SOME WITTGENSTEINIAN REFLECTIONS ON TRANSLATION PRACTICE IN A CHINESE CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

The global integration of economic, social and cultural activities has pushed the importance of translation to a new level. With the sheer volume of translation, and the increased demand for near instantaneous translation, there is a growing reliance on technological systems. This paper begins from the assumption that an examination of the conceptual foundations of translation is needed to understand the growing reliance on technological systems. The philosophy of language in later Wittgenstein provides a rich resource for reconsidering current translation theories and practice, especially his ideas concerning "language games" and his theory of meaning. This paper discusses translation from a Wittgensteinian perspective and urges caution against over-reliance on technological systems.

Key words: Wittgenstein, Chinese translation, language games, meaning theory

Translation and the philosophy of language

Translation is intimately connected with the concept of meaning: a translation is good insofar it is *meaning preserving*. But the concept of meaning is philosophically controversial, and it may be that the practice

of translation is sensitive to philosophical issues about the nature of meaning (and related semantic concepts).

The philosophical thought of later Wittgenstein centres on the study of ordinary language. Crucial to his later thought were the concepts of a *language game* and that of a *form of life*. These concepts are used to articulate a theory of meaning, expressed by his famous slogan: "meaning is use".

In addition to this account of meaning, there is a metaphilosophy in Wittgenstein's later work, according to which "philosophical problems arise when language goes on holiday."[1] This is *ordinary language philosophy*, according to which many traditional philosophical debates rest upon the misuse of language. The idea of "language going on holiday" refers to language that stops playing its normal function and begins to fail to achieve its original expressive effect. By carefully studying ordinary usage, these philosophers hoped to dissolve many traditional philosophical problems by correcting the linguistic confusions they rest upon.

In Wittgenstein's framework, the words with which we communicate are props in 'language games' and you will only understand the language being used if you are able to play the game. That is the reason for Wittgenstein's claims that "[t]he language of religion is meaningful only to the religious followers."[2] The followers of the same religion often use the same words in their internal organizations, which have a communicative meaning among them. For those who are not believers of the same religion, we do not think that these religious words have any meaning or influence on us, because we are outside the game. Words gain their meanings only from the context of the game. If you do not know the rule of soccer then, in your eyes, two soccer teams become just people running madly and meaninglessly. He admitted that certain similarities and commonality exist among different games; however, these commonalities are like crisscrossing 'family resemblances' and there is no deep or interesting feature that all games share and that distinguishes them *as games*.

Chen Jiaying points out that "the meaning of the original German *Sprachspiel* is much wider than the meaning of the word *game* in Chinese. It is too narrow to translate *Sprachspiel* into *language game* while too broad into language activities, comparatively the first one will be better. However, we cannot understand *Sprachspiel* totally based on the original meaning of *Game*"[3]. So, the original intention of Wittgenstein was to emphasize the rules, context and flexibility of language games, which can also be applied in the process of translating.

Before we start a translation, we must have a good cognition of the rules of both source language and target language, not only the usage of single word or sentence, but also handling slang, special terminologies, fixed collocation, interjection and metaphor, etc., which are also a parts of language games. Take a Chinese phrase "敷" (pronunciation: "fu yan"), for example, which means behave irresponsibly or treat others insincerely, and only deal with problems superficially. When it is translated into English, it should be translated as "lip service" in accordance with its implied meaning and fixed collocation, instead of literal translations like "say it but do not act", "empty promise" that follow the Chinese meaning.

Wittgenstein studied language in a descriptive way, saying "do not think, but look". Recently, a newly popular star draws much of the public attention. She is Yang Chaoyue, a member of a girl's band. However, for some reason she is called "Jinli". In traditional Chinese language, "Jinli" refers to a kind of shining and bright red carp, which are popular in Chinese culture for being colourful and joyous. In 2018, it became a buzzword on the Internet, referring to good luck and great popularity. So, in the process of translation, it should be sufficiently understood and the changes between the traditional and new meanings should be distinguished. The translation "Lucky people, lucky dog" is better and more appropriate than that of "koi fish". People are using languages smoothly in language games without being restricted by past usage, instead, more and more fresh and vivid linguistic phenomena are created. So, firstly, translators cannot get stuck in traditional standards. Secondly, an inclusive mentality that recognizes and learns new meanings learning is essential for effective translation.

Meaning is use

The transformation of Wittgenstein's thought from *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* to *Philosophical Investigations* reflects a wider turn of philosophical thought from logical positivism to behaviorism and pragmatism, in the 20th century. It shifts from the idea that language is a fixed structure to the realization that language is a rheological structure closely related to our daily life. Later Wittgenstein believed that creating a meaningful language is not to depict the logical formation of the world, but to use its conventional meanings in our daily life in a way of language games. "In most cases, meaning is use," which is one of the most well-known statements in his book *Philosophical Investigations*. "It's not about what you say, it's about the way you say it and the context in which you say it. The meaning of words is how to use them."[4] When investigating meaning, the philosopher must "look and see" the variety of uses to which the word is put. The meaning of a word is closely related to its use in the context, instead of being a designated referent.

The philosophical view on language from Wittgenstein, which blends language expressions into social practice, provides significant guidance to groups of people that want to communicate clearly and effectively. Writers, journalists, and translators are often asked to put themselves in the audience's shoes and prepare their own content accordingly. The thoughts of Wittgenstein pushed this issue beyond the scope of linguistics and entered into the field of ethnology: listen and look how they play language games if you want to understand and communicate with certain social ethnic groups. Within many contexts, slang, jokes, etc. are not merely secondary communication, but a form language system adopted within the social group.

As to translation activities, Wittgenstein's theory of meaning can also be valued as guidance. The generation of meaning comes from the use of words in daily contexts, which emphasizes that we should accurately interpret and grasp the context in the process of translation. The style and content of the translation should be determined in accordance with the specific context. Contexts can be interpreted on macro and micro levels.

The macro-level context refers to cultural, social, historical background of the text and its topic, theme and communicative function, which decide the "above-referential meaning."[5] Take the American presidential election as an instance. When topics on politics are discussed and reported, a better acquaintance and understanding of American political system and election mechanism is necessary in order to reach the goal of translating the relevant reports correctly and conveying information factually. Conventionally there are no two presidents existing in one country in the same reign period. However, when we translate American election news, the phenomenon of two presidents may appear in the target language. Without a thorough study of the political and cultural background, it may not be possible to tell the difference between president and president-elect because there is no term to express the concept of "elected but not on the job" in Chinese language. On the other hand, when the new president is waiting for his inauguration, the on-job president who is going to be relieved of his office soon is usually called a "lame duck", referring to the decrease of his political influence. When being translated into Chinese, the term "即将卸任的总统" should be adopted, meaning "outgoing president" instead of "跛脚鸭" ("lame duck") which has an underlying implication of being crippled, clumsy, with the slight insult. This second, less successful, translation is widely used among newspapers and social media.

The micro context refers to the context within the text, including a variety of words collocations, phrases and non-phrases, text, etc., which can determine meanings. Translation texts of science and technology require preciseness; literary translation requires elegance; journalism translation requires conciseness and poem translation requires neatness. Under different micro contexts, the usages and style should be carefully considered. In law texts translation, the nominalization of verbs is widely adopted, and sentences are simplified to the greatest extent, to avoid ambiguity as much as possible and guarantee the authority and prestige of law texts.

Wittgenstein believed that meaning is determined by use, so what we should make clear is how words are used. Use is here understood broadly, to include social forms of life and scenarios. The meaning of words lies in use within various forms of social life. Therefore, another aspect is needed to be mentioned here, that is, the acceptability of audience in ordinary language system also influences the meaning of language. Besides context and content currency in target languages, the comprehensive quality of audience group needs to be taken into consideration: elite groups or just ordinary people in the neighborhood. The same financial report might be translated by adopting different translation strategies in text style and sentence-making. The methods and tools such as analogy, amplification, metaphor, free translation can be taken into consideration for audiences that possess no professional knowledge.

The challenge that confronts any translator – human or AI – is that of playing, or *simulating* playing, the language games that are at issue in the context at hand. This requires sensitivity to all the features of context just mentioned. And it requires creativity, as we have to interpret *novel* usages – language is constantly adapting, after all, and the internet seems to accelerate this process exponentially. Current AI translation programs work by accessing huge data banks of past usages of expressions, and exploiting statistical correlations between expressions. But past usage – even terabytes of data about past usage – does not suffice to determine the language game that is relevant for interpreting *this* use of some expression. And determining this kind of fact is the essential prerequisite for accurate translation, from the Wittgensteinian perspective.

Conclusion

The concept of a language game is central to Wittgenstein's later philosophy of language. I have not, in this paper, attempted a detailed exposition of this concept. However, the problem just noted would seem to arise on any candidate interpretation. For understanding and participation in language games requires more than just information of past usages (many of which will likely be irrelevant, for any given

context of translation). It requires participation – or the *simulation* of participation – in the form of life that is involved in the context at hand. And for AI technology to simulate such participation would require a quite different approach to translation than that which is used in extant translation systems.

ENDNOTES

[1] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Macmillan Publishing Company, 1953.

[2] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Macmillan Publishing Company, 1953.

[3] Chen Jiaying, *Philosophy of Language*. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2003.

[4] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Macmillan Publishing Company, 1953.

[5] Sun li, "On the Influence of Wittgenstein on Liu Miqing's Translation Theory," *Journal of Northeast Agricultural University*, 2011.

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