

Translation and Cultural Hegemony From the Perspective of Foucault's Power-Discourse Theory

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Abstract

With the “linguistic turn” in 20th-century Western philosophy, the French post-structuralist thinker and philosopher Michel Foucault introduced the theory of power discourse. Foucault's power discourse theory elucidates the interrelationship between power, knowledge, and discourse: knowledge symbolizes power, discourse is the form of power expression, and cultural forces controlling the knowledge-power discourse can achieve cultural dominance. Dominant cultures, with their advanced scientific and technological knowledge, acquire the power of speech in cultural exchanges and manipulate weaker cultures. Translation, as an essential tool for communication between different cultures, is inevitably influenced by this cultural hegemony, as reflected in the translator's choice of translation subjects and strategies. Translation is no longer merely a tool for language conversion but a form of dialogue and exchange constrained by different power discourses. Weaker cultures can resist the cultural hegemony of dominant cultures by adopting foreignization strategies to introduce their superior cultural elements.

Key words: Foucault; Power discourse theory; Translation; Dominant culture; Cultural hegemony

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INTRODUCTION

Michel Foucault, a French thinker, is recognized as one of the representative figures of Western structuralist thought. He is also a renowned philosopher and historian of thought systems in France, significantly influencing literary criticism, philosophy, critical theory, history, the history of science (especially the history of medicine), critical pedagogy, and the sociology of knowledge. His major works include “Madness and Civilization”, “The Birth of the Clinic”, “The Order of Things”, “The Archaeology of Knowledge”, and “Discipline and Punish”.

For Foucault, power is an omnipresent relationship, a complex network. Before Foucault's analysis of power, there was a prevalent view in society: power has only one form, the control of one party over another, based on violence and legitimized to varying degrees, making unjust or unreasonable domination acceptable to the dominated. Foucault opposed this notion, emphasizing homogeneity, centralization, and totality, pointing out that power has various forms and is a relationship, comparable to the “fish and water” relationship. In this analogy, one party (fish) restricts, drives, constrains, and determines the other party (water), and vice versa. Power is not an object that can be possessed to control others but a network of relations that acts within a field (Storey, 2010).

1. THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE, POWER, AND DISCOURSE

Language generates knowledge, and knowledge has always been a weapon of power: “Power and knowledge are integrated into discourse.” Power generates reality and, through discourse mechanisms, produces the “truths” we rely on: “Every society has its specific regime of truth and general politics; in other words, certain types

of discourse are widely accepted and function as truth (Foucault, 2007).”

The existence of discourse does not merely signify the imposition of power. As Foucault stated, “Where there is power, there is resistance”. The relationship between discourse and power is not black and white; discourse is never silent. We must recognize that discourse is not only a tool and effect of power but also an obstacle and stumbling block on the path of power. All acts of resistance and strategies against existing power structures are based on and originate from discourse. This is an extremely complex and unstable process. Discourse produces, transmits, and reinforces power while simultaneously undermining and exposing power, revealing its vulnerabilities and giving hope for resistance.

In Foucault's power discourse theory, power is a crucial topic in social theory. Power refers to all control and domination forces, including tangible forms like political institutions and laws, and intangible forms like ideologies, moral ethics, cultural traditions, and customs. These can be seen as power, controlling and dominating people's thoughts and behaviors, forming a vast network that no one can exist independently of. Knowledge, as an integral part of society, cannot escape the constraints of power. Foucault argued that knowledge is power.

By examining, Foucault discovered that the social knowledge of the humanities is inherently linked to power concentration because these disciplines' subjects are at least partially constructed by power mechanisms. The production of knowledge can only be realized against the backdrop of knowledge communities as social power networks. For Foucault, both the humanities and natural sciences are inherently linked to power.

Regarding the relationship between knowledge and power, Foucault examined the effects of power on knowledge and vice versa. He believed that knowledge and power are inseparable; power is profoundly influenced by knowledge, which endows power. Without the dissemination and preservation of knowledge, power cannot function. Knowledge is permeated with power relations. Power promotes or hinders knowledge; it encourages and stimulates knowledge or conquers and restricts it, imprinting power onto knowledge. Power and knowledge are two aspects of a unified process. Knowledge not only reflects power relations but also is embedded in power. Human nature is the relationship between knowledge and power. Power and knowledge interact. Without knowledge, there are no power relations; power develops based on existing knowledge. Correspondingly, without power systems, there is no knowledge; power systems are the precondition for the existence of knowledge.

Foucault's concept of discourse can be understood narrowly as the form of “language” and broadly as encompassing all forms and categories of cultural life.

Therefore, discourse analysis is closely related to all aspects of social life, such as politics, economics, culture, and social systems. In fact, Foucault's discourse concept diverges from Saussure's standards of language and parole but is not Saussure's parole. It does not refer to personal language practice or expression but to a deep-seated logic hidden beneath people's consciousness, secretly governing the language expressions, thinking patterns, and behavior norms of various groups. It is the linguistic expression of a specific field of knowledge and cognitive activity. Foucault disagreed with Saussure's language as abstract grammatical rules but as a conditioned language application embodying ideological semantics. For Foucault, discourse is the form of power expression, realizing power through discourse. In any society, discourse immediately undergoes control, screening, organization, and redistribution by various power forms. The historical expressions we usually see are products of selective and exclusive discourse rules.

Foucault believed that power and discourse are inseparable, with power realized through discourse. For example, knowledge and truth are symbols of power. By mastering the discourse of knowledge and truth, people can gain power. In other words, discourse is a tool for implementing power and a key to obtaining power. Each societal level has specific discourses intertwined with politics, power, and ideology, forming a vast network that controls and dominates social members' thoughts. All social activities are governed by these power discourses. Foucault argued that texts should be interpreted and understood from political, ideological, and cultural hegemony perspectives. Translation is no longer a pure language conversion activity but one governed by power discourse from beginning to end. The new ideas and concepts brought by translation can support, weaken, or even destroy ideologies in the target language, making translation a form of control.

Foucault's power discourse theory elucidates the interrelationship between power, knowledge, and discourse: knowledge symbolizes power, discourse is the form of power expression, and cultural forces controlling the knowledge-power discourse can achieve cultural dominance. Dominant cultures, with their advanced scientific and technological knowledge, acquire the power of speech in cultural exchanges and manipulate weaker cultures. Translation, as an essential tool for communication between different cultures, is inevitably influenced by this cultural hegemony, as reflected in the translator's choice of translation subjects and strategies. Translation is no longer merely a tool for language conversion but a form of dialogue and exchange constrained by different power discourses. Weaker cultures can resist the cultural hegemony of dominant cultures by adopting foreignization strategies to introduce their superior cultural elements.

In the 1970s, translation studies experienced a cultural turn. This cultural turn emphasized the relationship between translation and aspects like politics, culture, and ideology within the target language system, leading researchers to increasingly realize that translation is no longer a neutral text conversion activity but a rewriting, transformation, or recreation of one culture's discourse in another culture's discourse. Simultaneously, foreignization translation has gradually become a hot topic in contemporary translation theory (Munday Jeremy, 2016). As a product of the cultural turn, foreignization translation contains profound cultural, literary, and even political connotations. Under this background, researchers have objectively interpreted foreignization from various perspectives. Foucault's power discourse theory provides a macro perspective for translation studies, introducing social and historical dimensions into translation research, thus broadening the field's scope and depth. The theory profoundly reveals the social nature of translation activities, the controlling factors behind them, and their significant role in cultural construction. Therefore, adopting the perspective of power discourse theory and examining foreignization translation within the broad international political and cultural framework, focusing on exploring the true meaning of foreignization translation and its irreplaceable role in cultural exchange, is of significant practical significance.

2. CULTURAL HEGEMONY IN TRANSLATION

What is hegemony? Gramsci believed that hegemony refers to an ongoing state where the ruling class (along with other related classes or class components) guides society through the manipulation of "intellectual and moral leadership" rather than ruling it. Hegemony is never simply top-down power but a result of negotiation between the ruling and ruled classes, involving both resistance and incorporation. This negotiation and compromise have certain limitations. Gramsci explicitly pointed out that hegemony struggles can never threaten the economic foundation of class power. Especially when large-scale crises occur in society, and intellectual and moral leadership cannot maintain social authority, hegemonic struggles cease, temporarily replaced by "coercive state apparatuses" like the military, police, and prisons.

From the perspective of hegemony theory, popular culture is produced as people actively consume the texts and practices of the culture industry. It is a mixture negotiated between the upper and lower classes, between commercial interests and authenticity, balancing forces of resistance and incorporation in an unstable field (Storey, 2010).

According to Foucault's theory of power discourse, culture is an invisible form of power. It combines with all other forces to form a vast network of power, ensuring that no individual in society can escape its influence. Knowledge, as a symbol of power, is inevitably closely linked with culture. Therefore, any cultural force that controls the discourse of knowledge power can achieve a position of cultural dominance.

Comparatively, culturally dominant countries often possess advanced scientific and technological knowledge, enabling them to have a voice in international cultural exchanges, while weaker cultures often fall into a state of silence. The disparity in knowledge discourse between strong and weak cultures inevitably leads to cultural hegemony (Venuti, 2004). Furthermore, the existence of cultural hegemony certainly impacts an important tool for cultural and knowledge dissemination—translation. Translation activities no longer occur in a vacuum, isolated from political, ideological struggles, and other social and economic factors. Instead, translation is a highly political activity. Translators' choices regarding translation culture and strategies are influenced by cultural hegemony.

Generally speaking, dominant cultural countries tend to disdain translating texts from weaker cultures, resulting in translated books occupying only a small proportion of the market in dominant cultural countries. In contrast, translated books account for a large proportion in weaker cultural countries (Venuti Lawrence, 2004). This shows that dominant cultural countries have quickly established cultural hegemony through their economic, social, and cultural means. For a long time, translation has operated unidirectionally from dominant to weaker cultural nations. In terms of translation selection, countries like the UK and the US often examine Third World works through their own aesthetic standards, as a conscious choice. Texts reflecting the primitive, mystical, and backward aspects of the Third World often become the preferred selections for dominant cultural countries, which then regard these texts as cultural classics of the Third World, translating them repeatedly. Texts that do not meet their preconceived standards are excluded.

Translators' choices of translation strategies are also clearly influenced by the cultural power disparity between dominant and weaker cultures. On handling cultural differences in translation, there are two differing opinions—domestication and foreignization strategies (Zhao, 2005). The former is target culture-oriented, often ignoring the original text's language and imagery, transforming foreign cultural elements into familiar content for the target audience. The latter is source culture-oriented, requiring the translator to align closely with the author, using the source language's expression methods to convey the original content. This strategy retains linguistic forms or literary images present in the source language but

absent in the target language. Generally, when translating foreign texts, Western countries, represented by the UK and the US, due to their self-confidence and disregard for other cultures, often do not accept elements differing from their cultural values and mostly adopt domestication strategies. In specific translations, to cater to readers' tastes, translators do not hesitate to modify or delete parts of the original text that do not conform to the target culture. Besides, countries like the UK and the US add extensive explanatory material to selected texts to adapt them to the preferences and biases of the target audience.

Since the 17th century, English and American translations of foreign texts have adopted this "smooth" or "transparent" translation approach, maintaining its dominance to this day. This translation trend reflects Anglo-American cultural hegemony, essentially a form of cultural aggression by dominant cultures towards weaker ones. Domestication translation deliberately erases linguistic and cultural differences in foreign texts, assimilating them to Anglo-American societal values and ideologies, making the translations easy to understand, allowing readers to immerse themselves in a culturally transformed foreign culture. Pound's translation of Chinese classical poetry in "Cathay" employs domestication strategies. More typically, British translator Fitzgerald's translation of the Persian "Rubaiyat" under the influence of Anglo-American centrism, resulted in significant alterations. Consequently, the translation is regarded as one of the finest translations in British literary history and is listed as a world literary classic. This demonstrates that translation activities between Western dominant cultures and Eastern weaker cultures are unequal cultural exchanges, characterized by cultural hegemony. Domestication translation strategies are closely linked with cultural hegemony, shaping asymmetric power relations between dominant and weaker cultures, making weaker cultures subservient to Anglo-American manipulation. In other words, domestication translation helps dominant cultures spread discourse power, implementing cultural assimilation.

3. THE INFLUENCE OF POWER THEORY ON TRANSLATION

Foucault's power discourse theory profoundly impacts the humanities and social sciences, injecting new vitality into translation studies. Foucault's major contribution is extending discourse beyond itself, making it a method and object of historical research. In other words, power discourse theory has brought a profound ideological revolution to translation studies, shifting the text-centric view of translation, providing a new theoretical perspective and research method (Mona & Gabriela, 2019). According to power discourse theory, under the influence of Anglo-American cultural hegemony,

transparent communication between languages is impossible. Translation is no longer merely information transfer between texts but a dialogue and exchange constrained by two different power discourses (source and target language discourses). The economic and political advantages of Western dominant cultures inevitably lead to cultural hegemony. Therefore, the Third World should use translation as a weapon to counter cultural hegemony.

As part of the Third World, China should pay sufficient attention to foreignization translation when translating its excellent culture into English, because only through foreignization can the essence of Chinese culture be introduced authentically, preventing it from being assimilated by dominant Western cultures and allowing Chinese culture to reach the world (Anthony, 2016).

The two different translations of "Dream of the Red Chamber" illustrate the irreplaceable role of foreignization in cultural exchange. These translations, by Yang Xianyi and his wife and by David Hawkes, adopt distinctly different approaches, resulting in markedly different outcomes. Yang Xianyi's foreignization strategy retains cultural elements and syntactic structures of Chinese idioms and rhetoric. This approach helps create a sense of unfamiliarity among Western readers, confronting them with cultural differences and challenging the superiority of contemporary global standard language (English) and cultural hegemony. Hawkes' translation brings the two cultures closer, making it easy to read. However, it deprives English readers of understanding the true cultural essence of the original text, thus hindering cultural exchange. Therefore, it is evident that foreignization translation is more beneficial in introducing China's distinctive culture to the world, maintaining its cultural status and attributes, and preserving its excellent cultural heritage from being overshadowed by the colorful Western dominant cultures (Qin, 2001).

Some might doubt whether translations with distinctive cultural characteristics can be accepted by foreign readers. However, such concerns are unnecessary because, with the increasing frequency of cultural exchanges, people have adopted a tolerant and open attitude towards heterogeneous cultures compared to past resistance and seeking conformity. Therefore, the principle of "when in Rome, do as the Romans do" will not satisfy the desire for new cultural elements to enrich and renew their cultural composition (Zheng, 2019).

4. CONCLUSION

Foucault's power discourse theory makes us realize that translation is far more complex than mere linguistic conversion; it is closely related to politics, economy, power, ideology, and social environmental factors. We should always be aware of the complexity of translation and translation practices, which helps us remain vigilant

against cultural hegemony (Andre, 2004). To prevent our national culture from being forgotten by the world, we must strengthen cultural output to change the previous translation deficit. When facing dominant Western cultures, we should have strong national self-esteem and pride, and be courageous in adopting foreignization strategies in translation to introduce our country's excellent cultural works to the West, allowing other countries to understand China better rather than through the lens of cultural hegemony. Additionally, we should critically absorb the essence of Western dominant cultures, rejecting their flaws, and actively using their excellent achievements for our benefit.

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