Sidney Shapiro’s Translatorial Agency:  
A Diachronic Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Translatorial agencies have gained wider currency in contemporary translation studies. Efforts have been made to delve into it from both translators’ individual habits and the contextual elements of their work. But there is still relatively little work done on the variety of translatorial agencies exercised in different actual working conditions. Drawing on available studies and archival primary sources, this article tries to look into the development of translatorial agencies over time and space by uncovering the translator Sidney Shapiro’s changeable textual, paratextual and extratextual agency in different translation networks in which he had been involved. The central argument of the article is that the extent to which translatorial agencies are influenced by other actors in the same network depends on whether the translator has the chance, ability, and willingness to negotiate with them.

KEYWORDS

Actors, ANT, Different Translation Networks, Sidney Shapiro, Translatorial Agency

INTRODUCTION

Agency studies in translation studies have covered two aspects: agency of other agents and that of the translator, namely translatorial agency (Khalifa, 2014; Kinnunen and Koskinen, 2010; Milton and Bandia, 2009). With the improvement of the translator’s status, translatorial agency has gained wider currency. Translatorial agency is a translator’s willingness and ability to act (Kinnunen and Koskinen, 2010:6). It highlights the translators’ behaviour in the whole translation process rather than that of other agents, hence revealing the importance of translator studies in sociological or cultural translation studies. However, due to too much attention paid to the translator’s subjectivity, translatorial agency studies paid little attention to the influence of other agents on the translator, and focused mostly on translators’ invariable agency. Therefore, little work has done to reveal the dynamics of agency over time and space. For the sake of a deeper socio-cultural understanding of the dynamics of agency, which would consequently prove fruitful in projecting how agency is exercised or agents’ choices are made and reflected in the final translation product, further studies on the variety of translatorial agency should be undertaken. This is what this paper is aimed at.

Without being unduly restricted to one single source text and one single target text at a time, this article conducted comparative textual analysis on different translations produced in different time and space. Plausible explanations are made to the textual, paratextual and extratextual data extracted from certain translations. Particular attention is devoted to uncovering Shapiro’s choice of different

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translation approaches in different networks. The data collected include memoirs, biographies, Shapiro’s translations and the corresponding source texts.

TRANSLATORIAL AGENCY

Agency is “the ability and willingness to act” (Kinnunen and Koskinen 2010:6). Translatorial agency is therefore a translator’s willingness and ability to act. In light of Koskinen’s (2000:99) categorization of translators’ visibility, Paloposki (2009:191) classified agency into textual, paratextual and extratextual agency. For the convenience of discussion, this paper will adopt Paloposki’s division of agency and the overlap is unavoidable. Textual, paratextual and extratextual agency are defined in this paper on the basis of both Koskinen’s and Paloposki’s interpretations on them. Textual agency refers to the translator’s voice in the text such as deliberate manipulation, stylistic preferences or habits, etc., paratextual agency consists of the translator’s role in inserting and adding notes and prefaces, and extratextual agency of the selection of books to be translated, the use of different editions and intermediating translations, and the role of translators in ‘speaking out’, publicizing their translations, explaining their approaches and strategies, and the like. As can be seen, textual and paratextual agency could be revealed through comparative textual analysis, and extratextual agency could be uncovered by analysing some essays and memoirs. Since agency is not a static but a fluid entity, it is located in time and in space (Giddens 1979: 54), we study Shapiro’s development of agency in different periods and working places, in Latour’s(1996) words, different translation networks.

DIFFERENT TRANSLATION NETWORKS SHAPIRO INVOLVED IN

Sidney Shapiro, a famed US-born Chinese translator of Jewish descent, translated plentiful Chinese literary works into English during his half-century translation career starting from the year of 1949 and ending in the year of 2002. Shapiro had a key role as one of the most widely praised Chinese-English translators of his generation, and his translation activities extended over a period of several decades, spanning works of different genres from fiction to non-fiction, and consisting of different translation strategies. Given his contributions to China’s literary translation and international communication, Shapiro was awarded many prizes like ‘You Bring Charm to China’ Award (2009), the Lifetime Achievement Award in Translation (2010), and Lifetime Achievement Award of Chinese Influencing the World (2011). As a special translator, Shapiro’s life trajectories, diasporic identity and his various positions in different actual translation circumstances exerted great influence on his agency as a translator.

Nearly all of Sidney Shapiro’s translated works were produced in the latter half of the 20th century. He started his translation career in 1949, the year when PRC was founded, and ended it in 2002 with the translation of Deng Xiaoping, written by Deng Rong, daughter of Deng Xiaoping. From 1983 on, Shapiro spent most of his time writing until the age of 88 and he had literary production of his own such as My China: The Metamorphosis of a Country and a Man, which served as a valuable extra text for this paper. Shapiro was a prolific translator, translating nearly 20 novels, a biography, some novellas and short stories, prose, poems and even Pingju opera. Most of the novels were contemporary works with war themes. Shapiro was best known for his English translations of the Chinese classic novel Outlaws of the Marsh as well as works by the more modern authors Ba Jin and Mao Dun. During his half-century translation career, Shapiro functioned as a veteran translator in five different translation networks Which impacted his agency over time. Network 1: First try as an independent translator—In 1949, Shapiro started the translation of Yuan Jing’s Xin Er Nv Ying Xiong Zhan in his own initiative and was influenced by few actors¹. Network 2: Progressing as a foreign expert in the Bureau of Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (BCRFC)—From the late 1949 to 1953 when Shapiro worked as a foreign expert in BCRFC, he had to comply with some rules but still had liberties to select the books to be translated and was given enough freedom in the
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