

Who came first? Time-travelling translations

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The question of “Who came first?” seems to have an obvious answer: volumes before 1975 precede volumes after 1975, therefore volumes before 1975 came first. However, paratexts from two different periods in the Korean-American translation flow (the first stage covering 1951 to 1975 and the second stage covering 1976 to 2000) do not seem to confirm this apparently straightforward correlation. Actually, more volumes in the second period are presented as “first translations” than in the first period. We claim that the purpose of the translation and the stability of the profession are two basic factors that model such claims for “novelty”. On the one hand, pioneer translators seem unaware of their characteristic originality. They usually rely on previous works to legitimise their efforts. On the other hand, later works are already legitimised. However, they need to look for differentiation from the previous works and therefore claim to be “the first”. This research looks into the paratexts of translations from Korean into English published in the United States between 1951 and 2000 as a case study for these claims.

Key words: paratexts, Korean literature, professionalization, discourse analysis

Introduction

“Who came first?” This question seems to have an obvious answer: first-stage volumes come first. However, the paratexts of translations from Korean into English do not seem to confirm this apparently straightforward, logical correlation. While first-stage volumes hardly ever present themselves as being “first”, second-stage volumes emphasize their novelty.

If we take the paratexts as absolute truths, we should be able to shed new light on the physics of literary time travelling. Clearly, the volumes published after 1975 were the first translations, while those published before 1975 were a continuation of previous efforts, so, logically, Korean translators must have travelled in time. Unfortunately, we will have to see the paratexts as relative truths and try to find a sociological rather than physical explanation.

Research background

This research is based on the paratexts of the English translations of Korean literary works published or distributed in the United States from 1951 to 2000. The evolution of the relationship between these two countries, in this period, provides a complex historical background. It comprises the creation of strong ties (American intervention in the Korean War), the development of those ties (building Korea as a stronghold against Communism), and the change of discourse provided by the evolution of the participants (developed Korea speaking for themselves in the world system).

The corpus comprises 198 volumes over both periods: 24 in the first stage and 175 in the second stage. Of the total corpus, we have physically accessed 90 volumes (24 corresponding to the first stage and 72 to the second stage), additional information was found on another 60, and only bibliographical information has been collected for the remaining 48 volumes.

For the volumes that have been physically located, we take into account the information found in the paratexts. By “paratext” we mean the “verbal or other productions, such as author’s name, a title, a preface, illustrations [...], accompanying [a book], which vary in extent and

appearance” (Genette 1997: 1). Specifically, we have looked at covers, flaps, introductions, translators’ notes, acknowledgements and prefaces.

The reasons for relying on the information provided by the paratexts come from the main function they perform. This is to present the work for a certain public, or to respond to certain author’s demands, without changing the text:

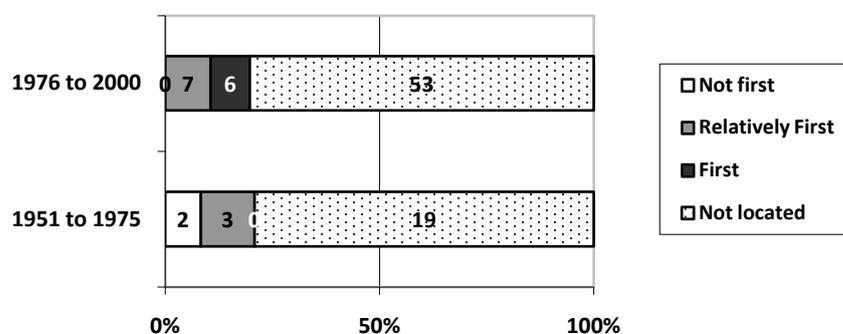
Being immutable, the text in itself is incapable of adapting to changes in its public in space and over time. The paratext - more flexible, more versatile, always transitory because transitive - is, as it were, an instrument of adaptation. Hence the continual modification of the text’s “presentation”. (Genette 1997: 408)

In our corpus, not only do inborn characteristics of the works (like genre) respond to the development of the Korean-American translation flow, but paratexts also reflect the process of professionalization surrounding the flow. We understand “professionalization” as the social process by which any trade or occupation becomes a true “profession”, that is a “community that holds exclusive rights to the commercial application of an organized set of knowledge in a given social context” (Monzó 2006: 159, my translation). We understand that the degree of professionalization is a crucial factor in the way a text is presented and that paratexts, being “instruments of adaptation”, can tell us about the professionalization of translators.

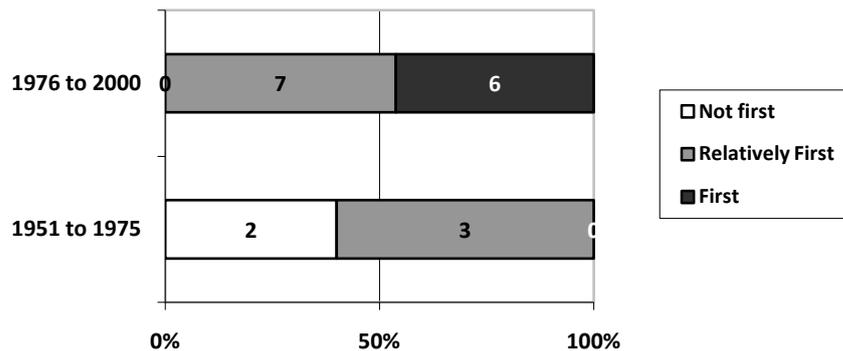
Case study

As noted, we only studied the paratexts of the 90 volumes that were physically accessed (24 corresponding to the first stage and 72 to the second stage). We found different variations on the novelty discourse in five volumes in the first period and in thirteen in the second period (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Presence of the discourse of novelty in the corpus



If we look at the varieties of discourse, none of the works of the first period claim to be first and none of the works of the second period give references to previous works (see figure 2). By first, we mean a claim of novelty in a certain aspect only.

Figure 2: Distribution of the discourse of novelty

Let's look at the numbers in more detail.

First stage: not the first

Three volumes in the first stage acknowledge not being “first”:

1. The front flap of *The Ever White Mountain* reminds the reader of previous efforts: “It is only in recent years that Western understanding of the Orient has begun to be enriched by a small number of excellent *pioneer works* devoted to Korea, the Land of Morning Calm” (Kong-Paiz 1965, front flap, my italics here & passim.). The translator then includes her translation in this group pioneers: “The present book belongs among these works, for this is a sparkling presentation of a major poetic form hitherto virtually unknown to the West - the brief and evocative Korean *sijo*” (Kong-Paiz 1965, front flap).
2. Lee mentions how in *Songs of the Flying Dragons* he “attempt[s] to explore from yet another angle the East Asian view of man and history” (Lee 1974: ix), intrinsically accepting the existence of previous explorations.
3. Takashi argues that “there is *still* no *adequate* history of Korea in English or other European language” (Takashi 1969: v), again implying that there have been inadequate histories explained in English before.

In all three cases we find mention of previous works.

First stage: the first... I think

Two works in the first stage are presented as novelties, but within certain parameters:

1. In the case of *In This Earth and in this Wind: This is Korea*, Streingberg clarifies that the way the author had pictured Korean society “has never been presented before in English”, at least “in the translator’s knowledge” (Streingberg 1967: vii), leaving the door open for such a work to exist beyond his knowledge.
2. *Anthology of Korean Poets* includes many reprinted poems (as can be seen in the acknowledgments) but claims originality since “[i]t is a remarkable achievement in introducing *on this scale* for the first time to a Western audience [...]” (Lee 1964: 14).

The way the works are introduced reinforces their status as being “first” if certain conditions are taken into account, but at the same time they make reference to the existence of previous works.

Second stage: the first... in something

Several works in the second stage present clarifications in their introductions. This might throw light on the intended meaning of “first”.

For instance, in *The Silence of Love* we read: “The introduction of substantial selections from the works of more recent poets [...] makes this anthology the *first truly representative* collection of modern Korean poetry in English or Korean” (Lee 1980: front flap). This veiled reference to updating previous works (although “not truly representative” in this case) allows reviewers, editors and translators to present their work as “the first” in something. *The Wayfarer* is then “*one of the very few* [anthologies] to be published in North America, and is the *first to focus* on the work of such a variety of women writers” (Fulton and Fulton 1997: back cover), while *The Rainy Spell* becomes a whole new book, as “three stories have been *added* to the original edition and are presented here for the *first time in English translation*” (Suh 1998: back flap).

Sometimes the work might not be the first translation, but it can be *considered* the first translation, anthology, or the first collection of a certain author. In *The Stars and other Korean Short Stories* we see that “[i]n this *first anthology* of twelve short stories, chosen from over a hundred written in five decades, the translator E.W. Poitras, considered it important to span *Hwang’s entire writing career*” (Poitras 1980, inner flap). *The House of Twilight* is the “[*ff*] *first English collection by Korea’s most original and stylish young writer*” (Holman 1982: back cover) as it is again stressed upon in the back cover which in big letters reads “The House of Twilight, his first-ever collection in English...” (Holman 1982: back cover).

To take another example, the back cover of *The Metacultural Theater of Oh Tae Sok* uses a sentence from the preface to summarize this collection of avant-garde Korean plays. Stress is placed on their originality: “Offered here are the first English translations of five plays by Oh Tae Sok, Korea’s most gifted playwright and one of the most original dramatists and stage directors in Asia today” (Graves 1999: Preface).

At this stage, introductions seem to be more market-oriented, with greater stress on the improvements and novelties the works offer.

Second stage: the first despite the evidence

This lack of exaltation of originality in the first stage contrasts with the six volumes in the second stage that claim to be the first of their kind.

In some situations, these claims might be refuted by looking at the corpus. That is the case of *The Shaman Sorceress*, a 1989 translation of 울화 (Ulhwa). It states in the inner flap: “This novel, published here *for the first time in English* [...]” (Shin and Chung 1989: inner flap), obviously forgetting about the 1979 translation of the same novel by An Jeonghyo and published in the United States by Larchwood: *Ulhwa the Shaman*.

The back-cover presentation of *The Moonlit Pond* (1998) is also difficult to support. It is presented as a “major anthology, *the first of its kind* in English” (Lee 1998: back cover). Without any intention of taking credit away from the excellent editing of this volume, it is difficult to consider it “the first of its kind” when there were at least thirty anthologies of poetry published before 1998.

Meeting and Farewells is also supposed to be the first selection of Korean short stories: “This selection of the best modern Korean short stories—the *first such volume* to appear in English translation—will help to introduce Korea’s literary achievement” (Jeong 1980: xi). It would be, if we ignored *Flowers of Fire: Twentieth Century Korean Short Stories* (1974) and *The Hermitage of Flowing Water and nine others* (1967). We would also need to assume that

Meeting and Farewells was published months before two other anthologies in the same year: *Modern Korean Short Stories* (1980) and *A Washed-out Dream* (1980).

The same applies to *Trees on the Cliff*, where on the inner flap we are told “Trees on the Cliff is his *first translation* of a Korean novel and is the *first complete* modern Korean novel *ever to be published in English*” (Chang 1980: inner flap). However, *The Yalu Flows* would better fit this description as it dates back to 1960.

In other situations, the claims are refuted by the information provided by the volume. For example, Lee’s translation of *The Silence of Love* claims that “[t]he translations collected here make possible for the *first time* an appreciation of the full range and depth of modern Korean poetry” (Lee, 1980: front flap). However, as stated in the acknowledgements, the volume includes a considerable amount of reprinted material, which could surely be found in other editions.

These examples contrast drastically with those found in the first stage, which avoided any claims to novelty. How can these diametrically opposed views be reconciled?

Analysis of the results

As mentioned, we believe that paratexts are a useful tool for unveiling the process of professionalization. This is because its main function is to present a text to a public. Genette stresses the functionality of paratexts:

The most essential of the paratext’s properties [...] is functionality. Whatever aesthetic intention may come into play as well, the main issue for the paratext is not to ‘look nice’ around the text but rather to ensure for the text a destiny consistent with the author’s purpose. To this end, the paratext provides a kind of canal lock between the ideal and relatively immutable identity of the text and the empirical (sociohistorical) reality of the text’s public [...] the lock permitting the two to remain ‘level’. (Genette 1997: 407-8)

In order to understand the finality of the paratexts we need to answer two questions:

1. What are the differences in the “destiny consistent with the author’s purpose” in both stages?
2. What are the changes in the “empirical reality of the text’s public”?

The contextual information surrounding the works can provide an answer.

The empirical reality of the public

In the first stage, Korea held an important position in American society: the Korean War had put the country in the limelight and the public was receptive to imports from the Hermit Kingdom. Parallel 38 became, after the war, a strategic border that stopped the expansion of Communism. Korean literature had UNESCO support and there were subsidies for translation and distribution of Korean works. However, the scant contact between Korea and foreign cultures limited the number of translators available to do the job.

In the second stage, a growing number of professional translators were available. However the zenith of Korean popularity was soon passed and Korean literature was in direct competition with other foreign literatures. There were fewer subsidies, so publications responded to commercial needs.

A destiny consistent with the author's purpose

In the first stage, the available translators not only did the more textual part of the work but were often also in charge of selecting the works, acquiring the translation rights, and even finding suitable publishing houses. Most often, their work was paid for by government subsidies. These translators were often in visible positions of society. Therefore, the purpose of most works was to spread Korean culture, and most paratexts were designed to acknowledge the funding. The novelty of the situation required legitimacy.

In the second stage, translators were still consulted for activities beyond their linguistic ability. However, in general, their work was controlled by publishing houses. The translations were designed to sell. Korean literature as such was already legitimate and now needed to claim its originality.

Professionalization and paratexts

As explained, the early translations depended on subsidies and translators, in their role as multiple agents of the process needed to legitimate the relevance of their work. Previous experiences validate, to a certain extent, the importance of the works. Moreover, the visible yet inexperienced translators needed good knowledge of the foundations of their work in order to justify their efforts. The reluctance to put emphasis on the novelty of the product, in favour of the exaltation of the idea of continuation, corresponds to a first stage of professionalization.

In comparison, later translators did not feel the pressure of visibility and were already considered professionals, or at least paid as such. Their obligation was not so much to the public or the sponsor, but to the intermediaries between their work and the final reader, their publishers. Either encouraged by them or bearing in mind the commercial purpose of their work, they presented the text as something original, new, and different from previous texts. This tendency was probably reinforced by the publishers themselves. Such bold claims to novelty would be unlikely to exist if not in a stable situation of professionalization.

The discourse used in paratexts complies with the needs of these two stages of professionalization: origins and establishment. Therefore, studying the first helps us to understand the second, and justifies the use of a discourse of novelty that travels in time.

Conclusion

To sum up, we argue that the stability of the profession is a basic factor that models claims of “novelty”. In this case, paratexts are a useful tool for unveiling the professionalization of translation.

On the one hand, early translators depended on subsidies and relied on previous works to legitimate their efforts. Pioneer translators also need to justify themselves to a certain extent. On the other hand, later works and translators were already legitimized but needed to look for distinction from the previous works in order to satisfy market demands.

The discourse used in paratexts complies with the needs of these two stages of professionalization: origins and establishment.

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