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## CHINESE ECO-TRANSLATOLOGY IN TRANSLATION THEORY CONTEXTS

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### **Abstract:**

The article discusses eco-translatology as a unique and independent Chinese theory in Translation Studies. The paper opens with a presentation of three influential Western schools, namely the principle of dynamic equivalence that was developed by Eugene Nida (1964), the Skopos school as introduced by Hans Vermeer and sophisticated by Christiane Nord, and Descriptive Translation Studies whose main figure is Gideon Toury. Eco-translatology is related to these schools and its basis in ancient Chinese thinking, its emphasis on the harmony between man and his environments, and the relevance of collective vs. individual efforts are highlighted. Concrete examples show how eco-translatology is in keeping with actual translation practices even in the West.

Key-words: Eco-translatology; China; equivalence; the Skopos school; Descriptive Translation Studies; harmony with nature; adaptation and selection; interplay of contextual factors; no uncritical transference of messages between cultures.

In this article, I shall discuss Chinese eco-translatology in relation to some influential Western translation schools. It goes without saying that the article is not an exhaustive presentation of the Western schools discussed, nor of course a discussion of all facets of eco-translatology. Instead I focus on salient points as the most pertinent ones.

I shall concentrate on

1. the equivalence principles, and in these I shall include a few comments on prior translation criticism and theory,
2. the Skopos approach, and
3. Descriptive Translation Studies to which I myself belong.

Although this is rarely noted, let alone emphasised in Western works on Translation Studies, these schools all spring from specific educational, spiritual, linguistic, social, political and even historical circumstances.

### **Translational activity in Europe**

Although there must have been competent translation throughout the ages – for the simple reason that otherwise there would no sophisticated intercultural communication – there was little formal training in translation before 1940 in Europe.

The languages used for international communication were Latin (from Antiquity to c. 1750 and subsequently French until 1940).

Translations into the national languages gained ground first in the Renaissance (c. 1450) and then after 1630 in northern Europe with Lutheranism, since Lutherans held that all believers must read the Bible.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, science and technology made great progress, mostly in the US, Great Britain, and Germany. Translation of scientific and technical information demanded accuracy, otherwise there would be misunderstandings and errors.

The most intensive translation activity took place in Europe between nations that were geographically very close and whose languages nearly all derived from Indo-European. Therefore it is small wonder that the 19<sup>th</sup> century also saw the introduction of systematic foreign-language teaching in the educational systems of many countries. Foreign-language teaching was often inadequate and this led to an insistence on ‘accuracy’, that is a ‘close’ translation of all types of texts. Societies also introduced the concept and office of ‘certified (or official) translators’ to ensure that translations were ‘correct’.

The first translation criticism sprang from teachers’ comments on and frustrations with student translations done in foreign-language teaching. Virtually all European works on translation until around 1970 connect, directly or indirectly, with dictionary work and usage and have a strong linguistic bias. They were often anecdotal and focused on ‘errors’. Most studies centred on the translation of single words, simple phrases but rarely on major contexts. They are prescriptive.

### **Translation and the colonies**

Europeans had colonies and used the local language at the lower levels of their administration. This did not lead to theoretical thinking. But Westerners also imposed the Christian religion on colonies.

Western clergy knew that some references to ancient Jewish phenomena were obscure even to Western flocks such as the phrase to ‘give stones for bread’ which referred to Jewish loaves that looked like stones. But, when, for instance, Hindus would not accept that sins can be forgiven in communion with God, missionaries did not grasp that this was a cultural and spiritual stumbling block. They believed the biblical translation was not sufficiently clear.

### **Equivalence**

The Americans sent out more missionaries than any other nation. Therefore they took great interest in Bible translation. In 1964, Eugene Nida, executive secretary for translations for the American Bible Society, issued the book *Toward a Science of Translating* which introduced equivalence, notably ‘dynamic equivalence’, in a systematic, well-reasoned and structured way.

In so doing he became the founding father of modern Translation Studies. Yet Nida disregarded many facts in his quest for equivalence.

He posits that the Hebrew and the Greek versions of, respectively, the Old and the New Testament are the ultimate source texts and yet he takes it for granted that the American version can be used for translations into other languages. He does not pay sufficient heed to the fact that many of the source texts used for Bible translations are translations into a third, a fourth, or a fifth language.

All languages are changing inexorably. Nida disregards the fact that the meaning that we extract today may be far from what was meant 2,000 years ago. And although he is aware of linguistic and cultural differences in the semantics of languages, he shies away from accepting that ‘equivalence’ between the linguistic expressions in different cultures is impossible because they

have different implications. Many of his explanations are flawed on closer inspection, e.g. that translation can be divided into ‘de-coding’ and ‘en-coding’.<sup>1</sup>

Nida’s great contributions are that (1) he is systematic and progresses in a structured way, (2) he is pedagogical and explains things, and that (3) the tone is urbane in a field where readers were accustomed to strident and vociferous critics of ‘errors’ in translation.

To Christians there is only one God and one message as it is aptly phrased in the opening of the Gospel of St. John: “In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God.” Therefore the scriptures must be the same everywhere. Otherwise Christianity loses its power to redeem human souls. Nida wants to promote Christianity as a unified religion that is the same, equivalent, in all cultures.

### **The Skopos Theory**

The Skopos theory originated in Germany in a special national context: after the Second World War, Germany quickly recovered thanks to an influx of German refugees from the former eastern parts of Germany. They manned German factories. The beginning of the Cold War in the early 1950s obliged other Europeans to import German goods. This led to the German ‘economic miracle’ which meant that by the 1960s, Germany was the largest exporter of goods, machinery and technical products in Europe.

Customers in other countries needed manuals and instructions in the use of the products. German manuals are thorough and detailed. In principle, a German manual for a lawn-mower will provide an overview of its use then discuss lawns and grass, then deal with the usefulness of the machine, and finally instruct readers in how to use it. Other Europeans prefer to get the instructions right away and complain about German ‘Gründlichkeit’. (Kingscott, 2002)

The task of translating manuals often fell to German translators. As professional middlemen, they immediately identified the problem: the German originals contained too much information for the target-culture customers.

But German culture is not tolerant of deviations, and collating their originals with the translations, technical writers would spot changes and omissions thanks to the many common Indo-European words.

Hans Vermeer’s Skopos theory meets this problem. The Skopos theory gives top priority to the purpose of a translation. This ulterior purpose allows translators to change the wording and to add or omit something from source texts. Hans Vermeer was a reputed professor and his theory provided translators with an academic excuse for adapting texts to target-culture norms. Let me add that Hans Vermeer was a sinologist: he was aware of cultural stumbling blocks.

The Skopos theory has been refined, mostly so by Christiane Nord, who has added the concept of ‘loyalty’. Loyalty implies that translators inform their clients about how they deal with the source text and explain deviations.

The Skopos principle is influential. In its German version it is tied to the source text and its expression in the target text as phrased by translators in cooperation with senders.

Many non-German scholars disregard this specific German angle and believe that Skopos is whenever a text is well-targeted by translators in receptor cultures. I wish to distinguish between the two for the sake of scholarly stringency.

### **Descriptive Translation Studies**

Descriptive Translation Studies emerged in small nations in Europe around 1980 and concentrated on the outcome of translational activities. Its programmatic book is Gideon Toury's *Descriptive Translation Studies – and beyond* (1995).

In this book Toury insists that studies of translation should be descriptive and not evaluative. Although this may seem to be a passive stance, Toury argues that a descriptive approach may, in the long run, provide translators with practical guidelines.

The book is subject to much discussion. Small wonder, for many scholars overlook (1) that its point of departure is the Israeli situation in 1960's and 70's, and (2) that the contents were first published as separate articles in different journals and were part of the scholarly Israeli discussion. Israel had become independent in 1948, and faced vital questions about which common language to use for the many immigrants who came to the Jewish homeland.<sup>2</sup> This is why the book discusses appropriateness of translations and polysystem theories which are basically about which types of literature to translate, not about translation itself.

However, the book has inspired many studies of non-evaluative descriptions. It is telling that, like Toury, most adherents are from small countries which are at the receiving end in translational activity: more is translated into their languages than out of them. In short, they lack the linguistic and cultural clout to prescribe users of other languages what to do.

### **Eco-translatology**

Let me admit at once that I do not read Chinese and that my understanding of the school is therefore limited. Yet I believe that I am one of the first Western translation scholars who have recognised this as an independent Chinese school in Translation Studies. My attention was first called to it thanks to Professor Hu Gengshen's pioneering articles in *Perspectives, Studies in Translatology* which I edited from 1994 to 2006. The referees instantly recognised that Professor Hu Gengshen was saying something new. Subsequently, I have met with Professor Xu Jianzhong's books on *Translation Ecology* and *Translation Geography*.

Unlike Western approaches that have been prompted by identifiable circumstances, the theory is based on ancient Chinese notions about harmony between man and his environment. I wish to emphasise this interdependence and harmony and to underline that ancient lineage is central: the school is not prompted by any sudden changes in society but has been inspired by nature, by our environments which are greater and last longer than the individual human being. The interplay is illustrated in Hu's string in which the links interact and the order can be reversed:

Translation > language > culture > human activity > natural world.

Key words in Prof Hu's eco-translatology are adaptation and selection in the translational eco-environment where there is a constant interplay between contextual factors, clients and translators, and where they are on a par, at least in principle, and yet, when viewed from specific angles, some aspects are more salient than others.

In Western approaches, translators are often made out personally to decide which texts they translate. This is blatantly not true. In the Chinese view it is the eco-system, the text, the text type and the client that select translators for specific assignments. Chinese theory allows for the selection

to apply to the translator personality.

Once chosen the translator can then select and adapt so as to fit the eco-environment. Hu provides some concrete examples in consecutive interpreting in his 2006 article.

Translators must adapt to the environment or they will be eliminated. The translation strategies similarly depend on factors, often very complex ones, in the translational eco-environments, at the beginning, in the translation process, as well as at the end.

### **Differences from Western schools**

This is in marked contrast with the 'equivalence principle' which holds the linguistic level of the source text as the yardstick for assessing a translational product. It contrasts with the Skopos theory which considers either the ulterior purpose of a translation or the trust between translators and clients as the ultimate check. And it contrasts with Descriptive Studies which focus on the receiving side. The Chinese approach considers the sending sides, translators and receiving sides in their totality as forces that may all influence the end result.

Professor Hu also uses 'translator-centership' as a point of departure.

As a Westerner, I initially balked at the idea that translators could really reach out to all components in the translational eco-system which in Xu's works is all-comprehensive. No translator is perfect and as I put it in *Basics of Translation Studies*: 'the languages between which the perfect translation could be undertaken do not exist' (Dollerup, 2007: 53).

But I missed a major point in Hu's argument: Western culture centres on individual achievements. But since eco-translatology is based on Chinese attitudes about collective efforts, it mirrors reality in positing that translation activities are also the result of collective work in their environments, and that translators supplement and support one another's work.

I mentioned that scholars find the Skopos theory in contexts where the key points in the German theory are not present: I have committed this error. In *Tales and Translation* (1999) which is a descriptive analysis of the Danish translations of the tales of the German brothers Grimm over a 170-year period, I concluded that the Skopos theory fared well in translation (Dollerup, 1999: 323). I was wrong. There was never an explicit agreement or any loyalty between the brothers Grimm and their translators. I had merely discovered that innumerable Danish translators had quietly adapted the German tales to Danish audiences. Permit me to exemplify by citing an example of what Hu Gengshen has termed the micro-level: *Snow White* is a fairytale about a beautiful girl whose mother/stepmother is jealous of her beauty and who tries to have her murdered. Snow White initially escapes thanks to the help of some dwarves. The slender religious strand begins when the slender religious strand begins when (1) Snow White's mother wishes intensely that she can have a daughter as she watches the snow fall from heaven ("vom Himmel"). (2) In the dwarves' cottage, Snow White goes to bed and commends herself to God. (3) She is found in bed by the seventh dwarf who exclaims 'Oh my God' ("Ei, du mein Gott"). (4) The first time the queen attempts to kill her, by tightening her laces, the dwarves warn her against the 'godless' woman. (5) As the seemingly dead Snow White is carried along by the Prince's men and suddenly wakes up, she asks 'Dear God, where am I?' ("Ach Gott, wo bin ich?"). Finally, (6) the 'godless' stepmother is invited to the wedding. In Danish, these features are realised or not as follows in good translations:

Year	translator	Feature 1	2	3	4	5	6
1884	Sørensen	+	+	+	+	+	+
1892	Daugaard	+	+	+	+	+	+
1905	Ewald	+	+	+	onde	-	onde
1912	Jerndorff	+	-	+	+	+	ond
1923	Æventyr	+	+	+	onde	-	onde
1941	Gelsted	+	-	-	ond	-	onde
1944	Kirk	+	-	-	onde	-	onde
1946	Morsing	+	+	+	slemme	+	onde
1970	Rud	+	-	-	onde	+	onde
1971	Hemmer	+	+	-	onde	-	djævelsk

The word ‘ond/onde’ implies that her behaviour is wrong socially and does not imply any religious point.

The collective body of translators adapts its products to the environment.

Eco-translatology also allows of seeing translation as only a part – and important part indeed, but even so only as component part in communication. This is illustrated by the following, last example that hovers between translation and international communication as such. The European Union has more than 25 members and more than 20 official languages. In the beginning, in the 1960s, there were numerous **regulations**, that is laws translated into all official languages in Brussels and immediately effective as national laws in member states. Today the Union prefers to use **directives**. Directives are guidelines about what a national law should address. In other words, the European Union nowadays allows national politicians to adapt legislation to local norms, local customs, to the local eco-environments.

## Conclusion

Translations are not solely determined by the source text as the ‘equivalence’ principle has it, nor by the bond between the sender and the translator as posited by the Skopos school, nor by its expression in the target culture as posited in Descriptive Translation Studies.

The European schools that I have discussed bear the imprint of the place and circumstances of their appearance and, as pointed out by Xu, they cannot uncritically be transferred from the culture in which they originated to others (Xu 2009).

Translations exist in close interaction with their environments, the source and target words, languages and cultures, in an interdependent ecological world-system. With its calls for studies of the balance between translation and the surrounding ecological systems, eco-translatology faces a fruitful future.

## Footnotes

1. For a more detailed critique of Nida, see Dollerup 2009, available on the net.
2. See e.g. [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org), articles ‘Israel’, population; and ‘Hebrew’, modern Hebrew (accessed 21/10/2010).

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