

Post-Nietzschean Contributions to Translation

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Abstract

Post-Nietzschean thought has subverted the metaphysics of essentialist Platonic thinking about meaning. It has made significant contributions to elevating translation to a superior position after being considered inferior and secondary by essentialist thinking for more than two millennia. The purpose of this paper is to answer the question: What insights do we gain from post-Nietzschean thought into meaning, and how might these impact the future of translation? We will shed light on some of the significant post-Nietzschean contributions that have paved the way for various insights into translation. These insights primarily contradict the essentialist viewpoint on the concept of meaning in translation, which has long regarded translation as inferior to the original. This paper adopts a corpus-based method that focuses mainly on Jorge Luis Borges' enriching analysis of *The Translators of The Thousand and One Night* and Jacques Derrida's reasonable letter entitled *A Letter to a Japanese Friend*. It also incorporates some other relevant arguments, including the work of Rosemary Arrojo, which contrasts many key post-Nietzschean contributions to provide anti-platonic perspectives on translation's role in the formation of meaning and identity. This study suggests that post-Nietzschean perspectives on meaning may prompt us to reconsider our understanding of meaning and the original text, as well as our approach to translating and teaching translation.

Keywords: Friedrich Nietzsche, Jorge Luis Borges, Lawrence Venuti, post-Nietzschean, translation

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Introduction:

The most significant shift that post-Nietzschean thinking has introduced to the way of looking at meaning and form is that it does not treat the meaning as an absolute frozen object but rather as a dynamically and actively changing concept following time and circumstances. It was not until the twentieth century that post-Nietzschean thinking set translation free from the inferior view of the Platonic school of thought. Translation had been haunted for two millennia by the Platonic theory regarding meaning, which views the original text to be superior, sacred, and inviolable when it is translated, regardless of the circumstances, time, or location of both the original and translation.

Language is considered arbitrary by Nietzsche (1999), for example, in the way “we speak of a ‘snake’: this designation touches only upon its ability to twist itself and could be therefore also fit a worm. What arbitrary differentiation!” (p.82). Since language is arbitrary, the meaning is ever-changing and unfrozen according to post-Nietzschean thinking. This way of looking at meaning made Borges look at different and unfaithful nineteenth-century translations of the famous *The Thousand and One Night* with applauding appreciation. For example, when Borges (1935) talks about Jean-Charles Mardrus’s translation, Borges argues against being faithful to the original and stating it clearly that in order “To celebrate Mardrus’s fidelity is to leave out the soul of Mardrus, to ignore Mardrus entirely. It is his infidelity, his happy and creative infidelity that must matter to us.” (p.103). This post-Nietzschean way of looking at meaning and translation also made Derrida respond reasonably to his Japanese friend when the latter requested Derrida’s help to explain what he meant by *deconstruction*. However, Derrida gave him nothing but the freedom to construct its meaning based on the Japanese context (i.e., circumstances). As an influential post-Nietzschean theorist, Derrida (1991) encourages the advent of the translator’s agency by not giving an essential meaning or original intention for the word *deconstruction*. Instead, he leaves that space or task to the translator to transform and create its meaning as he (the translator) thinks best suits its Japanese context. Those two examples can give us an indication of the significant shift that post-Nietzschean thinking has brought about to the practice of translation which encourages the translator agency, unlike the essentialists who insist on restraining the translator agency.

In the same manner, Arrojo (2010) supports this line of thinking by arguing that meanings are not discovered but instead constructed following dynamic circumstances. She discusses Nietzsche’s famous *leaf* example and how there cannot be one “ideal leaf” to which all other leaves can be compared. Arrojo, (2010) argues:

Concepts and meanings are not discovered, but constructed, and because the circumstances of their construction are never the same, they can never be fully reproduced. Just as every leaf is different from and cannot faithfully repeat one ideal, original leaf that could exist apart from our conventional concept of “leaf,” every reproduction of a text into any other language or medium will not give us the integrity of the alleged original, but rather constitute a different text that carries the history and circumstances of its (re)composition. (p.249)

Indeed, the circumstances of constructing meaning are never the same; therefore, it would not be reasonable for a translator to keep digging for the original author’s intention or purpose in using a single word or a whole discourse. Because a translator, in this time of dominance of post-Nietzschean thinking, will receive another reasonable response like Derrida’s response to the Japanese translator. Derrida’s answer to the Japanese translator constitutes an approval that the author is not always a reliable source to help the translators explain the meanings. Therefore, the

translator should not rely too much on the author's intentions (i.e., the author's intentions are not to be overwhelmed but rather to be simplified). Derrida (1991) writes to his Japanese friend, "What deconstruction is not? Everything of course! What is deconstruction? Nothing of course!" (p.275), which is another way of saying it is up to you, my translator friend, to translate it according to the context of the target language, whatever language you are translating into, it is your call as a translator to figure its meaning out.

In the same direction, Borges's (1998) famous short story *Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote*, is another proof that neither the meaning nor the circumstances of constructing it are always the same, to be frozen forever. Although Borges' (1998) short story depicts Menard's efforts to go beyond a mere translation of the Quixote by immersing himself so thoroughly in the work as to be able to re-create it line for line. Borges was sarcastic about essentialists as he was opposing them when he states: "Initially, Menard's method was to be relatively simple: learn Spanish, return to Catholicism, fight against the Moore or Turks, forget the history of Europe from 1602 to 1918- become Miguel de Cervantes" (p.91). It is a logical fact that this is an impossible endeavor that entails Cervantes' intention is only suitable for his time; that is, the author's intention is not permanent at all, likewise his circumstances. Borges shows in this work that the source material needs not always be a fortress of the ultimate knowledge or a "definitive text." According to Kosick (2016) Borges, "in *Pierre Menard, author del Quixote* challenges not just the original's purported superiority, but the original's unique claim on the text itself." (p.63). The fact that post-Nietzschean thought considers meaning to be made and created rather than transmitted is supported by Borges's two works and Derrida's letter. This is consistent with Richard Rorty's (1982) argument about the two ways of thinking about truth and meaning in general, specifically whether or not there is an essence of truth and meaning in the first place. He argues for the second way of thinking that looks at truth horizontally as "the representation of our predecessors' reinterpretations of their predecessors' reinterpretations which consequently regards truth as artifacts whose fundamental design we have to alter." (p.92). This indicates that translators are also translating against one another, just like the translators of *The One Thousand and One Night* did, similarly to authors who write against one another. However, according to this post-Nietzschean framework, it would be unethical for a translator to claim fidelity and faithfulness while transforming a text into a different language with its context, including other circumstances and interpretative communities. Because language is arbitrary for Nietzsche, insisting on the concept of intrinsic meaning (essence) would be absurd. There are two reasons why talking about the author's intention is naïve and reasonable. First, unconsciousness participates in shaping the author's intention. Second, the interpretive community will refuse to talk about it because it is unpredictable and cannot be controlled. It is not reasonable to pretend that you, as a translator, are faithful to the so-called 'original' because no one can predict or control the original circumstances. Instead, it would be more reasonable to be loyal to the current events (context) that you can understand and therefore predict what suits them.

Waisman (2005) compares some of Borges's writings on translation to those of other translation theorists and concludes that they pose challenges to many of the fundamental tenets of translation theory, as they present a complete recasting of how the relationship between source and target texts and cultures is typically conceived. Most of translation theories strongly favor the original over the translation, assuming that translation is always accompanied by loss and that there are always limitations on what may be translated. This privileging of the original is frequently

portrayed as an unattainable demand for source text accuracy, a requirement that necessarily sets up the translation to fail. Borges regularly challenges and refutes assumptions of this nature. (p.42)

Borges is known to be a nonessentialist in that he does not believe that the original is superior to translation because he and others look at translation as another version of the original, i.e., there is no essential meaning in the first place within the original. That is because the meaning itself depends solely on the context of the text, including the time and the location of that given text, the readers themselves deduce the meaning as they see it in different temporal and spatial settings. For Borges, the fundamental point of departure is how the sense and interpretation of words change based on given temporal and spatial circumstances of the meaning and its understanding. Waisman (2005) argues:

This point alludes to the temporal and spatial displacements that exist between the time and the place a text is written, and when and where it is read... This line of thought leads Borges to a discussion of how the meaning and the interpretation of words change, even within the same language, from country to country, from one individual reader to another, and from one generation to generation. (p.46)

To conclude this part, post-Nietzschean thinking is also relevant to translation practice as this thought calls for the possibility of translating but never the same. After being caught by the Platonic notion in the shadows and scrutiny of the author and the so-called 'original,' this method of thinking about translation enables us to reassess the translation's position as superior and more visible. That is what Derrida (1991) confirms when he says, "I do not believe translation is a secondary and derived event in relation to an original language or text." (p.275)

What is to be taught about translation as an ethical practice can benefit from this post-Nietzschean way of thinking about the core of meaning. Since I explained previously how the meaning for post-Nietzscheans is constructed and transformed, it is now reasonable to clarify whether it is ethical to teach a translator to be faithful and impartial or not. This post-Nietzschean view on translation entails a translation that differs from the original and is not necessarily judged against it. For example, Borges did not study or bother to study the original *Arabian Nights*; all his study and analysis of them were solely based on their translations into European languages. Antoine Galland adds two fictitious tales to his translation that do not appear in the original *Arabian Nights* text. However, Aladdin and Ali Baba became more well-known in the West than any of the other tales in the *Arabian Nights*. This supplement may suggest that if a translator is going to repeat the same thing, it would not be as creative and exciting as translating differently in a transformative manner as opposed to a simple and faithful transference of the original. Such an addition to the *Arabian Nights* is a difference that is governed by actual circumstances and the natural context of that time of its translators like Antoine Galland and Richard Burton. Such an examination of Borges' translations of the *Arabian Nights*, conducted without reference to the original, would provide us a suggestion as to his stance on the original and its purported superiority. Another indication of the ethics of translation based on post-Nietzschean thought is summed in Borges' comment (1998) about Menard (the translator of the Quixote in the story), in the way that for Menard to "be somehow Cervantes and arriving thereby at the Quixote- that looked to Menard less challenging (and therefore less interesting) than continuing to be Pierre Menard and coming to the Quixote through the experience of Pierre Menard." (p.92)

Post-Nietzscheans or nonessentialists do not pretend to be faithful to an original; instead, through their works, they assert that fidelity should not be towards the so-called original, but rather

towards the difference, the present, the actual context, the actual circumstances, and the actual interpretative community. This kind of faithfulness is what Lawrence Venuti calls the ethics of difference which entails admitting impartiality and admitting difference as wanted and encouraged not to be condemned or refused. Borges (1935) also calls for this kind of difference which entails total visibility of the translator agency when analyzing the different translations of the *Arabian Nights* as he asks for something more diverse and more attractive in Enno Littman's translation of the *Arabian Nights* as Borges (1935), puts it "The commerce between Germany and the Nights should have produced something more." (p.104). Post-Nietzschean thinking urges the translation to be more like a positive transformation rather than passive transportation. This transformation constructs meaning creatively rather than trying to discover the meaning or find the essential purpose in what is presumed to be a "definitive text." This transformation is most blatant in Derrida's and Borges's works, and these two might have affected Venuti with this tendency towards transforming new and different meanings in the translated text to suit the target audience and culture; his preference for domestication rather than foreignization could be argued that Venuti is indeed a contemporary successor to both of Derrida and Borges.

In his seminal work, *The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference*, Lawrence Venuti, (1998), calls for a superior position for translation, which has been so long marginalized, by accepting difference in translation to be the rule and as something inevitable and reasonable especially of translation is oriented to bridging gaps between the source and the receptive cultures. Although Venuti does not give a practical guide for certain ethics of difference, he warns that translations may cause scandals, and these scandals may be cultural, economic, or political. He argues that the linguistics-oriented approaches in translation were away from such scandals because they did not consider social values. However, these approaches have limitations in translation, and such restrictions are most visible in literary translation. Therefore, Venuti argues that "through domestication, translations become different from originals, and then the source texts become as different as they are domesticated inevitably. Thus, specific home values are selected while others are omitted; hence, distinct cultural and political repercussions are automatically generated." (p.79) However, according to Venuti, these impacts are likely to become scandals. He believes that translations can have far-reaching social repercussions; therefore, we can evaluate these effects by asking whether they are good or evil or whether their outcomes are ethical. Venuti refers to Berman's concept of translation ethics, in the way that a bad translation shapes the target culture toward an ethnocentric attitude. While a good one is intended to restrict ethnocentric negation. In the end, it is the translator who will choose to credit or discredit the ethnocentric movement. That is, theoretically, it is all and large for the translator to become visible or invisible. Still, in practice, this decision is made by many others (i.e., publishers and editors, etc.) rather than the translator only (pp.80-81). But ultimately, if not compelled by the publisher, it is the translator who determines the fate of the translation and whether it becomes inferior (invisible) or superior (visible). Consequently, it is not something inherent in the translation or translating that makes it by default inferior to an original. It rather depends on the translators and their understanding of the potential of translation even to become better than the original. Only the translators can adapt their translations to suit the audience, the temporal, and the spatial circumstances of the target text.

In conclusion, this paper attempted to shed light on some insightful contributions to translation theory by prominent figures of post-Nietzschean thought. We have discussed the post-

Nietzschean position towards the essence of truth and meaning within original texts. We have introduced how they argue for a superior position of translations that should be judged based on their temporal and spatial merits rather than against those of an original or "definitive text." The researcher discussed the relevance of those contributions to the practice of translation by introducing post-Nietzschean arguments that insist on giving translation superiority by translating in a transformative manner that is not necessarily identical to an essential original meaning that was not necessarily there, to begin with. Also, the researcher discussed how meaning, according to post-Nietzschean thinking, is no longer believed to be discovered but instead created and transformed. This way of thinking entails the total visibility of the translator's agency. It hence brings about a different understanding of the required ethics of translation which are called by Venuti 'ethics of difference.' As we have seen so far that many translators, like the translators of the *Arabian Nights*, and *Menard of the Quixote*, tend to pretend that they were faithful to the originals. However, they have made rich interventions and modifications to what they were supposedly loyal to! and that gives us an indication that it would be more reasonable and more ethical not to pretend to be doing something that you will not do by the end of the day. Post-Nietzschean thought was able to give a wise perspective for translation, as articulated by Borges (1998): "trade between cultures through translation must bring something unusual, intriguing, and fresh." (p.104) when meaning is no longer regarded as crucial to the original but is instead modified based on the context and circumstances of the translated text. There is a need for additional research to introduce and evaluate translations that appeal to the post-Nietzschean perspective on translation discussed in this paper. Such research would hopefully contribute to the advancement of translation theory and may lead to novel approaches to translation theory and practice.

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