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Translating as Narrating? A Narrative Approach to Translation Studies

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Abstract

Mona Baker presents with her *Translation and Conflict: A Narrative Account*, a narrative perspective for translation studies, believing that translation functions as re-narration and translators/interpreters should circulate discourses that “promote peace”. Promising and inspiring as her initiative may sound, the narrative course charted for translation studies would be problematic on both ontological and ethical grounds. Valuable lessons could be drawn from Chinese historical narratives, in which censure of historians and discourses of facts are meticulously balanced under the guidance of two seemingly paradoxical regularities, namely “to narrate but not make history” (述而不作) and “subtle words carry profound meanings” (春秋大义). Being faithful to the historical truth while appreciative of the subjectivity of historians, the Chinese narratives tradition might thus suggest a hermeneutical route that integrating narrative theories with translation.

Key words: Narratives; Translation studies; Re-narration; Chinese historiography

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INTRODUCTION

Flourishing respectively within their own finitude for decades, narrative and translation studies—two ostensibly dissoluble yet primordially adjacent subjects, would never have been so closely linked without Mona Baker’s acuity of observation and, in particular, her publication *Translation and Conflict: A Narrative Account* (2006). Baker’s contribution to translation studies could not be trifled with: As one of the leading minds in British translation research community, Director of Language and Culture Research Center of the University of Manchester and also as a prominent figure in the international academic world, Baker has been constantly expanding the breadth and depth of translation domain by offering systematic frameworks for training translating practitioners as well as piloting audaciously in the field of corpus-based translation studies and thus presenting the circle a brand new methodology. As one who spent collage years in the US, published major volumes in UK and well-established as an extraordinary translation theorist, Baker never ceases her reflection on the cultural hegemony and power politics from various perspectives and continuously examines the role played by translators and interpreters in mediating inveterate conflicts resulting from the current political upheavals. Her exploratory quest in the two seemingly irreconcilable subjects as well as her determination to translation undertaking finally found a prime demonstration in her work *Translation and Conflict: A Narrative Account*.

Differentiated itself from the classical and post-classical narrative theories, the narrative theory Baker relies principally on regarding narrative as understood in some strands of social and communication theory, rather than narratology or linguistics. Inspired by social theorists Somers and Gibson (1994), Baker chooses to take narratives not as an optional mode of communication

but as the principal and inescapable route by which we experience the world. Narratives are thus reconsidered either public or personal stories that we subscribe to and guide our behavior, since they are not just the stories we tell other people—they are in fact the stories we tell ourselves about the world we live in (Baker 2007, p.1). Narratives theories, in this perspective, lay emphasis on describing how narratives operate and how they impact our lives, neither through their structural configuration nor their textual realization, but through its types and dimensions. Reexamining translation through the prism of social narrative theory, significant resemblances have been found between narrative and translation, which, in turn, direct Baker to her keynote hypothesis that translation operates as a matter of course “re-narration”¹ and translators/interpreters hold in their hand the power of molding and changing the world.

Launched in 2006 and like most of her other publications, the book is well-received both within and outside the translation circle, with Susan Petrilli, from the University of Bari claiming it to be “scientific and critical, never gratuitously polemic”(quoted in Baker, 2006, p.2), and Annie Brisset, Professor of University of Ottawa, eulogizing it as “groundbreaking volume” with “brilliant exploration of translators’ narrative positionality”(ibid.), and Africa Vidal Claramote from the University of Salamanca predicting it would “undoubtedly constitute a turning point in Translation Studies”(ibid.).

Translated into Chinese by Zhao Wenjing and published by Peking University Press in 2011, the Chinese version of the book finds itself in no need of seeking supporters and admirers. In the dual-preface, Pan Wenguo resolutely proclaimed that this book is “groundbreaking” and of “great inspiration for international translation studies” and thus is “another landmark after the ‘cultural turn’ took place in translation studies”(Zhao, 2011, p.5), whose idea is in tune with Xie Tianzhen, who co-prefaced the book, exclaiming that with an “international perspective”, this book takes neither linguistic nor ontological paradigms and instead “exploring vigorously in a field that no one has been to” (ibid., p.11)².

However, without any intention of sabotaging Baker’s arduous undertaking, it is found that Baker’s theoretical foundation, namely “translation as re-narration” barely stands ontological questioning, and translators’/ interpreters’ moral obligation of “promoting peace” could hardly withstand ethical scrutiny.

1. TRANSLATION AS RE-NARRATION?

Seeds of doubts were sown when Baker defines narratives as the “stories we tell ourselves and others about the world

in which we live, and it is our belief in these stories that guided our actions in the real world” (Baker, 2006, p.46). The statement enables us to acquire the first “equation”:

Narratives = Stories about “our” life

Granted Baker’s statement with full credibility and supposed that translation do operate as “re-narration”, we may naturally arrive to another equation:

Translation = Re-narration

Then, we could combine the two equations and find that:

Translating = Retelling stories about “our” life

Translators/Interpreters = Stories re-tellers

The inference seems surprisingly convincing that it almost leads to a perfect marriage of narrative and translation until one question surfaces: since translation is in essence retelling stories reflecting the world “we” live in and containing “our” belief, translators are intrinsically rewording beliefs and worlds of “the other”, to be more specific, the original narrators or writers. Of course, a broad definition could be adopted and this “we” and “our” may not necessarily refer to any individual but human beings as a whole; however, when narrowed down to one specific narrative or stories, it would and have to first and foremost mirror the world and belief of a certain people, or, a group, since the embeddedness is bond to show up in one way or another. Furthermore, the spate of mass media makes writers/narrators of today address larger audience than they could have conceived of even a decade ago. It makes it very difficult for any of them to take a common assumption between them and their audience for granted, let alone expressing “their” interests on behalf of the whole human beings. Consequently, if the deduction is still of some credence, the task of translating has been transmuted into conveying writers’ beliefs and ideas as it is shown in the concomitant equation:

The task of translators/interpreters = retelling narrators’/writers’ stories

Conclusions as such might be paradoxical: Translation, thanks to Lawrence Venuti (1953-), Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) or Gideon Toury (1942-2016) indicates ongoing tensions between authors and readers, masters and servants, life and afterlife, domestication and foreignization, dominance and resistance.³ However, to narrate a story, be it either fictional or historical, implies “reading aloud from a text”, or to “describe events as they happen”, which hardly reveal the challenges and dilemma translators encountered in modern days. Running the risk of over-simplifying the nature of translation and

¹ See Baker 2005, 2006, 2007.

² Originally in Chinese and translated by the author.

³ Rethinking translation from the perspectives of the meaning of discourses, the subjectivity of translators, and the ideological conflicts among authors, patronages and translators, Venuti, Derrida and Toury all suggest cultural and social factors involved and intervened in the translation process.

overlooking the “Cultural Turn”⁴ in translation studies, Baker’s proposal seems implicitly yet unmistakably bringing translation studies back to the 1970s when the original writers’ words were enshrined and deified.

Alternatively, Baker reiterates in the book and her follow-up articles that “translators are depicted in our disciplinary discourse as honest and detached brokers who operate largely in the ‘space between’ cultures” (Baker, 2006, p.29), while in fact “we participate in very decisive ways in promoting and circulating narratives and discourses of various types and make our own choice” (Baker, 2007, p.4). Hence giving us have every reason to infer, as cliché as it may sound, that translation would never be omnipotence, all-encompassing and a perfect replica of the original; that translation is and forever would be a “creative betrayal of the original” (Ricoeur, 2004, p.6). If translation is tantamount to re-narration, as suggested by Baker, there would be no such thing as perfect re-narration accordingly. Then, when we put a direct narrative: “Come to me, my child.” into indirect speech: “He said: come to me, my child.”, are we not re-narrating? Yet, have we in any way betrayed the original?

Even a pinch of plausibility, if there is any, exists in the reasoning would unfailingly leave Baker’s conclusions under questioning. But does that mean narrative theories and translation are so incompatible that they shall never meet? Then could we afford to explain those intertwining similarities between narrative and translation as pure chance? Maybe we should return to the starting point and review how Baker comes up with the hypothesis—“translation as re-narration” in the first place.

2. ANALOGY MAKES HOMOLOGY?

After a succinct introduction to the social narrative theory she adopts, Baker elaborates on the connections between narrative theory and translation by introducing types of narratives classified by Somers and Gibson, namely, “ontological narratives”, “Public narratives”, “conceptual narratives” and “meta narratives” (Somers and Gibson, quoted in Baker, 2006, P.48). In that process, Baker stresses that the conceptual challenge of narrativity is:

... to develop a social analytic vocabulary that can accommodate the contention that social life, social organizations, social action, and social identities are narratively, that is, temporally and relationally constructed through both ontological and public narratives.”

(Somers and Gibson, quoted in Baker, 2006, p.39)

⁴ The Culture Turn of translation studies was initially put forward by Bassnett and Lefevere as a cultural approach of research in 1990, which attaches great importance to the role of culture in translation, the social background, the influence that cultural tradition imposed on translation, the subjectivity of translators. See Susan Bassett. (1988). *Translation Studies*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.

Therefore, it would be both reasonable and productive to extend it to “include the disciplinary narratives in any field of study” (Baker, 2006, p.39) and thus concludes that conceptual narratives might be more broadly defined as the “stories and explanation that scholars in any field elaborate for themselves and others about their object of inquiry” (ibid.) and by so doing associates social narrative theory with any academic discourses, which naturally holds translation theories in its inclusion. The connection is further unveiled when Baker turns to Somers and Gibson again and draws in four interlinked defining features of narrative: “relationality”, “causal emplotment”, “selective appropriation” and “temporality”—with each one linked to another, those four features combined to illustrate the similarities between narrative and translation. Her reasoning seems plausible: firstly, since relationality implies that “any event has to be interpreted within a larger configuration” (Baker 2006, p.67), any narratives, as long as they are isolated from other events, could not be understood and interpreted. Baker makes herself clear that just like “narrativity demands we discern the meaning of any single event only in temporal and spatial relationship to other events” (ibid., p.46), translation is also a complex procedure that asks for constant reference to a constructed configuration; Secondly, it occurs to Baker that facing the vast array of open-ended and overlapping events, it is through “causal emplotment” and “selective appropriation” that we are able to “rearrange the sequences of events and select the most appropriate elements to construct a narrative” (Baker, 2007, p.2), and therefore it is always possible to tell the same story in a different way. Likewise, in translation it is always possible to translate in an alternative way since constructing translation requires the same amount of (if not larger) meticulous weighing and selection from related information; Thirdly, exposed to certain narratives repeatedly, people would forge their culture, values or history accordingly and that would gradually become their meta-narrative—a public value shared by the group. Similarly, translation could do the same given that narratives could not travel cross linguistic and cultural boundaries without the direct involvement of translators and interpreters; i.e. on every occasion when migratory discourses are perpetuated into meta-narratives, there is the tacit presence of translation as a prerequisite. Eventually, Baker comes to her theoretical starting point that translation is a matter of course “re-narration” and translators hold in their hands the power of shaping and changing the world.

There is no denying that fundamental similarities could be found between narrating and translating; nevertheless, if only we could depend on these simple analogies to justify arguments—any comparison, as long as it is meant to be valid, invariably demands a thorough excavation the essential attributes and properties of the comparables. However, through out the book, no evidence could be

found discussing features and properties of translation providing a sharp contrasting concerning that the disproportionate portion is engaged by narrative theories. Indeed, as Baker puts, the discussion of the nature of translation would go far beyond the scale of the book; nevertheless, circumventing that exposition entirely breeds more pending questions: Does translation mentioned in the book cover translation activities of every kind, including CAT, namely, Computer Aided Translation? Could we infer that translation in general is amount to re-narration, regardless whether the typology of text? Deprived of ontological discussion on translation and narration, any attempts of building theoretical framework is no more than constructing on quicksand. As “defining” as these features might be, they are in essence external presentations that would only be used to prove similarities rather than homogeneity. A veteran translator as Baker is, she should know better than anyone that translation is a sophisticated undertaking involving not only faithful reproduction but, rather, a deliberate and conscious act of selection, assemblage, reconstruction and fabrication. If only Baker would have relaxed her eyes occasionally from Somers and Gibson, she could have discerned an alternative yet more reliable approach.

3. TRANSLATORS AS PEACE-MAKERS?

With great effort, Baker attempts to prove that “translation as a means of promoting peace, tolerance and understanding through enabling communication and dialogue to take place” (Baker, 2007, p.4). As a result, as she says: “translators and interpreters may always make their decisions which may lead to ‘peace or conflicts’” (Baker, 2007, p.9) and since translators/interpreters have been empowered with moral obligation of changing and shaping the world, they should spare no effort to “circulating discourses that promote peace” (Baker, 2006, p.19). It would be difficult to dispute with her lofty statement since to construct fields of peace rather than a field of battles is the outcome anticipated by any intellectual with conscience, translators and interpreters naturally included. Ever since Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), intellectual workers have been regarded in many ways as one of the essential foundations of power, guiding its strategies, charting its progress⁵.

Peace, in every sense, cannot exist without equality. As long as there is the marginalized, the oppressed, there would never be peace at sight, no matter how hard translators/interpreters may exert their influences. The

⁵ Nietzsche laments the fact that the “great majority lacks an intellectual conscience” and calls for an “intellectual conscience”, asserting that that philological virtues, as integrity and honesty, are characterized by “the demand for certainty” and the demand that everything be surrendered in the service of truth. See Friedrich Nietzsche. (2008). *The Gay Science*. Trans. Thomas Common. New York: Barnes & Noble, p49.

seduction of the word—peace—itself lays in that it is surrounded by and drenched in the “blandishments of approval, uncontroversial eulogizing, and sentimental endorsement” (Said, 2009, p.28). Lured by the tempting vision of peace, translators may well pacify conflicts or silence other voices containing conflict provoking potentials for the sake of unanimity. Of course, translators and interpreters do shoulder ethical responsibility for their intellectual works as Baker suggested, while peace would never be such a desirable outcome if it has to take diversity as a sacrifice; correspondingly, conflicts may also be not so dreadful, if its very existence manifests the survival of other narratives. Therefore, instead of avoiding fueling conflicts or promoting a “field of peace”, translators/interpreters’ task is probably first and foremost to present a “field of coexistence”. Rather than muting conflicts, translators/interpreters may have to nerve themselves to present alternative narratives and other perspectives than those provided by combatants on behalf of official memory and national identity—even if it entails that they have to be “conflict-makers”.

4. MAKERS OR TRANSMITTERS: NARRATIVE REGULARITY OF CHINESE HISTORIOGRAPHY

If, instead of sticking to adamant logos of social narrative theories, Baker could regard translation as a everyday act of speaking, not only as a way of translating oneself to oneself, disregarding whether it is public or private, inner or outer, but also more explicitly of translating oneself to others, self to strangers, she could have found narrative and translation are merged spontaneously since to speak is already to translate and hence everyone, translators included, is a narrative identity, operating as translators of our life; If, rather than pinning her eyes on the Middle East turbulence, Baker could realize that war as the most noticeable form of conflict could not represent how manifold nowadays conflicts are even to the slightest degree, she could have discerned that how deeply and complicatedly translators and interpreters are involved in conflicting needs, competing demands that no less severe than warfare. And if, instead of promoting relentlessly the idealized “peace”, Baker could accept that peace might never exist without equality no matter how many peacemaking discourses translators/interpreters produce and circulate, she would have advocated a field of coexistence rather than a field of peace which may well be fulfilled at the price of suffocating thousands of challenging voices.

Hence valuable lesson could be drawn from Chinese historiography featuring the discursive regularity of “to transmit but not to make history” (述而不作) and the “Style of *Spring and Autumn Annals*” (春秋笔法),

which paradoxically indicate that historical narratives should, on one hand, be “transparent” for the effect of reality and on the other, imply in a subtle manner, the historians’ subjective consciousness. It is worth noting that narratives in China originate from and fall primarily under the category of history recording and the *Spring and Autumn Annals* or *Chunqiu* (春秋) is the earliest surviving Chinese historical narratives in annals form. Initially compiled as the official chronicle of the State of Lu, and covering a 241-year period from 722 to 481 BC, the *Spring and Autumn Annals* was later canonized as one of the classics (经)⁶ thanks to the involvement of Confucius (551-479BCE)⁷. In *Shu R* (述而) of *the Analects*, Confucius elaborates his principles of editing the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, saying that “I have transmitted what was taught to me without making up anything of my own. I have been faithful to and loved the Ancients” (Legge, 1893, p,113). Therefore, under the Ruist framework, “to narrate” (述) as opposing “to create” (作), attaches great importance to the transmission of knowledge, experiences and legacies and refrains historians/narrators from weaving their own opinion into the factual record.

However, in his editing practice of the court record of the State of Lu, Confucius demonstrates with the “Chunqiu style of writing” a perspective quite on the contrary to his words in the *Analects*. Between the lines of extremely concise and brief narratives, the *Spring and Autumn Annals* is believed to employ “subtle words to carry profound meanings”, with every word reflecting either approval or censure of the sage. Even the selection and organization of historical events are ample in connotations that noticeable only to the trained eyes of Confucian intellectuals. Narratives are in this case approaches to interpreting morality whilst narrators, being far more than personal conduit for conveying historical knowledge, highlight their subjectivity. The significance of the Chunqiu writing style finds prime explanation in the comments of Mencius (372-289 BCE) :

The world was fallen into decay, and right principles had dwindled away. Perverse discourses and oppressive deeds were again waxen rife. Cases were occurring of ministers who murdered their rulers, and of sons who murdered their fathers. Confucius was afraid, and made the Chun Tsew. (Legge, 1872, ii.)

Hence we find, much to our surprise, that Baker’s quest for merging translation and narratives could be fulfilled

once it is re-contextualized in Chinese historiography: Translators might as well be narrators and their narration should be validated by the factual events or authors’ intentions. Yet alongside retelling stories of others, their visibility and subjectivity are also safeguarded since their judgement of reality is exquisitely represented in their translation. As long as translators could, as Confucius demands, “be faithful to and loved the Ancient”, namely adopting a respectful and grateful attitude towards the author and source text, they could, through translation, make their own voice heard for promoting social justice and fortifying human morality, rather than being peace-makers steering away from controversies and sensitive topics .

CONCLUSION

Experience is meaningful and human behavior is generated from and informed by this meaningfulness. And narratives, personal or social histories, myth, fairy tales, novels, and everyday stories, record experience in oral or written forms indicating the passing of time, accumulating the cultural legacies, and passing on wisdom. In fact, narrating is a human instinct—and beyond that lurks the ambitions of nations, the hope of human kind and the truth of history. Thus there exists no need justify Baker’s interest for presenting a new interdisciplinary perspective for translation practitioners and researchers. Indeed, the social route of narratives is inspiring with far-reaching influences as it breaks free from linguistics and literature (as compared to classical and post-classical narratology or narratologies)⁸, and began to deem narrative not only as a subject explaining how text is constructed, but rather how it operates as an instrument of mind in constructing reality, and by so doing implies a prospect of a productive application of narrativity within translation studies. While unarguably, critiques are echoed in translation circles, almost unanimously, on the negligence of translators’ intricate interplay with a standard, prevailing social dogma as well as on the essentialist dichotomies confining translators to the narrow alley between domesticating and foreignization.

No one could doubt that the infusion of narrative theories would present a new vista to the translation studies, yet the challenge remains how the narrativity could be used to query out discourses on translation? Baker finds her solution in the presumption that

⁶ “Jing” (经) in Chinese signifies the warp that runs through the whole texture. It employed, metaphorically as the the kernel guideline for ancient Chinese intellectuals and illustrated by the Confucian Classics, or The Five Classics (五经), namely the *Book of Songs* (诗), the *Book of History* (书), *Book of Changes* (易), the *Book of Rites* (礼) and the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (春秋).

⁷ There has been a long standing debate on whether Confucius compiled the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. Yet modern studies tend to believe that Confucius edits the *Spring and Autumn Annals*.

⁸ Classical narratology was founded and supported by structuralist scholars in the 1960s, who sought to identify and classify universal structures and patterns of narrativity, while post-classical narratologists rethink and recontextualizes narratives against the backdrop of cultural norms, ideological conflicts and power struggles. Martin (2006) holds that while exposing the limits of classical narratology, the post-classical approach retains the base of the former and thus exploits possibilities for an integrated and much diversified narratologies.

'translation functions as re-narration' (2006, 2007, 2009), assuming that the messianic narrative theories might shed new light on translation studies. However, it is on the crucial ontological part that Baker scarcely provides any solid and direct reasoning apart from few indefensible analogies. The hinge between translation and narrotology is forged so fragile that the second Baker's pretension "translation as narration" is under attack her whole theoretical construction is in a precarious position.

Chinese historical narratives, with their two-folded features of reflecting the factual events and judgement of reality, offers an alternative approach to the narrative study of translation. Emphasizing sincerity to the original work and faithfulness to ethical standards, Chinese narrative tradition stands a strong chance of easing tensions between fact and opinion, objectivity and subjectivity, and by doing so providing translators a narrative role that far beyond "servants" of the author/readers.

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