

The Evolution of Martin Luther's Theory of Translation

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to track how Martin Luther's translation theory has changed over time. She also hopes to fill the gap in the current research, because we don't have enough research on how this theory develops. This study adopts qualitative research method, combines literature analysis with text analysis, and draws lessons from the original materials such as Translation Open Letter and German version of Luther Bible, and divides the evolution of its translation theory into three main stages: The first stage (before 1517): His theological thought reveals why translation is necessary and gives a basic direction. Formation stage (1517-1530): Its most important principle was established and clarified through concrete translation practice and debate. Deepening stage (1530-1546): His theory was constantly improved through revision and stepped out of the religious field, which contributed to the development of standard German and provided a historic example for later translation theories. The results of this study show that Luther's translation thought is a dynamic organism and develops through practice. Its vitality comes from its constant interaction with theological beliefs, public demand and language reality. Its basic principles are still of great significance for guiding the current study of cross-cultural translation and communication. For example, "functional equivalence" is a typical theory.

Keywords: Martin Luther; Translation Theory; Historical Evolution.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the 16th century, Europe experienced great changes in social structure, ideology and culture. Latin is the only official language of religious texts, which makes it difficult for people to understand religious teachings. At the same time, there are many different dialects in German-speaking areas, which makes it more difficult to convey religious knowledge to everyone. In order to help people better understand the main ideas of religious texts, Martin Luther, a very important person in the Protestant Reformation, completed the German translation of the New Testament in 1522 and published a complete translation of the German Bible in 1534. Luther chose these words in a way close to the original text without fundamentally changing it ^[1]. This not only provided Germans with religious texts that they could understand, but also helped to standardize German unintentionally. In addition, it laid the foundation for the formation of modern Germany. Through practice and translation, Luther finally created a translation theory with the characteristics of the times and great practical value.

Although the previous research has made great contributions, there are still major defects in the research. Although the influence of innovation and Luther's theoretical translation on Europe has been fully studied, few studies have been devoted to tracking its historical evolution. In this case, this study focuses on two main research questions: how Martin Luther's translation theory has developed over time, and what are the key stages and important factors of this evolution. Using the method of literature analysis, this paper systematically discusses its evolution process, and we find that there are three stages in the development of Luther's theory.

In order to explain the above arguments, this paper is divided into five parts: introduction, literature review, research methodology, research findings and conclusions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Martin Luther's translation theory appeared during the Protestant Reformation in the early 16th century. This period is also the revival of humanism, the invention of printing, and the general criticism of the authoritative position of the Catholic Church. The background of the Reformation made the Bible open to all believers. This is why Luther was motivated to concentrate on his vernacular translation, not Latin. In his main source of An Open Letter on Translation, he has defended the inclusion of "alone" in Romans 3:28 as being in conformity with natural German expression in order to emphasize

justification by faith: “I wanted to speak German, not Latin or Greek”^[2]. This is precisely functional equivalence. The theory places more value on the natural flow of the receptor language and an accurate delivery of the intended effect than on an exact word-for-word correspondence.

The first group of books focuses on Luther’s language and cultural influence, and thinks that his theory is a catalyst for language development. Lobenstein-Reichmann and Bluhm pointed out that Luther’s functional equivalence method standardized the early Novelty German with idioms and new terms^{[3][4]}. Generally speaking, this kind of research can be divided into three categories: language standardization through the use of local languages, creative revision to achieve aesthetic depth, and broader cultural changes, including the formation of national identity. Badger further proposed a more elaborate dichotomy, and Luther must find a balance between theological loyalty and reader accessibility^[5].

The other group focuses on the theological and hermeneutic aspects of Luther’s theory. Management opposes language emphasis because it emphasizes the influence of doctrine. Thompson and Marsh discussed how Luther’s Christocentric hermeneutics guides translation, giving priority to the meaning of the gospel rather than the form^{[6][7]}. This group shows the specific trends of each discipline. For example, the clarity of the sermon is aligned with that of the sect. Wendell explored functional categories, listed ten principles such as situational adaptation and team review, and explained how Luther increased spiritual resonance with poems^[1]. Tomlin added examples such as Luke 1:28, in which the change of idioms highlighted grace^[8].

Despite these good ideas, it is still an important loophole in the study of Luther. Although Luther’s innovation and its influence on Europe are well known, few studies have tracked the changes of his translation theory over time. Therefore, this paper will discuss the diachronic development of Luther’s functional equivalence model and how it helps to create different cross-cultural influences. The contradictory results of these comparisons also need comprehensive analysis.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Type

This study adopts qualitative research methods, with literature analysis and text analysis as the main methods. Because Martin Luther’s translation theory involves many dimensions such as historical background, religion and language practice, it is difficult to analyze a single research method in depth. This is why this study has carried out systematic literature analysis and text analysis to deeply explain Martin Luther’s translation theory, including its background, application and influence. This study is based on the research problems revealed by literature review.

3.2 Data Sources

The analysis drew on two categories of sources:

1. Primary sources:
 - Martin Luther’s Open Letter on Translation directly explains his views on translation and is the main source for us to study his translation theory.
 - Martin Luther’s German Bible Translation Our research focuses on how his translation theory can be seen in German Bible translation. In addition, we compare the details of his translation with the way his contemporaries treated the Bible.

2. Secondary sources:

This study reviews and analyzes some existing studies on Martin Luther’s translation theory. These studies cover the historical background of his theory, the feature of “functional equivalence” in modern translation theory, and the critical examination of his religious and cultural influence (religious marginalization).

3.3 Analytical Procedures

The study process unfolded in three interconnected stages:

- The study began with a careful reading of the translated open letter and its translation of the German Bible. This study directly extracts Martin Luther’s motivation to put forward his translation theory from this main source as the principle of “reader-centered”. Then, the study puts his translation theory under the historical background of the religious reform in the 16th century, and explains the necessity of putting forward this theory. In addition, I explained how his

translation theory was applied to the German translation of the Bible. This also provides the first discovery for these research results.

- After analyzing the main texts, the study searched for keywords in Google Academic, such as “Martin Luther Bible” or “Martin Luther Translation Theory”, to find important books and articles. Then, the study organized and brought together all the studies about the German translation of the Bible and the theory of “functional equivalence”. The analysis of this study shows that the existing texts mainly focus on the principle of “functional equivalence” in Martin Luther’s translation theory, and emphasize its influence on German Bible translation.
- By searching for the keyword “Martin Luther Bible”, this study found that there were criticisms about the German translation of the Bible in books and articles. Therefore, this study uses these secondary sources to analyze how Martin Luther’s translation puts religion aside by changing certain theological words and terms.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Early stage (before 1517): The theological foundation and intrinsic driving force of the theory

This study investigated three time periods and drew corresponding conclusions. It is found that Luther’s activities before 1517, even without systematic translation practice, laid the foundation for his revolutionary translation theory in the future. When Luther taught the Romans poems and letters at Wittenberg University, the “Bible alone” theology he gradually established meant that the authority of the church had to give way to the authority of the Bible itself. This inherent requirement liberates the Bible from the academic restrictions of Latin and makes it a text that all believers can read and judge. Therefore, translation is not an optional academic activity, but a logical necessity of religious reform.

The doctrine of “justification by faith” emphasizes the direct relationship between believers and God. Faith is a personal and inner experience. This core theory determines the main purpose of Luther’s translation. This is not for looking for scholars, but for the “faith” of ordinary believers. This predetermines the core of his translation theory. Martin Luther adhered to the principle of “easy to understand”. At that time, his sermons had shown a tendency to use living and imaginary Germans, which could be considered as the first repetition of his translation philosophy.

The key discovery in the early stage was that Luther’s translation theory was already “theologically ready”. The necessity (Bible alone) and direction (serving ordinary believers) of its translation have both been established in its theological breakthrough.

4.2 Phase two (1517-1530): Practical breakthroughs in theory and establishment of core principles

Research has found that Martin Luther’s core translation theory was entirely formed and clarified in specific translation practices and debates. This period was the “explosion period” of Luther’s translation theory.

This period of about ten months of forced seclusion gave him a precious opportunity to concentrate on the German translation of the New Testament. This is a large-scale practical field for his research on translation theory. Away from daily debates, he can focus more on the issue of language transformation itself. When translating the New Testament in Wartburg, Luther faced countless specific translation choices. For instance, when dealing with the Epistle to the Romans, he resolutely incorporated the German word “allein” (alone), translating it as “a person is justified by faith alone”. Although this word goes beyond the original Greek text on the surface, he regarded it as the most accurate conveyance. This is a typical example of Martin Luther’s weakening of the church and religious authority. In contrast, Tyndall paid more attention to lexical correspondence. Even when creating new words (such as “Passover”, “mercy seat”), he should reflect the original text. His additions or adjustments were more aimed at clarifying grammar rather than implanting theological viewpoints^[9]. Martin Luther, having fully understood Paul’s intent, probably better than anyone since these immortal words were first uttered, adequately caught the spirit of Paul’s famous verse and rendered it ingeniously in another language^[4]. This famous case shows that his “yit-to-meaning” principle was primarily aimed at addressing the issue of the precision of theological expression rather than being a purely linguistic choice. Scholars often argue that Luther may have unintentionally promoted the sovereignty of the individual, at the expense of institutional (church) authority, which continues into our age^[10].

The Open Letter on Translation in 1530 was Martin Luther’s concentrated rebuttal to his critics and thus became the declaration of his translation theory. Luther’s break with the Roman Curia required a great deal of writing and debate to win support. He frequently quoted from the Bible and began to realize that accurate and powerful German expressions were crucial for winning over the public and refuting opponents.

Martin Luther used “mothers in the market, children at home, and ordinary people on the street” as the criterion for testing, meaning that these people could directly understand the content of the translation^[2]. Martin Luther directly countered the accusations from the Catholic camp that his translation was vulgar and indecent. Luther said, “Whether my translation is good or not is not decided by the professor, but by the most ordinary people.” If mothers buying vegetables in the market, children playing at home and ordinary citizens on the street can all understand my translation, then it is a success.

By contrast, translators of Martin Luther’s era paid more attention to the restoration of the source language. Although William Tyndall was also committed to making the Bible understandable to ordinary English people, his principle was more inclined towards “literal translation word for word”. He insisted on translating directly from the original Hebrew and Greek texts, pursuing the greatest degree of literal accuracy. He sometimes even sacrificed the fluency of English.

Martin Luther’s translation theory focused on functional equivalence. For example, the methodology of “it is necessary to ask the mother at home, the children in the alley, and the ordinary people in the market” reflects an empirical translation work model centered on reader feedback, which is completely different from the academic style of the scholastic philosophy at that time, which was working in isolation^[2]. This shows exactly what Martin Luther did. His translation method is not to bury himself in the dictionary alone, but to take the initiative to ask these people.

Martin Luther translated the Greek word “Angel’s greeting” as “the woman of great grace”^[2], explaining: “If this word were directly translated to Germans, they would be completely confused and think that the angel was making Mary happy.” Although the term “the woman who received great grace” does not exactly correspond to the literal meaning, it accurately conveys the spirit of the angel’s respect and greeting, which was correctly understood by the Germans at that time. Luther’s interpretation vividly embodies his mature ideas of “meaning taking precedence over words” and “respecting the expression habits of the target language”.

Research has found that Luther did not translate alone but collaborated with a team composed of theologians and linguists. For instance, Martin Luther said in *Tischreden*: “When I translate the Bible, I often have to deliberate for three or four weeks, or even longer, over a single word.” Once, both Philip Melancton and I were dissatisfied with *Gratia Plena*’s translation. We asked the lady at home, the children, and the servants to find out how people in Germany paid tribute to a highly honored woman. Ultimately, we adopted the word “*Holdselige*”^[11]. This model of collective discussion and refinement of the best German expression is itself a practical field for the principles of “ideal-to-meaning” and “popularization”. The determination of a word often involves a complex process of listening to spoken language, debating, and theological consideration, which makes its theory originate from collective wisdom and be thoroughly tested.

The key discovery in the middle stage lies in the fact that all the core principles of Luther’s translation theory originated from the need to solve practical problems and were refined and clarified in the debates with opponents. Its theory is practice-driven and polemical.

4.3 Phrase three (1530-1546): The refinement, defense, and long-term influence of theory

The trade of indulgences was the trigger for the birth of the Bible. What was deeper was the widespread dissatisfaction of the people with the economic plundering, moral degradation and theological monopoly of the Roman Curia. This had created a social demand for translation. People were eager to bypass corrupt clergy and have direct contact with the origin of their faith. After the complete Bible was published, Luther’s theory entered a stage of deepening. The influence of its theory has also begun to show profound significance beyond the realm of religion.

Luther spent his entire life revising his translation of the Bible. For instance, his repeated revisions of certain words in the Book of Genesis indicate that his understanding of “easy to understand” is dynamic. He will continuously optimize the translation in accordance with the development of the language and the readers’ comprehension. This in itself refutes any rigid view of translation. Actually, Martin Luther’s continuous revisions reflect the dynamic nature of the theory.

The Bible and other translations by Martin Luther were widely circulated. In fact, they shaped a cross-regional, unified, and common German language, laying the foundation for the birth of modern standard German. His translation is not only about using language, but also about shaping it. When it came to adding new words during translation, Martin Luther was highly innovative. He created numerous German words and idioms, such as translating “temporary substitute worker” into “*Lückenbüßer*” and translating “bait” into “*Lockvogel*”.

Besides, Luther shifted the focus of translation from the “source text” to the “target reader” and “communicative effect”, which provided a historical precedent and classic case for modern translation theories such as “dynamic equivalence” in the 20th century. Luther’s policies, principles, and procedures embody the modern “functional equivalence” method

employed today to a greater or lesser extent by Scripture translators the world over^[1]. In order to enable the target readers to understand better, Luther believed that the form of the target language needed to be changed accordingly. This makes the words of God sound more natural in the target language. Luther expressed his views in this regard quite frequently and clearly and forcefully. This idea runs through all his discussions on translation. His translation of Psalm 91.9 is a very typical example. “We changed the pronoun *mea* into *tua*, making ‘your’ out of ‘my’, because the verse is obscure if one says, “For the lord is my refuge,” inasmuch as throughout the psalm the psalmist uses the word ‘your’ and speaks to or about someone else... Now since an ordinary German will hardly understand this sudden change in speaking [from second to first person], we tried to put the matter clearly and plainly. After all, one is not accustomed to speaking this way in German as in Hebrew... We have made changes of this sort several other times as well.”, Luther said^[12]. Moreover, in Matt. 2.1, Luther classified Bethlehem as a city and Judea as a country^[1].

In conclusion, the core finding of this study lies in clearly outlining the three stages of the evolution of Martin Luther’s translation theory. This evolution process reveals that Luther’s translation thought is an organic living entity, and its vitality stems from the continuous and profound interaction between it and theological beliefs, the needs of the people, and the reality of language. His greatness lies not only in proposing a series of translation principles, but also in his personal practice. Through the act of translation, he completely transformed the religious, linguistic and cultural landscape of the German-speaking world^[1].

5. CONCLUSION

Martin Luther’s translation theory was not only a majestic creation of a specific historical period, but also an important foundation for the western translation theory. Most importantly, the evolutionary process of Luther’s translation theory profoundly reflected the close interactive relationship between translation theory and socio historical context. Translation theory should both respond to the needs of the times and promote the progress of society, language, and culture through its own development.

Adopting the literature analysis method, this study systematically sorted out the development trajectory of Luther’s translation theory from germination to maturity. The evolution of Luther’s translation theory was divided into three core stages: the initial stage, the formative stage, and the deepening stage.

Nowadays, there’s an increasing need for cross-culture communication. In this instance, re-examining Luther’s translation thought is of great practical significance. His viewpoints, such as “functional equivalence,” still keep providing valuable guidance to people’s translation work, helping balance the fidelity and adaptability of translation, thus exerting its function of communication better. In the future, with the innovation of research methods and the expansion of literature scope, the in-depth value of Luther’s translation theory will be further explored, continuously providing historical guidance for the development of translation studies.

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