

# The Influence of Cicero's Translation Theory on Translation Theory

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**Abstract:** Marcus Thulius Cicero was a famous orator, politician, philosopher, rhetorician, and translator in the ancient Roman period. Although his works "On the Most Excellent Speakers" and "On the Definition of Good and Evil" did not provide specific explanations of translation theory, some of the theories in these chapters well expressed his translation ideas, such as the famous "Speaker" and "Interpreter" theories, It has had a huge impact on translation theory in later generations. This article will analyze his views on literal translation and free translation from excerpts from his two works and their impact on future generations.

**Keywords:** Cicero; Translation theory; Orator.

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## 1. Introduction

The ancient Roman period was the enlightenment period of Western translation theory, and the vast majority of discussions on translation theory in the Western translation community from ancient times to the present began during this period. Therefore, exploring and studying translation theories and ideas at this stage is of great significance for learning and studying translation theory from ancient times to the present.

The splendid culture and splendid civilization of ancient Rome mainly inherited the mantle of ancient Greek civilization, and the origins of European and Western civilizations came from ancient Greece and Rome. Strictly speaking, the ancient Romans learned a lot of ancient Greek civilization and ideas, and their medium was translation, in which translation played a crucial role. The Romans conquered Greece around the 3rd century BC and began to translate Greek texts on a large scale. After the translation was completed, they began to imitate and learn Greek culture, making ancient Roman civilization a glorious civilization in Western history. After the increasing popularity of translation activities, translation theory emerged, and many important translation theorists who are still being studied and studied by people have emerged, mainly represented by Cicero, Horace, Quintilian, Philo, Jerome, Augustine, and others.

The earliest history of Western translation can be traced back to the third century BC, when the "Seventy Son Greek Text" was published as the first recorded translation text, officially opening the history of Western translation. But until the decline of ancient Greek civilization and the rise of the Roman Empire, there were no theories related to translation. When the Roman Empire first emerged, they believed that Greek culture was more superior and had many things to learn from. Therefore, they adhered to Greek culture as the norm and paid more attention to imitating the style and content of the original text when translating Greek into Latin, which is now known as literal translation. But as time passed, the Romans realized that they were the military victors, and Greek culture was nothing more than their plunder. Roman culture should have been more superior. From then on, they paid more attention to competing with the original text in translation than imitating it, no longer focusing on the original text, but surpassing it, which is to some extent what we call

free translation today. And the representative figure among them, also the first person to propose translation theory, is Marcus Thulius Cicero.

## 2. Roman Times

Translator is not Cicero's only identity, and he has not written any works on translation theory. However, his most famous translation theory comes from his two books that are not specifically devoted to translation, namely "On the Most Excellent Speaker" and "On the Definition of Good and Evil", some of which involve translation issues. In Chapter 14 of Volume 5 of "On the Most Excellent Speaker," Cicero states: I am not translating as an interpreter, but as a speaker, retaining the same ideas and forms... but using language that is in line with our expression habits. In this process, I believe it is not necessary to translate correctly, but to retain the overall style and power of the language. Because I believe that the original text should not be 'counted' to the reader like counting coins, but rather should be 'weighed' by the weight of the original text 'For readers. The 'speaker' style translation and the 'interpreter' style translation in this passage made a distinction between free translation and literal translation at the earliest stage, and weighing the original text to the reader indicates his support for free translation. From a historical perspective, he also advocated that in the process of translating Greek into Latin, there needs to be competition with the original text, even surpassing the original text. Although it is somewhat extreme, this is still considered a literal free translation Prototype. And he also emphasized in the fourth volume of "On the Definition of Good and Evil" that translation needs to be flexible and cannot be translated word by word. From then on, there has been ongoing debate about the use of literal translation and free translation until now.

As the first person to propose translation theory, Cicero's theory also had a significant impact on later translators. The closest to his time were Horace and Quintilianus, both of whom advocated for adhering to live translation and abandoning literal translation. Horace also proposed the need to create new words in moderation to enrich the language of the motherland, which is equivalent to localizing foreign words, which is now known as domestication; Kun Quintilianus advocated that translation is just recreation, and was the first person to specifically propose that translation

should compete with the original work.

Although many people were no longer limited to copying Greek translations at that time, there were still many people who insisted that translation should be completely faithful to the original text. Whether in the East or the West, religious translation holds a crucial position. The initial translation in the West mainly revolved around the Bible, and in Bible translation, a considerable number of people insisted on following the original translation. The most famous person who adhered to this viewpoint during this period was Augustine. He was not a professional translator, but rather a theologian. However, he had worked in biblical proofreading and believed that the staff involved in biblical translation must be clergy, because he believed that the 72 translators of the earliest "Seventy Greek Texts" were all called upon by God to complete the translation, and must strictly follow God's will to carry out the translation work, without allowing the translator to have their own consciousness. He advocated literal translation more than free translation.

The theories of the ancient Roman period may seem complex, but they can be summarized in three main directions:

The first one is word by word translation, and the controversy over word by word translation has persisted throughout the ancient Roman period and even into modern times. The two translation methods proposed by Cicero, the interpreter and the speaker, represent word by word translation. Horace and Quintilian mainly absorbed Cicero's viewpoint, advocating that translation needs to be alive rather than dead, opposing word by word translation and advocating live translation. This type of translator is mainly literary translators. In contrast, the clergy of biblical translators, such as Philo and Augustine, believe that word for word translation is necessary. Even Jerome, who also advocates free translation, believes that some concessions need to be made in biblical translation because the existence of the Bible is unique, and the content and sentence of the Bible are also unique. The entire history of Western translation can be said to have developed around literal translation or free translation.

As mentioned above, the two professions generate different ideas, which can be roughly divided into two schools: the literary school represented by Cicero and the linguistic school represented by Augustine. Cicero advocated that translation is also literary creation, and his philosophy greatly influenced many translators in later times, such as Quentin, Horace, and others. Augustine's semiotic translation theory laid the foundation for later linguistic schools.

To summarize the above theories, they can be divided into three categories: those who advocate live translation are classified as one category, those who advocate dead translation are classified as one category, and those who believe that both are acceptable are classified as one category. As one of the samples that have been studied by translators since ancient times, the Bible is also one of the earliest reasons for the birth of the translation industry. When it was first translated into Greek, people believed that it was necessary to be completely faithful to the original text in order to convey the original meaning. Until the rise of the ancient Roman Empire, when translated into Latin, a group of translators represented by Cicero believed that the ancient Roman Empire, which was stronger in military power, did not need to submit in terms of ideology and culture, so they began to recreate it. On the contrary, the clergy Augustine believed that word by word translation was necessary. After absorbing Cicero's ideas, Jerome also dialectically viewed the

translation of the Bible and believed that the two methods should be combined.

### 3. Middle Ages

As time passed by the end of the Middle Ages, ethnic languages in various European countries began to rise, and the mainstream language at that time was still Latin. The discussion about whether Latin should be translated into ethnic languages directly or freely emerged. In late medieval Germany, ethnic language translation had become widespread, but Latin still held an important position. Translators still copied the beautiful and elegant style of Latin in the translation process. Only by completely copying the essence of Latin can German become more beautiful. Word by word translation was the main translation method, with the most prominent translator being Nicholas von Ville. He believes that accurate translation of Latin can reflect the beauty of German, and Latin is superior to German. Therefore, it is necessary to use word by word translation and imitate the form and style of Latin one by one in order to produce a better translation. Although sometimes word by word translation may make the translation less smooth and fluent, Will felt that in order to preserve the beauty of Latin, the fluency of the translation could be sacrificed. The dispute over literal and free translation lasted for a long time in Germany, until the 16th century, when the German national self-awareness further strengthened and free translation gradually replaced literal translation as the dominant position. However, the mainstream views of the British on ethnic language translation are vastly different from those of the Germans at first. Unlike Germans who completely imitate Latin, the British believe that translation must respect the local style of the ethnic language in order to better integrate into society, be more accepted by the public, and be better promoted.

In fact, from the emergence of translation activities until the Renaissance, literal translation dominated translation activities at all stages, with free translation coming first. Because both Western and Chinese translation activities initially revolved around religious translation, which emphasized fidelity to the original text, the initial translation activities were mainly based on literal translation. Religious thought was originally a tool used by rulers of both China and the West to govern people's thoughts, so translators are not allowed to have too many of their own thoughts. Tindale's translation of the Bible resulted in his friends and himself being burned as pagans. This phenomenon began to change during the Renaissance period, and it was not until the Enlightenment movement to modern times that people began to translate much literary works, becoming more open-minded, and daring to resist the church. Literary works happened to be more suitable for free translation. Compared horizontally with China, it began with the translation of Buddhist scriptures and continued until the Ming and Qing dynasties when much foreign novels were translated. At that time, it was emphasized that translation was recreation, which was to reject literal translation and promote free translation.

Driven by the Renaissance movement, Western countries continued to develop in the 17th to 19th centuries. During this period, the trend of classicism emerged in French literature, and writers used ancient Greece and Rome as models for learning. The literary and translation fields were inevitably influenced, and the "debate between ancient and modern times" became a hot topic during this period. Literal and free translation were also linked to issues such as valuing the past,

the present, and the ancient. The most famous French translator of the 17th century was Perot de Abrancourt. He is a representative who advocates for free translation rather than accurate translation, and the debate over literal and free translation in France in the 17th century also revolved around his translation theory and methods. He believes that a translator can understand the meaning of the original text, it is sufficient. It is impossible to translate all the content word by word, and even do not be afraid to bring the original translation with a national color. His characteristic is that he has a certain understanding of the main idea of the original work, regardless of the style of the original work, as the translation has readability and literariness, can be highly praised by the public, and even can be arbitrarily deleted, completely disregarding the accuracy of the translation. From here, it can be seen free translation school gradually took a dominant position after the Renaissance.

#### 4. The Present Age

After entering the 20th century, imperialism began to rise, and imperialist countries began to expand outward, competing for their sphere of influence and international markets. In just half a century, two world wars also occurred. Due to the invasion of war, the translation industry inevitably suffered damage, but during this period, many excellent translators still emerged. Italian literary critic and aesthetician Croce proposed some insights into translation in his aesthetic masterpiece "Principles of Aesthetics". He believed that translation cannot perfectly reproduce the original work, and translation must rely on recreation. American professor Herbert Tolman, on the other hand, proposed in his monograph "The Art of Translation" that in order to correctly understand the original text, the translator's own perspective must not be mixed, and the spirit of the original text must be thoroughly understood in order to correctly translate. To reflect the style and ideas of the original text, it is necessary to be faithful to the original text. If the original work wriggles on the ground, the translation cannot soar in the air is also his very classic idea.

It was not until the end of World War II that various countries began to recover from the war, their economies took off, and translation became a separate discipline. Translation also entered the computer age, during which translation theory began to flourish and entered its most glorious era. And

the most well-known translator Eugene Nida's theory of dynamic and functional equivalence is actually very similar to Cicero's proposal to 'address' the original text to readers. It can be seen the ideas of Cicero's from ancient to contemporary times have had a huge impact on many translators, and it is not an exaggeration to say that he was the first to propose a translation theory. Cicero is undoubtedly the ancestor of translators.

#### 5. Conclusion

During the ancient Roman period, such extensive and profound translation theories emerged, which had a significant impact on translation theory and practice in later generations. To this day, these theories are not outdated. Undoubtedly, reinterpreting these theories from the knowledge gained in modern times and contemporary perspectives can also drive the translation industry today. As one of the earliest translation theorists in the West, Cicero achieved such a feat over 2000 years ago. Although it seems that his theory is not so mature and even has many flaws, Cicero's translation theory also reflects some factors of functional equivalence, so there are still many areas worth studying and learning from.

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