

The Relevance of Derrida's Deconstruction for Translation Studies

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Introduction:

Deconstruction is a revolutionary approach that challenges the traditional western philosophy in almost all the fields of knowledge. Applied into the field of translation, it has altered basic concepts and explores a totally new field of translation studies.

1- *Deconstruction Defined:*

The term deconstruction owes its origins to the 1960's. It has been coined by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida to describe a reading approach which searches for the meaning of a text to the point of engaging the underlying structure on which a text is apparently founded, and that this structure is unstable or impossible. Deconstruction rejects the idea that the text is a conclusive unit of meaning but instead foregrounds the ways in which a text undermines its own assumptions and reveals its internal conflicting and contradictory meanings.

Christopher Norris describes deconstruction in the following way:

Deconstruction works at ...giddy limit, suspending all that we take for granted about language, experience and the 'normal' possibilities of human communication.

It seeks to undo both a given order priorities and the very system of conceptual opposition that makes that order possible...deconstruction is an activity of reading which remains closely

...tied to the texts it interrogates (quoted in Munday (2001):pp 170-171)

Deconstruction tries to elaborate meaning not only in the words but by questioning all the systems and concepts that a given language can construct within the same text. Any given text is therefore open for more than one interpretation. The variance of these interpretations is irreducible.

Davis and Schleifer (1989, 207) define deconstruction as a strategy of reading that starts with a philosophical hierarchy in which two opposed terms are presented as the 'superior' general case and the 'inferior' special case.' These terms include day/night, good/evil, male/female, etc.

Derrida's deconstruction builds on the work of the French Structuralist Ferdinand De Saussure. He tries to dismantle the premises of Saussure's Course in General Linguistics (1965) mainly the following arguments:

1- Language is a system of signs.

- 2- The sign has two components: the form that signifies (the signifier) and what it signifies (the signified).
- 3- The link between these two components is arbitrary, which “is the organizing principle for the whole of linguistics, considered as a science of language structure”
 - 4- The signifier and the signified are relational or differential entities.
 - 5- Language, then is not simply a nomenclature, there are no fixed universal concepts or signifiers.
 - 6- Each language is a distinctive and arbitrary way of organizing and conceptualizing the world. (Payne M (1993): p.133)

Derrida has elaborated the idea of Saussure stating that signs are relational and differential entities i.e the meaning of any sign differs from the other signs and it can be defined by its relation to its opposite. Thus, concepts such as good, day and right have meaning only when they are opposed to evil, night and wrong.

Within this respect, Derrida has elaborated the term Différance, one of the most significant terms in the terminology of Derridean deconstruction. This neologism used by Derrida plays on the two meanings of the French verb différer which roughly corresponds to “to defer” and “to differ”.

Norris describes the importance of this term saying:

“where Derrida breaks new ground...is in the extent to which ‘differ’ shades into ‘defer’. This involves the idea that meaning is always deferred, perhaps to the point of an endless supplementarity, by the play of signification. Différance not only designates this theme but offers in its own unstable meaning a graphic example of the process at work. ” (Quoted in Munday (2001): p/171)

Différance is therefore the key theoretical basis of deconstruction. It refers to the process of the production of difference and deferral and supports the idea that there is no fixed meaning.

2- **Derrida and Translation studies:**

Jacques Derrida has been writing on translation both directly and indirectly. In his *Des Tours de Babel* (1985), *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, transference, Translation* (1985) and *What is Relevant Translation* (2001), Derrida directly addresses translation. However as Davis (2001: p.9) says, ‘All of Derrida’s texts concerns translation in various ways’. Most of his works even discuss the problem of philosophy as one of translation:

“What does philosophy say?...what does the philosopher say when he is being a philosopher? He says: what matters is truth or meaning, and since meaning is before or beyond language, it follows that it is translatable. Meaning has the commanding role, and consequently one must be able to fix its univocity, or in any case, to master its

plurivocality. If this plurivocality can be mastered, then translation, understood as the transport of semantic content into another signifying form is possible. There is no philosophy unless translation in this latter sense is possible.”

(Quoted in Baker & Salandha (2009):D)

This means that translation and philosophy hold similar assumptions. In Derrida's deconstructionist view, translation occupies a primary position that effaces the traditional ways of thinking that historically dominated the perception of translation and philosophy.

Though deconstruction doesn't provide a theory of translation, it has suggested many theoretical and practical keys that help to *de-construct* meaning as Kathleen Davis states in *Deconstruction and Translation*:

“if there is no one origin, no transcendent meaning, then there is no stable source text. Derrida's ideas are used to build new approaches to translation within translation studies. In these two contexts deconstruction becomes a translation theory” (Davis 2001: p.2)

Deconstruction takes into account all possibilities that help people to get meaning from their knowledge of multiple meanings attached to a given word. It has given translation an aspect of relativism through which people can choose the most appropriate meaning for a particular context .a text is therefore open for a set of interpretations that grow endlessly by the number of reading.

Another close relationship between translation and deconstruction is drawn by the concept of difference. Jacques Derrida claims that translation and deconstruction are intertwined and cannot be separated and that the presence of Difference is quite clear: “Translation practices the difference between signified and signifier” within the possible limits where this is possible or at least seems possible. (See Derrida (1981): xv)

From a deconstructionist point of view every reading of a text renders a new meaning. This means that every reading requires a different translation. Thus translation for Derrida can be defined as rewriting the original texts over and over. This view attempts to demolish the traditional concept of originality and unified entity and, instead, proposes to focus on relations between texts and contexts.

According to Derrida, an author's work is bound by some factors including time and space which the author himself does not have control over. In such a thinking, translation scholars shall learn how to focus on difference to get the possible meaning.

“translation augments and modifies the original, which insofar as it is living on, never ceases to be transformed and to grow. It modifies the original even as it also modifies the translating language. This process- transforming the original as well as the translation- is the translation contract between the original and the translating text.” (Derrida (1985):p.122)

Within this respect, a good translation is based on a good and appropriate reading. Thus' translators play a mediating role between the original text and its translation and should be aware of the plethora of gaps, differences and traces in source and target texts as well as source and target languages and cultures. Such an idea puts emphasis on the acute awareness of context. According to Derrida "there is nothing outside the text", which is in turn interpreted by Davis as follows: "*Meaning cannot be extracted from, and cannot exist before or outside of a specific context*".(Davis (2001): p.9)

Derrida is also reclaiming the power of the word and everything it has the potential to signify; '*At the beginning of translation is the word. Nothing is less innocent, pleonastic and natural, nothing is more historical than this proposition, even if it seems too obvious.*'(Derrida (2001): P.180)

Any activity of translation is therefore impacted by the word which is so important and evident within the central term of deconstruction named Différance.

3/The misreading of Derridean Deconstruction in translation studies:

Derrida's deconstruction has contributed in many ways in the field of translation studies by providing a set of important ideas since both deconstruction and translation share common concerns with regard to language, text and meaning. However, his philosophical ideas of the non-presence, non-identity and non-center have been misread and misunderstood by a number of scholars.

In describing Derrida's views on textual meaning, Kearney states that:

"deconstruction celebrates the endless multiplication of meaning over the spurious if comforting unity of a single correct reading.the text becomes an autonomous chain of signifiers irreducible to any fixed reference (transcendental signified) or intention (transcendental signified) outside the text. The deconstructed text is without origin or end"(Quoted in Lin Zhu (2012): p.66)

Derrida is often regarded as rejecting the source text or even as a banner for dethroning the source text. In fact his ideas aim just at removing the stable structure and transcendental meaning of the text, rather than the text or its author. He even says that nothing exists outside the text "context" and suggests that the source text should be open to rather than be devoured by, the other. Derrida has rejected this misreading which reflects a dualistic and mechanical way of thinking, stating that his philosophy is not a rule or a method to be followed. Thus,

"Deconstruction is neither a theory nor a philosophy. It is neither a school nor a method. It is not even a discourse, nor an act, nor a practice. It is what happens , is what is happening today in what is called society, politics, diplomacy, economics, historical reality, and so on and so forth. Deconstruction is the case"(Ibid, p.70)

Derrida does not want his deconstruction to be reduced to a set of simple instrumental procedures. It is a thinking that has impacted almost all fields .

The same applies for translation studies where deconstruction can be only a new way of perception that provides: “*its constructive ideas...which can change our old metaphysical thinking about text, meaning and translation.*” (Davis (2001):p.72)

Another misreading of Derrida’s deconstruction has to do with deconstruction as a form of hermeneutical, nihilistic relativism. Such a thinking devalue deconstruction according to Michner who argues that, “such a mistaken notion rests on the failure to understand what deconstruction affirms,” adding that Derrida is promoting a democratic open endedness but not arguing anything goes philosophy.(See Lin Zhu 2012, P.72)

To some, Derrida is considered relativist or nihilist concerning his firm belief of undecidable meaning, truth, and subjectivity. Every meaning should be seen as the sign for other possible meanings.He just wants to give more importance to the activity of reading as he claims that good translators are in the first instance good readers.

Conclusion:

Though deconstruction has affected some stable notions such as equivalence and faithfulness through its open-endedness and idea of multiple meaning, its usefulness in the field of translation can not be denied or ignored for its philosophical questioning that provided translation with a significant terminology mainly- Différance.

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