

# Lu Xun and Nabokov in the Light of the “Verbatim Translation” Concept<sup>\*</sup>

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Lu Xun and Nabokov were both independent and unique literary writers, and both were criticized for their adherence to literal translation theory and practice. The author, through intensive reading of their translation works, finds that both reached the same goal by different routes and drew almost the same conclusion. Lu Xun's reason lay in enriching the local Chinese culture and modern language through literal translation of foreign works while Nabokov sought to introduce his own native culture and language to American readers.

*Keywords:* literal translation, native culture and language, verbatim translation

## Introduction

We should not omit the cultural factors behind their theories of literal translation. For Lu Xun, he would like to take advantage of literal translation to introduce foreign advanced culture and language into disastrous China while Nabokov would like to introduce his own culture and literature into American life. Almost all of the critics' comments are focused on their language facets rather than their cultural intentions without understanding their profound motivations to transmit or improve their modern native language and literature. Their original objectives are to transmit information accurately and completely, and help their readers acquire information to the largest degree possible. However, we still need to differentiate their literal translation theory from translation word for word.

Since Lin Shu, the first literal translator of early-modern China, there is a popular moral of altering the original text without hesitation according to some demand. Many translators transformed foreign novels into Chinese style of stories by means of translation. Lu Xun ever learned from Lin's style of translation when he was translating the novels, like *Month-Border Travel* and *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, but until 1909, he changed his translation strategy when he was translating two volumes of *Novel Outside the Area Gather* with his brother, Zhou Zuoren. He decided never to emulate the famous Lin Qinnan, and even very regretted at his translation works made in his early age. He ever said in his letter to Yang Jiyun in May 15, 1934: “I love science story for I yearned for studying science, but I was too smart to conduct literal translation in my early age. I even thought it was too later to change” (Lu, 1981, p. 409). Later on, Lu Xun always keeps taking the method of literal translation or just like what he said; he takes a method of verbatim translation. He defined the verbatim

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translation as literal translating sentence by sentence according to the sheet gauge, even translating word for word (Lu, 1981, p. 200). It means literal translation with as equal meaning to the original text as possible. Generally speaking, Lu Xun did not advocate paraphrase translation because he thought if too much emphasis had been laid on the paraphrase translation, the content input may lose shape, either helpless to further enriching the expression ability of Chinese (Gu, 2009). Never as the only case, similarly Nabokov, who was born 10 years later than Lu Xun, also changed the paraphrase translation taken by him in his early age and advocated literal translation even verbatim translation in his middle age. The author decided to investigate why they happened to coincide to advocate literal translation, which was disliked by common translators and would like to know whether it is because they are great minds who think alike. What are the profound reasons behind it?

### Lu Xun's and Nabokov's Origin of Verbatim Translation Concept

Lu Xun wrote in the translator's postscript in Lunacharski's *Tolstoy's Death and Teenaged Europa* (Spring Tide, Monthly Journal, Vol. 1, 3rd ed., Jan., 1929) as follows:

Lu Xun's translation retained the syntax of the original text deliberately, where there are many long sentences with some Europeanized subordinate clauses, so they will show their influent-inexpressive aspect. Lu Xun said he advocated verbatim translation mainly because he had been against conservative and rejecting all Europeanized sentences. He thought ancient Chinese needed to input fresh expressive methods from foreign countries when ancient Chinese is being transformed into modern Chinese. The fresh expressive methods are absorbed by modern Chinese during the process of translation and writing and enrich the vocabularies and expressions of Chinese and obsolete those not able to be absorbed. Lu Xun's ideas on these comments are filled with dialectical thinking and pioneering spirit. He thought: “The translators' basic mistake is to keep the accidental status of their own languages rather than making their languages influenced strongly by the foreign languages. (Yue, 1998, p. 31)

As for Nabokov, the fluctuation of life experience has exerted great influence on his creation and translation. With the change of his life and creation style, his translation has changed greatly. When he got to America, he translated Pushkin's poems into English through his regular paraphrase methods and made success very soon. Wilson, the American writer, praised highly these translation works and thought it had been the best English version of Pushkin. In this stage, he translated rhyme to rhyme, keeping considerate accurateness, although sometimes expressing vaguely for rhyming. After arriving at Wileshley, his first works are translated poems of Ходасевич. After half a century, these wonderful translations were still what the English readers think can testify Ходасевич is talent. After 1945, Nabokov's translation ideas changed greatly and he began to think that the voice of the original writer had been replaced by a fake voice in so wonderful and smooth paraphrase translation and the romantic charm had lost during translating. “I am very sure that I will never do rhyming translation—their dictatorship is absurd and incompetent with its accurateness” (Boyd & Nabokov, 2011, p. 148). Therefore, he began to spare no effort to advocate literal translation. In *Translation Problems: English Translation of Onegin*, he claimed that the most serious literal translation is one thousand times useful than the most beautiful paraphrase translation because paraphrase translation is blaspheme of the original work just like noise of parrot and uproar of monkey, showing the degrading of the translators. He would like to adopt literal translation with notes. “I hope the translation texts are filled with a large number of notes, which arrive at the top of this page or that page just like skyscraper, magnificent between notes and eternity”. In the late March of 1957, he said in his letter to Wilson: “This is my fifth or sixth texts of translation that I have done. I love dull dictions

and fish bone of poor truth” (Nabokov, 1957). What is wrong about a writer said to have much concern about the style rather than content did not hesitate to evade various beauty in styles, at the cost of all the charm in order to express the accurate meaning of the words and sentences of Pushkin faithfully? Even in 1940s’, Nabokov’s poetic translation was highly praised, so why he would refuse any rhyming translation and adhere to such an unconditional literal translation style?

### **Luxun’s and Nabokov’s Practice of Verbatim Translation**

*On Technics and Literature and Art Criticism* has been consecutively published since 1929. He has applied his verbatim translation theory a lot and became the target attacked by his enemy in this aspect. Liang Shiqiu advanced sharp criticism to this in his article titled as “On Lu Xun’s verbatim translation” (published in Vol. 2, No. 6, 7 of *New Moon*). He said it had been close to dead translation and took three points’ translation in *On Technics and Literature and Art and Criticism* as the examples to describe the abuses of this translation style had been more serious than paraphrase translation.

Some authors and scholars admired Lu Xun’s translation style. For example, Mr. Xu Shouchang commented on this translation collection as follows: “Since Lu Xun failed in planning *Neogenesis Journal*, he had to try hard to translate books and carried out introduction to European new art and literature with his brother Zhou Zuoren”. He published *Novels Outside the Area Gather* and believed it would transform personality and rebuild the society. The eastern European and North European literature translated by them, especially the works of weak nations are filled with struggling, revolting, and roaring. Xu Shouchang said he had read and compared Lu Xun’s translation version with German version and found it had been faithful word for word, with attention to details, with no abuse of random addition or emission. He built a monument of a new era for the translation circle. Mr. Xu pointed out that firstly the content of translation had been filled with revolting, secondly the translation style just includes literal translation, and therefore it had opened up a new stage.

As for Lu Xun, the publishing of *Novel Outside the Area Gather* was a sign of greatly changed translation style. When Lu Xun was translating *Month-Border Travel* and *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, he still followed Lin Shu’s style of translation, but gave it up when he was translating *Novel Outside the Area Gather*, in which Lu Xun specially said that his translation would be totally different from the translation version of some recent celebrity. Certainly, Lin Shu was not the only translator who pruned the original version with most mistranslation for at that time many translators have very similar but less different styles, such as Liang Qichao who translated *Beauty’s Adventure* and *Fifteen Little Heroes*, Wu Jianren who translated the *Wonder of Power Skills*, and Bao Xiaotian in early stage. Lu Xun summed up that Chinese ancient translation laid an emphasis on the ideas that literal can introduce original foreign culture to enrich Chinese culture based on the experience and lesson of Sutra translation and the language of literally translated texts can improve Chinese language and Chinese thinking. Lu Xun’s new principle can be regarded as a deliberate literal translation.

Lu Xun thought “shun (smoothness)” shall be extended to the idea that the thinking and culture shall comply with the tradition of our nation. Forcing others to become ours may be greatly welcome, but it has lost significance, so Lu Xun was against such smooth translation. Especially in the fields of art, literature, and theoretic field, in the era needing more Western fresh blood, such translation seemed to be hard because there had been profound cultural causes behind it, but also causes of text form. Interpreting Western culture in an old form

is but “Cutting the feet to fit the shoes”, so although it has met the masses’ demand in reading, its meaning was not so important than verbatim translation, which appeared influent and hard.

Nabokov’s literal translation with notes can be seen much in Pushkin’s poetic novel *Evgenii Onegin* translated by him. He began to translate since 1950 and finished it across over 10 years. The 1964’s English version has four volumes, about 1,500 pages in total, including translation texts about 250 pages, translator’s preface about 250 pages, and indexes over 100 pages, with the rest 800 pages of detailed notes. In 1950’s, he consecutively finished five to six full-translation versions, but until 1957, he then claimed that he had found the correct method to translate *Onegin*, which means getting rid of the excess of original texts from the perspective of faith (Nabokov, 1946). In fact on Sep. 14, 1954, he submitted the paper titled as “Translation problems: Onegin in English” to verify that unless absolutely faithful word to word, other modes can transmit the explicit meaning and tacit association underling Pushkin’s poetry. This paper has got resounding success. He created explosive atmosphere for the publishing of English version of *Onegin* based on his standard of absolutism he adhered in translation. Just as the reaction got by Lu Xun when he finished his *Novel Outside the Area Gather*, Nabokov caused tit for tat reaction and much dispute, but it just helped him to arrive at his destination, which means hoping this book to be eye-striking for its breach of tradition. He even set up at least one trap for the future critics deliberately (Nabokov, 1960).

### **The Ideological Connotation of Lu Xun’s and Nabokov’s Verbatim Translation**

Since Yan Fu advanced faith, fluency, and elegance as the standards of translation, there were always disputes and discussion for the standard of translation, but it can be regarded as a conclusion to various theories in translation circle. In this three-word principle, Lu Xun specially drew faith out to emphasize his profound intention, and he thought the target of translation would be to absorb the foreign nutrition, so the heterogeneous culture shall be accurately introduced, just like Prometheus’ stealing fire from other countries, advantageous to the development of Chinese culture. No matter what its ideological meaning, thinking or expression modes are, you will feel it not smooth definitely, for if you had been very acquainted with them, they did not need to be introduced. Lin Shu’s former translation was of evident style of Chinese traditional culture, popular for it, but limited to it.

Lu Xun was not only for discussing the language problems, but naturally discussing naturally the radical methods and ways to build Chinese modern culture from language problems. Language is the reflection of our existing frustrations. Introducing foreign original culture and enriching Chinese culture was what he would like to acquire. However, the language of verbatim translation texts can also improve Chinese language and Chinese thinking. The sentence that do not lose original meaning means introducing foreign original cultures, with no pursuit of elegance of translation language no matter from its content and form. Lu Xun thought it had been a healthy mind, which considered both its content and language.

The critics did less research on Nabokov’s translation. Grayson (1997) suspected that Nabokov may hope himself to be surrounded by a raying circle of scholar beyond his identity of writer to change his unfavorable image left in American’s mind for his book *Lolita*. Just like Lu Xun, Nabokov gave up smooth and fluent translation for pursuit of hard translation certainly because of some profound element as a literary master who was proficient in both languages. Seen from the expectation of the readers, hard translation is a very feasible

choice for Nabokov because his ideal readers had been those students he had taught in the university. They could read in Russian, so he can retain the elements of Russian original works in his translation to guide these students to traverse the intermediate zone and learn to appreciate the original Russian culture. However, the elaborate of such intermediate zone like this is usually eliminated by the fluent version of translation adopting nationalization (paraphrase translation with our own culture and language). Nabokov's translation was just prepared for those persons who may have no time to master Pushkin's language, but understand that great poet can not read the second-hand reading material. Secondly, seen from the translator's cultural mind, literal translation is a reasonable choice for Nabokov because he felt deeply that the English translation version of Russian classic works had been of so low quality and American readers were in lack of enough knowledge for Russian culture. Taking the example of *Onegin*, before Nabokov's translation version, there had been four English translation version. Nabokov expressed his praise for pioneer's hard-work on one hand, but was affected for many mistakes in it, so he hoped his own translation could supplement the faults in those translations and recover the exotic style eliminated by the paraphrase translation to disclose the rich characteristics of Russian culture and rebuild the due position of Russian culture in American readers to get relevant respect and admiration.

### **The Theoretic and Practice Meaning of Lu Xun's and Nabokov's Verbatim Translation**

History verifies that the translation version transferred in status quo may be deserted by the people for it is not in conformity with the national conditions, but rejecting such translation is often a representation of cultural conservatism, not advantageous to the development of nation. Verbatim translation shows that Lu Xun made a clear distinction from the old generation not only in translation style, but also in cultural ideas and values. Lu Xun was against cultural conservatism, but for drawing as many useful lessons from as many countries, which means bringing firstly and then studying how to use, store or ruin.

### **Conclusion**

In a word, Lu Xun and Nabokov adhered verbatim translation both for transmitting information more completely and accurately to enable the readers to acquire original information to a largest degree under less intervening. “Verbatim” means adhering the validity of information. Lu Xun and Nabokov are both professional theorists of research on language and translation, for their own principle from the perspective of literature and culture, but the offspring makes criticism under a specific background. Whether they would like to reproduce the expected effect of the original works under the target language range background or they wanted to realize some specific functions in target language culture, the significance of language background is not less than the text of original language.

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