

ORIGINAL OR TRANSLATION? REVERSING THE PRIORITY OF TEXTS

Ugiloy Karimova,
BA Student at UzSWLU,
karimovaogiloy2301@gmail.com,
+998 91 596 23 01

Abstract

The dynamics between original texts and their translations have traditionally been conceptualized within hierarchical frameworks, under which the "original" is seen as the authoritative and authentic text, and translations are viewed as derivative, secondary, or auxiliary. This research challenges that dominant perspective by examining how translation can operate not just as an inferior product but as an equally valid, or in some cases, a more powerful textual form. Drawing on the insights of literary theory, translation studies, and intercultural communication, this research examines situations in which translations have distinctive receptions, achieve canonical status, or surpass their originals in effect. Through the close examination of both historical and contemporary cases, the research focuses on situations where translation produces cultural value, challenges authorial control, and builds competing textual realities. The research shows that what is between "original" and "translation" becomes increasingly more unstable under conditions of multilingualism and globalization. Accordingly, a relational approach is developed whereby the translational and original exist within a mutually dependent and productive relationship, precipitating a move from originality to an examination of processes involved in textual circulation, reception, and meaning-making.

Keywords: Translation studies, textual priority, authorship, originality, literary canons, cultural authority, reception, cultural mediation.

Introduction

The language of originality has long shaped the assessment of literary works as well as their translations. From Cicero's translations of Greek works to the Renaissance's respect for classical forebears, the language of the "original" as

authenticity indicator has prevailed in critical practice. Additionally, translation is often defined by its fidelity, openness, or conformation to the original text, with any divergence being viewed as failure or overstepping. This hierarchical model creates dichotomies: original and copy, original and derivative, source and secondary.

The globalization process has made traditional hierarchies increasingly volatile. Textual objects rarely find themselves within one linguistic system; they instead travel through several languages and cultural environments and consequently accumulate more layers of interpretation. In many cases, translated texts are more successful than the original ones. For instance, Goethe's writings gained more popular attention through English and French translations, and Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* gained more international attention through Gregory Rabassa's English translation, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

This research aims to question the assumption that the original work should always take precedence over its translation. By exploring theoretical debates, practical instances, and cultural reactions, the analysis argues that translations can compete, change, or even replace the “original” in significance.

Literature Review

The debate over originality and translation has deep roots in translation theory.

Walter Benjamin (1923) argued in *The Task of the Translator* that translations reveal the “afterlife” of a work of literature, thus extending its life instead of merely copying it.

Lawrence Venuti (1995, 2019) described the idea of “invisibility” of translators in situations where source texts are emphasized, while at the same time promoting translations' status as autonomous cultural products.

Susan Bassnett (2002) has noted that translation can redefine canons because texts become meaningful in international contexts not through their initial forms but through their translations.

Gideon Toury (1995) and the Descriptive Translation Studies framework underscore the way in which translations shape target culture norms and expectations, often displaying substantial divergence from source text intentions. The available literature repeatedly emphasizes the conflict between compliance with the source text and freedom exercised with the target text, thus laying the

groundwork for reconceptualizing translation as textual creation that can be equal to, or even greater than, the original.

Methodology

Interpreting foundational works in Translation Studies (e.g., Walter Benjamin, Lawrence Venuti, Antoine Berman), questioning the binary opposition between the original and its translated version. Using reception theory to examine how texts create meaning through audience response, regardless of any possible linguistic hierarchy.

Historical and Literary Case Studies

Identifying notable cases where translations had more influence than the original works, or where the original works survived mostly because there were translations. Comparing linguistic, stylistic, and cultural shifts in these translations to assess their role in canon formation. Exploring how globalization and online platforms alter the interaction between source texts and their translations. Considering multilingual authorship and self-translation as spaces where “originality” becomes ambiguous. This is not an empirical methodology in quantitative terms, but rather qualitative and hermeneutic, focusing on the textual, cultural, and historical analysis of contexts

Results

Hierarchical Significance under Time Reversal

Many examples show that translations have not always held a subordinate position:

The Septuagint and the Bible: The Greek version of Hebrew scriptures gained significant popularity among Hellenistic and early Christian circles, sometimes having a larger impact on theological ideologies than their Hebrew originals.

Throughout the Middle Period, Latin versions of Aristotle’s texts, together with those of several other Greek thinkers, spread throughout Europe almost entirely through Arabic and Latin transmission, instead of through direct exposure to the original works.

Shakespeare in Germany: Schlegel's German translations of Shakespeare were celebrated national treasures, influencing Goethe, Schiller, and the German Romantic tradition. Shakespeare was known primarily through such translations

amongst many German readers, and they were accepted within their aesthetic tradition as works of extraordinary beauty.

Formation of Canon through Translation

Translations have played decisive roles in canonizing world literature:

Constance Garnett's English translations of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Chekhov served to integrate these writers into the Anglophone literary tradition. While her translations have been criticized for possibly masking distinctive stylistic elements, they nonetheless set the standard by which Russian literature entered the wider cultural world.

Rabassa's translation of García Márquez was significant in making Latin American magical realism available to English readers, and at the same time impacting world perceptions of the genre.

Authorial Authority and Translator Visibility

In some cases, translators become co-authors or even overshadow the original author:

Ezra Pound's *Cathay* (1915) is considered a seminal work in the modernist poetry field, even though it is based on translations of Chinese poetry that were unavailable to Pound himself. Pound's translations have been made authoritative in English literature, regardless of the "originals."

Jorge Luis Borges persuasively argued that originals can be understood to be "drafts," with translations constituting their polished versions, thus obfuscating the inherent distinctions between them.

Discussion

The findings contradict the assumption that original pieces are in themselves superior. Various factors emerge:

Translations as Creative Acts

Translations are not passive reproductions but active recreations shaped by linguistic, cultural, and historical contexts. By mediating meaning across languages, translators inevitably introduce interpretation, adaptation, and creativity.

Destabilizing Authorship

The Romantic ideal of the isolated genius highlights the value put on originality. Yet, in the case of translation, the notion of authorship is naturally communal: the translator becomes a co-creator and, in some cases, the eloquent voice of the dominant cultural moment.

The Global Circulation and Reception

In today's world literature, reception often depends less on originals than on translations. For many readers, texts exist only in translation. Thus, the cultural value of a text may be determined more by its translated form than its original.

Reversing the Hierarchy

Rather than taking the target texts as secondary, it might be more productive to adopt a relational paradigm. Original texts and their translations exist as nodes in a web of textual exchange, where meaning is actively produced through interactions and reception processes.

Conclusion

This study argues that current preference for originals over their translations is not historically inevitable nor an unaffordable cultural norm. Translations have been responsible for preserving texts, shaping literary canons, and often transcending originals in value. A recognition of translation as a valid means of textual production allows a reconsideration of authorship, originality, and cultural worth in a more fluid and inclusive framework. Under the context of a universally interconnected literary system, original work's primacy no longer matters; instead, it is determined through circulation, transformation, and reception processes within different languages. In the same vein, translation should never be seen as the rejection of original work; it is, in fact, an essential process of cultural production that works ultimately against the idea of "original work."

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