Translation Unit and Translation Studies Scope

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Translation Unit was first put forward by Barkhudarov in 1969 (Shuttleworth & Cowie, 2004:192), and has been attracting academic interests from the Chinese translation studies circle. The research on translation unit boomed in 1980s and climaxed in terms of participation in 1990s. It turned out to be less fruitful than expected, for, as I believe, most of the researchers ignored the flexibility, the core of Barkhudarov’s concept. Consequently, the research lost its impetus at the turn of the new century when the cultural turn made its debut in China. After a few years of inactivity, the research on translation unit regained its new life after Bassnett and Lefever’s suggestion that “neither the word, nor the text, but the culture becomes the operational ‘unit’ of translation” was introduced into China. (Bassnett & Lefever, 1990:8) This introduction has not paved the way for a fruitful research on the previous topic but unfortunately made the matter worse, as translation studies researchers have got lost both at what the translation unit should be and at what are the differences between translation studies and culture studies. This paper will start with the rethinking of translation unit from a new perspective and conclude with a reflection on the scope of translation studies.
1. Defects of the Previous Researches on Translation Unit

In his most important monograph *Language and Translation*, Barkhudarov devotes one chapter to “The Problem of Translation Unit”. In this chapter he says that “By translation unit we mean the unit of the source language (SL) which has an equivalent in the target language (TL), but its parts taken individually are untranslatable, in that no equivalents can be established for them in the target language text (TT). In other words, translation unit is the smallest unit of the source language which has an equivalent in TL.” (Barkhudarov, 1985: 145) This definition makes it clear that translation unit is a SL unit chosen with the target language in view. Then Barkhudarov analyzed language linguistically and cut it into six units ranging from phoneme, morpheme, word, phrase, sentence and up to text. (op. cit: 146) He added that “each of all these linguistic units—from morpheme to the whole text—can serve as translation unit respectively. As for translation unit, it needs to be emphasized that even when the translator deals with the same text, translation unit can be flexible—being word at one time, being phrase or sentence at another. During translating process, one of the obstacles is to choose an appropriate linguistic unit from among the linguistic hierarchy as translation unit for each situation.” (op. cit: 157)

It is clear that Barkhudarov based his concept on linguistic theories. When explaining his translation unit, Barkhudarov has in consideration not only SL and TL but also “the type and genre of the SL text” (op. cit: 160). He, however, for historical reasons, fails to take other factors into account, such as the translator, who does translation and decides which linguistic unit to choose as translation unit, and the culture, in which translator does his work. Barkhudarov’s idea ushered in the research on translation unit in China. Luo Xunmin subdivided translation unit into “unit of analysis and unit of transfer” (Luo, 1992: 32), in order to solve the problem that “a bigger translation unit is appropriate for the SL text analysis but less useful for the transfer, while a smaller translation unit is useful for the transfer but inappropriate for the analysis.” (ibid.) He preferred clause as translation unit in English-Chinese translation. (Luo, 1992: 32-37) Some other important researchers, such as Si Xianzhu (1999), Guo Jianzhong (2001), Peng Changjiang (2000) and etc., prefer either clause or text. When they justify their favorites, all of them deny the other linguistic units as translation unit, ignoring the flexibility of translation unit suggested by Barkhudarov. All the above researchers expound on translation unit on...
their linguistic bases, excluding the translator, who, as a very important factor in translation studies, has recently come to draw attention from researchers such as Zheng Binghan and Tham Wai Mun, Zhao Dongmei and etc. After this important factor has been included in the discussion of translation unit, the most important feature of translation unit, its flexibility, immediately becomes more evident, that is, “translation units the translator chooses during his performance would not fossil at a certain linguistic unit, instead they fluctuate among the linguistic units subject to factors such as translator’s short memory, his proficiency, his processing efforts of the SL text and so on.” (Zheng & Tham, 2007:145) The efforts by such researchers have widened the scope of the research on translation unit, but they fail to incorporate into their researches the achievements the previous ones gained in linguistic perspective. Thus all the researches have noticed only a few features of translation unit because of failing to probe into the problem from a multiple perspective.

2. Tackling Translation Unit in a Multiple Perspective

Translation is a bilingual and bicultural activity, which can be roughly cut in terms of process into two parts—decoding and recoding, and which mainly involves in terms of participant two languages, two cultures, texts and the translator. All these factors should be taken into consideration in the research on translation unit if we want to have a better view of the topic, thus a multiple perspective is indeed necessary.

In terms of process, decoding and recoding are not clear-cut but over-lapped sometimes. In these two processes, the translator’s focuses are somewhat different, in decoding being the acquisition of information carried by the SL text, and in recoding being the transfer of the information into the TL text. These differences in the focus naturally result in different choosing of translation unit during the two processes, that’s why Luo finds “a bigger translation unit is appropriate for the SL text analysis but less useful for the transfer, while a smaller translation unit is useful for the transfer but inappropriate for the analysis.” (Luo, 1992:32) This finding implies that the units the translator chooses for his analysis are usually bigger than those he does for his transfer.

In terms of participant, two languages, two cultures, texts and the translator are actively involved in translating, and each of them should be included in the research on translation unit. As to two languages, they may share much similarity in
phonology, vocabulary and syntax and thus belong to the same language family, or they may share less in the three aspects and consequently belong to different language families. Translation units will be quite different when translation is done between languages of the same language family or between languages of the different language families. So that’s why Guo Jianzhong concludes “although translation practitioners and translation researchers disagree on the choosing of translation units, they reach the agreement that translation unit will be smaller for the translation between the closely related languages, or otherwise it will be bigger.” (2001:51) What’s more, translation unit would be subject to the translation direction. Tang Jun analyzes the translation between English and Chinese and comes to a conclusion that “translation unit for English-Chinese translation is somewhat different from that for Chinese-English translation.” (Tang Jun, 2001:38)

As to texts, their different types and genres would make them felt in decoding and recoding. For example, image is more crucial to classical Chinese poems than to modern Chinese prose, so image transfer is essential to the success of translation of classical Chinese poems into English, the case of Pound being an example. For this reason, Wei Jiahai proposes that image, to be exact, the cluster of words portraying the image, should be the unit for poetry translation. (2003:71) The factor coming next is translators, who, till recently, had been unwisely excluded in the research on translation unit. Different translators may differ in their command of both the languages and the subjects of the SL texts, in their translation proficiency, and in their familiarity with the two cultures. All of these will certainly have influence on translators’ choosing of translation units. “When analyzing the translation units translators manipulate, Lorscher (1991,1993) finds that “translation units for ordinary students are always smaller, being words in most cases, than those for professional translators, being phrases, sentences or even paragraphs in most cases.”” (Zheng & Tham, 2007:145) In their TAP (Think-aloud Protocols) case study of English-Chinese translations by 30 subjects, Zheng Bingham and Tham Wai Mun find that “translation units the translator chooses during his performance would not fossil at a certain linguistic unit, instead they fluctuate among the linguistic units subject to factors such as translator’s short memory, his proficiency, his processing efforts of the SL text and so on.” (ibid.) The last important factor is cultures involved in translation. Cultures have been influencing each other in many ways, but the influences would be asymmetrical for historical, geographical, political, economical reasons. But on the other hand, the exchange between cultures would
facilitate translation between them. The asymmetrical influences and the facilitation will surely have impact on translation between cultures and then further on the choosing of translation units.

The analysis above justifies the assumption that translation unit is indeed subject to the languages, the cultures, the texts and the translator, and leads naturally to the conclusion that translation unit is a continuum with internal flexibility. Thus the neglect of any of the factors in the research on translation unit will lead to biased conclusions, and as a result hamper a better understanding of translation.

3. Translation Unit and Translation Studies Scope

"[N]either the word, nor the text, but the culture becomes the operational ‘unit’ of translation.” (Bassnett & Lefever, 1990:8) This is regarded as an important idea of the culture school. After its introduction into Chinese translation circle, it is frequently cited by researchers on translation unit, many of whom are proponents of the idea. (Li Yan, 2005:82; Peng Aimin, 2008:23; etc.) In their papers, all these proponents cite Barkhudarov’s concept—translation unit—without giving their new definition, which implies that they agree with Barkhudarov on the definition of the concept. In Barkhudarov’s definition, there are three key words and one confinement. This confinement goes like this: “which has an equivalent in TL.” (Barkhudarov, 1985:145) This confinement implies that the SL linguistic units are not themselves the translation units, but the SL linguistic unit which must have an equivalent in TL, so translation unit is something that is related to, and ONLY related to, both the source language and the target language, or in other words, beyond languages we can find nothing that can serve as translation unit. The key word “equivalent” is an important notion for the linguistic school, but it is not something absolute, not the sameness for Barkhudarov, for “[N]o matter what text type or genre is involved or what translation method is employed, the translator strives for equivalence, for different-level equivalence, to be put it in a more appropriate way. This different-level equivalence is near or somewhat far from ‘the complete equivalence’, but this ‘complete equivalence’ is only an idea instead of something obtainable in translation practice.” (Barkhudarov, 1985:160) The key word “smallest” does not refer to the SL unit that is “smallest” in the SL hierarchy system, but the SL unit that is untranslatable with its parts being taken individually. The last key word “language” confines translation unit to languages, which emphasizes the idea that translation unit can not exist beyond language. So no one
can deny that in Bassnett and Lefever's statement, "unit of translation" goes against the very concept—translation unit in its original sense (1990:8), and therefore the statement cannot be justified.

The cultural turn has greatly expanded the scope of translation studies, and as a result the focus of the discipline has shifted from SL and TL texts to the cultures involved, something much bigger than the texts. The expansion of the scope of translation studies seems to help translation unit go beyond languages and become equal to culture. Such an illusion has made lots of translation researchers unconsciously mistake culture studies for translation studies, the natural consequence of which would be the merging of translation studies into culture studies. Such a crisis has already attracted attention from home and abroad. The crisis, I think, would be overcome to some degree if we have a thorough and complete understanding of the concept—translation unit.

4. Conclusion
Translation unit is a SL unit chosen with the target language in view, and all such units form a continuum ranging from phoneme up to text, which denies the statement that "neither the word, nor the text, but the culture becomes the operational 'unit' of translation." (Bassnett & Lefever, 1990:8) Because of its intrinsic relation with languages, translators and cultures, translation unit features flexibility, which denies the claim that only one level of language hierarchy is suitable to be chosen as translation unit. Researches on translation unit from a multiple perspective will help us see its true nature better, stick to the discipline of translation studies after its cultural turn, and understand translation itself thoroughly. Among the factors influencing the choosing of translation unit, translators are a crucial and very complicated one, but the research on it started only recently and much remains to be done.

Notes:
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[14] Zhao Dongmei. “Translation Unit Study in the Perspective of Translator’s Subjectivity” [J]. Journal of Sichuan Normal University (Social Sciences Edition) 2007(2), 111-115.

[15] Zheng Binghan & Tham Wai Mun. “An empirical study of translation units in English Chinese translating” [J]. Foreign Language Teaching and Research, 2007(7), 145-154.

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