousness. Biblical narratives attribute the Fall of Man to intellectual rebellion, whereas Eastern philosophies ascribe moral decay to the abandonment of fundamental ethical principles. Hence, the authentic salvation should lie in spiritual sublimation, moral cultivation, the perfection of character and the elevation of moral awareness. Language is, in essence, merely a tool for articulating thought and facilitating communication. Benjamin's attempt to achieve spiritual redemption through technical adjustments to language itself amounts to treating the symptom rather than the root cause; it addresses only superficial issues while failing to resolve the underlying malady.

What Benjamin terms the "seeds of pure language" scattered throughout human languages are, more accurately speaking, the shared human faculties of reason and cognition. The true mission of the translator remains, as always, "to convey meaning through words and foster mutual understanding"—to build bridges of communication that assist humanity in establishing shared moral aspirations and advancing collective spiritual progress, rather than pursuing the illusory reconstruction of a utopian "pure language."

4. The "Task of the Translator" is Not the Translator's Task

The fundamental fallacy in Benjamin's theory lies in its redefinition of the core concepts of "translation" and "translator," which deviates from the essential nature of translational activity. A fundamental question must be posed: Can a process of linguistic conversion that deliberately repudiates meaning transmission and disregards its readership still be legitimately called "translation"?

Checking the authoritative definitions of translation in different eras, they all emphasize without exception that the conveyance of meaning and the communication between people are the paramount core of the translation activity:

1) Jia Gongyan, a scholar of the Tang Dynasty, defined translation as "converting words to achieve mutual understanding."

2) Barkhudarov characterized translation as a process that alters the language while "preserving the content, i.e., the meaning, unchanged."

3) Nida (1969: 12)[13] identified translation as "reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source-language message, first in terms of meaning, and second in terms of style."

4) Xu Jun (2003: 75)[14] described translation as "a cross-cultural communicative activity taking semiotic transformation as its means and meaning regeneration as its task."

Taken together, these definitions all assign the meaning as the leading role in the process of translation. What Benjamin expects from translation, seeking the "reproduction of complementary modes of intention" while setting aside the meaning exchange, no longer accords with the generally accepted basic definition of translation. Therefore, the title of his essay "Task of the Translator" is highly misleading and inappropriate.

Furthermore, Benjamin's description of "translatability" is also drastically divorced from translational practice. He believes that the higher a work's value and the less information it contains, the greater its translatability; conversely, texts centered on information transmission (e.g., instruction manuals, legal documents) "are utterly incapable of yielding a translation that conforms to the proper

form” (Hu Gongze, 2009: 243)[6]. This line of reasoning completely inverts the realities of translational activity: it is precisely those non-literary texts carrying critical information that constitute the mainstay of global translation practice and directly drive the operation and development of cross-cultural societies.

Even within the realm of literary translation, Benjamin's theory has lost its value due to its failure to guide or assess practice. By comparing the theoretical propositions in his “The Task of the Translator” with his actual translations of Baudelaire's poetry collections, researchers have found that Benjamin's translation practice was “by no means a literal translation,” and the structure of his German translations “barely differed from ordinary German syntactic structures” (Rendall, 1997: 183)[15]. What is more, Pym (2006: 28)[16] plainly stated that it was “hardly possible to detect the practical application of his translation viewpoints” in his “rather mediocre translations of Baudelaire.”

Now in the AI era, the rise of AI translation also powerfully refutes Benjamin's translation theory. The AI translation, empowered by technology, featuring the large-scale language model, with the characteristics of low cost and high efficiency, has achieved semantic conversion and meets people's need in most scenarios. The traditional translator's position has been seriously impacted. Thus, it can be seen that the development and innovation of translation cannot be separated from the exploration and application of its practical value and significance. Pursuing the illusory and metaphysical “pure language” is not beneficial to human development and will lead the translator's research astray. Theoretical flaws and the gap between theory and practice have declared the absurdity of Benjamin's translation theory. Just as Cao Minglun (2013: 164) [17] pointed out incisively: “While not all translation theories need directly guide practice, all must withstand verification through practical application.” The translation, translator, and translator's tasks defined uniquely by Benjamin are untenable.

5. Creative Benevolent Distortion Violates the Seriousness of Academic Research

Despite its fundamental flaws in both theory and practice, “The Task of the Translator” continues to enjoy high prestige in academic circles at home and abroad—a phenomenon that in itself merits reflection. Sanders (2003: 163)[18] once summarized three reasons for this phenomenon: the persuasiveness of Benjamin's philosophical discourse, his posthumous academic prestige, and his profound writing style that lends itself to citations. In addition, this paper holds that several factors pertaining to the Chinese scholarly circle merit careful examination.

First, Benjamin's messianic critical spirit does contain some didactic value in today's society full of material desires, easily evoking an emotional resonance among scholars. This may consequently lead them to subconsciously engage in a “creative benevolent distortion” when explicating Benjamin's ideas—that is, scholars deliberately overlook his theoretical flaws to leverage his authority out of deference to his reputation, and even stretch the meaning of his ideas to make them self-consistent. While this practice may seem to “deepen” the theory, it actually runs counter to the fundamental principles of objectivity and neutrality in academic research.

Second, the obscurity of the text and errors in its retranslation have also provided fertile ground for misinterpretation. Benjamin wrote this essay originally in German. Of the nine existing Chinese translations of “The Task of the Translator”, most are retranslated from English versions, which inevitably adds to the difficulty and potential distortion of comprehension.

Some scholars, when citing and interpreting, failed to examine the original critically and instead made well-intentioned but incorrect interpretations, resulting in an increasingly greater misunderstanding and more and more errors.

In conclusion, whether it concerns objective flaws inherent in the theory itself or distortions due to subjective motives, neither of these factors should occur in academic research. Truth does not need to be embellished, and it can always withstand in-depth study and critical questioning. When scholars attempt to interpret the profound theories and viewpoints of outstanding predecessors, they ought to examine them with critical thinking.

6. Conclusion

Through a critical rereading of Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator", this paper draws the following core conclusions:

Rooted in German Romanticism and grounded in on the basis of theological messianism, Benjamin's translation thought is fraught with fundamental flaws. The elusive, unattainable, and unverifiable "pure language" is by no means the actual task of translators. His theory overemphasizes the mysticism of language while neglecting the dominant role of human thought and spirit in meaning-making and cross-cultural communication, leading to the cognitive confusion of mistaking the secondary for the primary. Furthermore, the "extreme literal translation" he advocates—which abandons the goal of message conveyance, entirely disregards readers, and extols the word-for-word translation of the Bible to an extreme degree—not only fundamentally deviates from the essential nature of translation, i.e., "converting words to achieve mutual understanding," but also misdirects the course of scientific inquiry into translation theory.

Of particular concern is that in introducing and interpreting Benjamin's ideas, the domestic academic community has to a certain extent exhibited the phenomenon of "creative benevolent distortion," triggered by factors such as emotional resonance, textual obscurity, and academic tendencies. Though seemingly upholding the validity of the theory, this phenomenon actually undermines the objectivity and seriousness of academic research.

In summary, academic inquiry must be guided by the principle of seeking truth from facts. For any theoretical doctrine, including highly influential classic works such as Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator", we should maintain a clear and rational mindset, refusing to evade theoretical flaws out of deference to the authors' prestige. As human history and now technology have proven, translators' unwavering commitment to their evolving yet consistent mission—enabling deeper understanding in an increasingly interconnected world—is far more meaningful and vital than the pursuit of an elusive "pure language."

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