

From Lacan's Concept of "Mirror Stage" to a "Mirror-Image" Theory of Literary Translation

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Abstract: Postmodern and deconstructionist approaches to translation have marked a shift to a more philosophical stance from which to explore the status of the translated text and the relationship between translation and original text. Following these developments, this paper draws on Lacan's theory and notion of the Mirror Stage and explores the concept of translation as a "mirror image" of the original work. In light of this notion, it understands the complex relationship between the translator and the original author, as well as the interplay between the translated text and the original, as both reflection and active interpretation and recreation. The paper also delves into the psychological and philosophical underpinnings of the mirror stage and how it applies to the act of translation. By viewing translation through this lens, one can gain a deeper understanding of the creative and interpretive processes that underlie the act of translation, as well as of the complex relationships between author, translator, and reader.

Keywords: literary translation; mirror stage; Lacan; subjectivity

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标题: 从拉康的镜像阶段理论到文学翻译镜像论

内容摘要: 后现代主义与解构主义的翻译研究转向了更具哲学性的立场，以此探讨译作的地位及译本与原文的关系。基于这一理论发展，本文借鉴拉康的镜像阶段理论，将翻译视作原作的“镜像”进行探讨。依据这一理念，本文阐释了译者与原作者之间复杂的互动关系，以及译本与原文之间既客观反映又主动诠释、再创造的辩证联系。文章深入剖析了镜像阶段理论的心理哲学基础及其在翻译行为中的体现。通过这一理论视角，我们能够更深刻地理解翻译行为背后蕴含的创造性诠释过程，以及作者、译者与读者三者之间错综复杂的关联性。

关键词：文学翻译；镜像；拉康；主体性

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In analyzing literary translation and the production of meaning that occurs in the context of the translational act, one cannot avoid the complex relationships between author, translator and, to a certain degree, the reader. Such complexities have long deserved the attention of scholars of translation which, stepping beyond the notion of textual equivalence, have attempted to make sense of the status of the translated text and its translator in relation to the original text and author. Whether one sees the translated text as a form of rewriting or manipulation, a function of the needs of the target readership or a form of creative treason, it seems clear that the translator is not only a writer, but also a subject.

Postmodern and deconstructionist theories applied to translation have marked a shift to a more philosophical stance from which to view the entire problem of the relationship between translation and original text/author. In this context, another way of examining the relationship between author and translator, original text and translated text, as distinct but interrelated entities is by using the theoretical framework provided by Jacques Lacan's concept of the mirror stage. Without aiming to apply Lacan's psychoanalytic theory in its entirety or strictly adhere to its clinical dimensions, in this essay, I argue that this core phenomenological concept of the mirror stage, where a reflection is an active, imaginative and misrecognized construct of the observing subject, can be analogically extended to the realm of literary translation and allows us to understand the translator as a kind of mirror, both reflecting the original text and also actively (mis)interpreting and recreating it. In other words, the translator takes the original text and reflects it in a new language and within a new cultural context, in the same way a mirror reflects an image back to the viewer. The process involves both faithful representation and creative interpretation, as the translator seeks to capture the essence of the original text, while also making it accessible and meaningful to a new audience. In this sense, the translator acts as a mediator between the author and the reader, facilitating a dialogue across languages and cultures. The mirror analogy I allude to here has implications for our understanding of the relationship between author and translator, between original text and translated text, as well as in regards to the role of the reader in the production of meaning. By examining these relationships through the lens of the mirror stage, it seems possible to gain a deeper appreciation for the complexities of literary translation and the ways in which it shapes our

understanding of literature itself.

1. Literary translation viewed through the mirror stage

Through his renowned notion of the mirror stage, Jacques Lacan posits that a reflection beheld in a mirror is not something objective, but an imaginary construct of the beholder subject, a construct which entails a degree of misreading and creation. Applying this concept analogically to the realm of literary translation, one can likewise understand the text which results from the translational act as the translator's imaginative re-creation of an author and the original text. The translator thus acts as the mirror reflecting the original author, and the translation as a mirror image of the original text. Therefore, in the process of imaginative misrecognition that is literary translation, both the translator and the translation emerge as subjects in relation to the author and the original text.

Translator and author appear in the act of literary translation as interrelated yet distinct subjects. From the perspective of translation as a process, the translator gazes upon the original text and produces a reflected version (i.e. a mirror image), shaped by his or her interpretation. However, the two can never coincide. Crucially, this reflective relationship is not mutual, but unidirectional. The author, as the source of the original text, precedes and exists independently from the translator, and does not look to the translator as a mirror for self-recognition. From the former's perspective, a translator is a mirror image, one that has its own individuality, and his work is a posterior reflection which attempts to capture and reconstitute the original. However, even though the original work emanates from the author, as long as the work is disseminated outside of its originating culture's borders, that which is received and read is the translator's text, not the author's original one. The translator, therefore, is not a mere subordinate of the author, which simply replicates what has been written by the latter. Even though, when opening a translated work, the name of the translator always follows that of the original author, the translation itself is bound to be a deviation from the original text, imbued with the translator's imagination and (mis)understanding of the original author and text.

In a series of essays, such as "The Mirror Stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience," "Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis," and "On the Subject Who is Finally in Question," Jacques Lacan understands the mirror stage as an anticipation of the construction of the subject: its function is that of establishing a relationship between the organism and its reality or, as is commonly said, between the subject's inner (*Innenwelt*) and the outer (*Umwelt*)

worlds.¹ Transposing this logic to the realm of translation, on the one hand, both author and translator exist as independent subjects; on the other, their relationship is mediated through a textual reflection in which imagination and misunderstanding play a productive part. The translator, in particular, serves as "a guide, guiding the original author in his understanding of himself, in his self-identification, and in the establishment of relationships with others and the whole world" (Gao, *Lectures* 376).

The original text and its translation might appear to maintain a passive relationship, in which the latter is subordinated to the former. However, the original text is a subject that can never fully express itself, while the translation, in attempting to give more voice to that original text, ends up constructing an independent subject. Because it can never accurately reflect the original text, the translation, as a subject, maintains with it a mirror relationship of both similarity and difference. This relationship between the Self and the mirrored Other is thus a subjective mutual projection, where "the ego is constituted as another and the other as an alter ego" (Laplanche and Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis* 251). The translation works as a window or a channel that ultimately leads to the original text. However, in the realm of translated literature, the translated text displays a double function: on the one hand, it works as a medium, allowing for the dissemination, circulation, criticism, even the after-life, of a work; on the other, it replaces the original and gains an independent life in the hands of a reader from another language-culture. In particular, since translation is necessary but translated works are unable to let the original texts fully shine through, they end up constituting independent subjects, the result of the imaginative understanding and rewriting of the original author and text by the translator and the translation.

2. The translator's imagination and the chain of signification

Thus, if author and translator are mutually implicated subjects, the same can be said of the original and the translated texts. The process of symbolic transcoding in interlingual translation consists not merely of the translation of linguistic and textual symbols, but of a leap from the semiotic world of the original author to that of the translator. For Lacan, these semiotic worlds carry the subject as language, so that literary works are linguistic representations of their creators. When one stares at oneself in the mirror, they become a "signifier"—something capable of bestowing meaning - and the image they see in the mirror a sort of "signified," with signifier

1 See Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, New York: Norton, 2006, 78.

and signified being harmoniously united.¹ In the same way, once translated, the author and the original text can no longer maintain their self-sustained identity, as being converted into the language of translation puts them in a binary relationship with the translated text, where both become equal subjects in a chain of signification. The original text and its translation form an expectant appealing structure, expecting to fill in and interpret each other in order to achieve the reproduction of meaning. However, the original text, as a subject, is not a perfect carrier of meaning, but the starting point in an open pursuit along the chain of signification. The original text and its translation each become subjects through the complex imagination and misunderstanding contained in the process of mutual questioning between author and translator.

The mirror image reflected by the translator and the translation presents both similarities and divergences in relation to the original author and text. That is, despite the differences imposed by the change in idiom, the translated text presents obvious similarities with the original at the level of content, internal paragraph structure, form, and even the use of some fixed expressions that are unique to the language of the latter, but that are transposed successfully to the translation. However, the translated text also constitutes the translator's retelling of the writing style, creative concept, ideological background and personal temperament of the original author. When readers attempt to glean the original text through the translation, what they actually encounter is the interpretation and expression of the former through the latter. Still, it is not uncommon for readers to automatically ignore or neglect the implications of the process of translation and believe that what they are reading is something written by the original author. Despite readers thinking that, by reading a translation, they are exposed to the creation of the original author, the fact is that, precisely due to the mirror-like relationship between translation and original text, the former is permeated by the translator's imitation and reflection of the particularities of expression and personal temperament of the author of the original. As a result, the translated text possesses its own characteristics, both formal and spiritual.

3. The psychological and philosophical underpinnings of the mirror stage

In light of the fusion of horizons that is central to hermeneutics, translation also becomes an act of interpretation where the translator assumes the role of reader. Preconceptions, human sociality and deferral of meaning, all of which play a role in the process of reading and meaning-creation, allow us to see translation

¹ See Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008, 144.

as the making of a literary reflection that, while preserving the subjectivity of both author and translator, enables the transmission of the (linguistic, aesthetic) style and content of the original text across cultures. Understanding translation in this way opens the way for the reconfiguring of the interaction between translator, author and reader.

To further understand this idea, it is necessary to explore the psychological and philosophical underpinnings of Lacan's mirror stage and their application to the realm of translation. The mirror stage, as Lacan describes it, is a pivotal moment in the development of the Self, when an infant's very first recognition of their reflection in a mirror triggers the formation of the "I," or ego. Such recognition goes beyond a simple acknowledgment of a physical image, instead involving a complex process of identification and misidentification. The infant perceives an idealized, unified, and coherent self-image, which contrasts with their actual fragmented and uncoordinated bodily experience. Such an idealized image lays the groundwork for the ego, an inherently imaginary construct based on a misrecognition of the Self.

In the same way, the translator's encounter with an original text in the process of literary translation can be seen as a similar moment of recognition and misrecognition. The translator, like the infant of the mirror stage, faces a seemingly whole and coherent text. However, this coherence perceived by the translator is but an illusion, as the original text is itself inherently fragmented and open to multiple interpretations. Facing such an object, the task of the translator is to create a new, coherent text in the target language, a process in which the original is both identified and misidentified. Consequently, the resulting translation is not a perfect reflection of the original, but an imaginative re-creation bearing the traces of the translator's own subjectivity.

The abovementioned process of imaginative re-creation is further complicated by the fact that, as in every instance of communication, the translator is not the passive receiver of a message but plays an active role as interpreter. Translators bring to the text their own preconceptions, biases, and cultural backgrounds, all of which influence the way they understand and recreate the original text. Therefore, the translator acts not just as a plain mirror reflecting the original text, but as a co-creator contributing to the meaning and form of the translated text.

The relationship between the original text and its translation can thus be seen as a dynamic interplay between similarity and difference. While the translation aims for fidelity to the original by preserving its content, structure, and style as much as possible, new elements are inevitably incorporated that reflect the translator's own interpretation of the text, as well as the cultural context of the language to which the

text is being translated. This dynamic between fidelity and creativity is what gives the translated text its unique character, making it both a reflection of the original and an independent work in its own right.

4. Conclusion: the collaborative nature of translation and its role in cultural mediation

From what was said above, it becomes clear that another way conceiving translation is as a dialectical relationship between the author of the original text and the translator. This dialogue, however, is subjected to the rather complex negotiation of meaning that derives from the act of reading. As readers themselves, translators must navigate the inherent gaps and ambiguities within the original text, filling in the blanks and making choices that reflect both their own understanding of the text, as well as the possibilities allowed by the target culture. In so doing, the translator engages in a process of mutual interrogation with the original author, a process that reveals the limitations and possibilities of both texts. This mutual questioning is particularly evident in the way the translator deals with the cultural and linguistic differences between the source and target languages. Such differences are, however, not merely obstacles to be overcome but, rather, opportunities for creative reinterpretation. The translator must reinterpret the original text in light of the cultural context of the target language and find ways to convey the cultural nuances and idiomatic expressions of the original text in a manner that resonates with the target audience, which often involves adaptation and transformation.

Consequently, translation can be viewed as a form of cultural mediation, bridging the gap between different linguistic and cultural worlds. Despite being an imperfect conduit, the translator acts as a cultural intermediary who facilitates the exchange of ideas and meanings between the original author and a target foreign audience. This role is particularly significant in the context of World Literature, with the translator being one of the major agents in the increasing circulation of texts across cultural and linguistic boundaries. At the same time, awareness of the complexities and compromises entailed by this cultural mediation also serves to complexify the very notion of literary circulation, as they foreclose the understanding of the literary work as a monolithic entity that travels wholesale across cultures.

Furthermore, the concept of the mirror stage also sheds light on the relationship between the translation and the reader. If translation is the most intimate kind of reading, the translator's engagement in a process of imaginative re-creation of the original text is mirrored by the reader's engagement in a similar process vis-a-vis the translated text. The reader's encounter with the translation is also not a

passive reception of some message, but an active interpretation shaped by their own preconceptions and cultural background. These play a role even in the very process of translation, as the translator often keeps the reader's sensibilities and preconceptions in mind during the translational act. In this sense, the reader is also a co-creator of the text, contributing to its meaning and significance. This dynamic interplay between translator, text, and reader highlights the inherently collaborative nature of the translation process. Translation is not a solitary act, but a collective endeavor that involves the participation of multiple agents and the fusion of multiple perspectives. The translated text, as the product of this collaborative process, is shaped by the interactions between the original author, the translator, and the reader.

Lacan's notion of the mirror stage provides a valuable conceptual analogy for understanding the complex dynamics of literary translation. Here, the translator is understood as producing a mirror image of the original author and text, a process of imaginative re-creation that involves both identification and misrecognition. The resulting translation is not a perfect reflection, but an independent work that bears the marks of the translator's subjectivity. The process of translation is not only a product of cultural mediation, bridging the gap between different linguistic and cultural worlds, but also a collaborative endeavor because it involves the active participation of multiple agents. By employing the concept of the mirror stage as an analytical lens in the context of the translational act, it is possible to further appreciate the creative and interpretive processes that underlie it, as well as the complex and interweaving relationships between author, translator, and reader it entails. By embracing this model, one can gain another perspective from which to view the intricate relationships that constitute the translated work, and empower translators to act and reflect with greater conscious artistry. For scholars of translation, it invites further empirical exploration on applying Lacanian thought and post-structuralist perspectives as a whole to the relationship between text, author, translation and translator.

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