Gene? Meme? Translation?

ZHANG Ting
Hubei University for Nationalities

Introduction
Since the "cultural turn" in translation, the focus of translation studies has gradually shifted from the source text to the translated text, translators and the cultural factors, and from descriptive to prescriptive study, with the interdisciplinary being emphasized, which aims to interpret and define translation studies from different perspectives and by more efficient ways.

A whole view of the development of every discipline saw the paradigm of interdisciplinary study has become the fixed trend. "Meme", which is created with the inspiration of "Gene", has influenced the research of other discipline, translation studies included. At present, in China, a few scholars has studied it in translation studies. These studies explore "meme" in English teaching by the way of the definition of "meme", or they attach their attention to the spread process in order to discuss the relations between "meme" and foreignizing or domestication strategy. Chesterman even proposed to set up a meme storage in translation. However, some other scholars express different opinions. They hold that the so-called "meme"
theory could not be independent as a discipline and has no scientific feature as a theory.

The nature of “meme” theory refers to the cultural gene which could be spread from one to another brain. There exists some correspondence between the nature of “meme” and the signified of “core”, “deep structure” in translation studies, which will be the key point of this paper.

II. Gene and Translation

1. What is Gene?

In 1909, Johnson of Denmark proposed the term of Gene, which was used to refer to “a functional segment of DNA... We view the DNA as containing the full set of genes that determine the inheritable characteristics, so the gene is the smallest functional element in that master blueprint for inheritance.”(http://hyperphysics.phy-astr.gsu.edu/HBASE/biology/gene.html) Gene could not only be inherited by the way of replication, but also could be expressed.

2. Relations between Gene and Translation

The process of translating is the spread of information between different languages, and the information itself is the same. Could we believe that information which is expressed in different languages but understood by people of different languages is also the structural and functional element? Such information which could be inherited and not be influenced also could be regarded as the smallest inherited factor or functional unit. The inherited process of translating is also a replication process from one language to another. Although the outer form is changed, the information included remains the same.

Different languages is of different characteristics, which are expressed from different angles. As a result, difficulties or non-translatability come into being, as is like the differences between children and parents. In view of this, it could be thought that there exist some similarities between the transference of different languages and the replication and inheritance of gene.

As to translation, the similarities in understanding or the “core” of understanding is what could be translated and will not result in mistranslation and misunderstanding. But different languages have different “gene”, so the goal of ultimate equivalence and the so-called adequate translation could not be achieved.

On the basis of the above analysis, it is inferred that there also exists some “gene” in different languages which could be “inherited” and “replicated”, as a
result of which, information could be transplanted from one language to another. These replicated genes are also the “core” of people’s understanding to the world, or even the “deep structure”, or “logos”.

“Meme” is created under the inspiration of “gene” and the Greek word “mimeme”. It is of some similar features of “gene”.

III. Characteristics of Meme
1. The Origin of Meme

In 1976, Richard Dawkins published his book The Selfish Gene for the first time, and in 1989, the revised edition is published, in Chapter 11 of which, he coined the term “meme” by shortening Greek word “mimeme”. He made a very brief explanation:

I think that a new kind of replicator has recently emerged on this very planet....The new soup is the soup of human culture. We need a name for the new replicator, a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation. ‘Mimeme’ comes from a suitable Greek root, but I want a monosyllable that sounds a bit like ‘gene’. I hope my classicist friends will forgive me if I abbreviate mimeme to meme. (2) If it is any consolation, it could alternatively be thought of as being related to ‘memory’, or to the French word même. It should be pronounced to rhyme with ‘cream’.

(from http://www.rubinghscience.org/memetics/dawkinsmemes.html)

He used “meme” to explain the transmission of ideas and cultural phenomena from one mind to another through speech, gestures, rituals. Meme acts as cultural analogues to genes as it could achieve the self-replicate process. According to Dawkins, meme can be any cultural entity which an observer may look upon as a replicator, and it is related to memory.

As known to most people, “Memes generally replicate through exposure to humans, who have evolved as efficient copiers of information and behaviour. Because humans do not always copy memes perfectly, and because they may refine, combine or otherwise modify them with other memes to create new memes, they can change over time.” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Memetics)

2. Expression of Meme

The ethnic belief could be replicated and inherited from one generation to another. Take Qiang minority as an example.
In Qiang minority, people worship “White Stone” because they believe “White Stone” is the symbol and embodiment of divinities to bring happiness and luck to them. This cultural information is transmitted and spread from one generation to another, not by body but by brain. Gradually, it becomes the common understanding, that is, a meme. However, to other peoples, such “White Stone” is just a stone of white color, because this cultural information is not be replicated and transmitted to their mind. However, with the communication between Qiang minority and other peoples, the other peoples will understand the cultural information loaded on “White Stone”, and they will understand why Qiang people worship a white stone. At this moment, the “White Stone” becomes a cultural meme and completes its replication.

It, therefore, can be inferred that Dawkins’ “meme”, in nature, refers to the cultural “core” which is the inner and deepest information, maybe with the outer form different. Meanwhile, language is the carrier of culture and culture is expressed through language. Although there are some differences, similarities still exist, namely, the “core” of different languages and cultures, which could be called “meme”.

Since 1990s, translation studies took its “cultural turn”, with the cultural factors as the focus. Under such background, does “meme” exist? If it does, what influence and inspiration does it take on translation studies?

IV. Meme in Translation

1. Meme and “Core” in Translation

The focus of “meme” is the transmission of ideas and cultural phenomena from one mind to another, just like gene. Not all information, however, could be called “meme”. Only those cultural information which can be transmitted, replicated and imitated are “memes”. The transferrence of cultural information is the most important part of translation, so there are naturally “meme”.

Translation is the transmission of information between different languages, so translating is not only the transference of languages, but the information under linguistic form. Since “meme” is the smallest replicated and transmitted cultural factor, it also can be seen as the smallest translated unit. These smallest cultural factors are also the common “core” of understanding and thinking. These common “core” could be subconscious or be attained through studying. Through other’s explanation, some cultural information can be replicated to one’s own mind and
become one part of memory. Once needed, these memories can be aroused. In 1969, in his thesis, E.A. Nida argued that “the impression that interlingual communication is always possible is based upon two ‘fundamental’ factors: 1) that semantic similarities in language are due to ‘the common core of human experience’; and 2) that fundamental similarities exist in the ‘syntactic structures of languages, especially at the so-called kernel, or core, level.” (qtd. Wilss, 2001:49) At the same time, one foundation of Wilss’ theory is that he believes that there is one kind of “universal language”, one important factor of which is just “a core of shared experience.” (Gentzler, 2004:63) Actually, such kind of “core” is the same understanding to the word, which may be transmitted from one generation to another or achieved by learning from others.

It is known that cultural-loaded words are the most difficult part to translate. One of the reasons may be that the understanding to cultural phenomena has not become the “core” of understanding to people of different languages. It is also proved that “meme”, as the smallest cultural factors, has not finished its replication and transmission. But, if these cultural factors are replicated to and stored in translators’ mind, they can be transplanted naturally in the target language.

2. Meme and “Deep Structure” in Translation

Meme can be replicated and transmitted from one to another culture, and be expressed in different linguistic form, and the transmitted and replicated process is also like the process of transferrence from surface structure to deep structure at first and then from deep structure to another surface structure. The signified of these deep structure may be one kind of common information or one smallest cultural factors.

The notion of “deep structure” is the key of Chomsky’s transformational-generative rule. According to Chomsky, there exist some “base components”. He believes that “for the base to the deep structure via phrase structure rules, and then from the deep structure to the surface via transformational rules... the phrase structure rules represent the internalized and unconscious workings of the human mind...” (qtd. Gentzler, 2004:48) These internalized and unconscious workings could be people’s common understanding to the world or got by studying, which have been stored in the mind and related to memory just as Dawkins pointed. Based on this point, “meme” and the signifié of “deep structure” share some similarities. The following example could prove it.

ST: She is a cat.
TT1: 她是一只猫。
TT2: 她是个包藏祸心的女人。

The source text is a metaphorical sentence. TT1 is a literal translation which can just transplant the surface information. Readers of translated text would not understand why the author use cat to modify a woman, and what kind of informations / he wants to express. That is to say, TT1 neglect the cultural information under the surface structure and misunderstanding would exist. In fact, Chinese and English cultures have different metaphorical meanings. In Chinese culture, “cat” is loved by people and used for appreciatory meaning. In English Culture, “cat” itself is a pet. Its meaning, however, in idioms has changed and refers to “a spiteful or unpleasant woman”. That means translators should understand this deep structure first and the surface structure could be correct. That is why TT2 is better than TT1 for it has spread out the cultural meaning.

Just through this simple example, a conclusion could be achieved: only when translators have the common understanding to the cultural information can they translate it correctly. In other words, only when the denotative meaning of “cat” in English culture has been successfully replicated or transmitted to translators’ minds, translation could be correct and faithful. We have reasons to hold that there are some correspondence between “meme” and the signified of “deep structure”.

3. Meme and “Pure Language” in Translation

The concept of “pure language” is put forward, and it is taken as the summation of the meaning of all languages. It could not be expressed out but has great power to creat. In The Way of Translation, Cao Minglun uncovered the mysterious mask of “pure language” through making comparative study on the translating steps of Nida, Wilss and Benjamin. He proved that every nation has its specific way for signifying of the world, but there are correspondences in the basic signified. These correspondences can be Benjamin’s “pure language”, can be Hölderlin’s “universal language”, can be Nida’s kernel structure or can be Wilss’ “core of experience”.(cf. Cao Minglun, 2007:160) The author of this paper wants to add that these correspondence can also be Dawkins’ “meme”.

Language is just used to express ideas. People of different nations may have different thinking ways, but they have common understanding to the world, or people could not understand and communicate with each other. Different nations must be of the same or similar understanding to the signifié of different languages, which is just the fixed matter expressed by languages. Language is just an outer
form, or an signifier which just determines the difference of pronunciation.

Translation, from the surface perspective, is just the transference of two language, however, it is absolutely not limited to the equivalence on the level of word, but the transplanting of the deep meaning. As long as the nature of translation remains, the way of translation will not change. The language and the method used to describe the way could change; the notion of describer could change; the perspective could change; but the original aim will stand forever. “Way” proposed by Cao Minglun is also the “pure language”, or a meme, which is the same internalized understanding that can be replicated and transmitted forever. Such being the case, the correspondence between “meme” and “pure language” could not be denied.

V. Influence of Meme to Translation Studies

Based on the above, the author of this paper believes that the nature of “meme” theory is just the “cultural core”, or “deep structure”, or “pure language”, even the “way” of translation. “Meme” theory is generated from biology, but it has influenced the study of social science, including translation studies.

Cultural information loaded on language is always a difficulty for understanding. Learners, therefore, are demanded to study hard our own and other’s cultures on the foundation of linguistic ability. As to teachers, they should take all ways possible to replicate and transmit cultural memes stored in their mind. According to Francis Heylighen, the replication of memes will go through four phrases, i.e. assimilation, retention, expression and transmission. Teachers can use this replication process to guide their teaching activity. At first, they should make students understand and accept the useful information, that is assimilation; and then demand students to remember them as much as possible, that is retention; next, teachers can design exercises to guide students to correctly transplant the information from one to another language, that is expression and transmission. In this way, students’ competence in translating will be gradually improved.

After the “cultural turn”, many schools like “Skopos Theory” and “Cultural Study” provide more angles and ways. Now, “meme” theory originated from biology is also studied and borrowed by translation scholars. In the process of borrowing, new theories will appear, which will flourish translation studies. However, the author of this paper has some different thinkings. She did not deny the active role of borrowing the results from other science, but she believes that the reasons for borrowing is to help translation studies. Scholars of translation studies
could not neglect the key problem of translation studies. At present, many so-called researches have lost sight of “text”, but pay more attention to the cultural factors, and they even lose sight of “faithfulness”. Just as Cao Minglun pointed out, we study culture for the purpose of translation studies, but not for the purpose of replacing translation studies by cultural studies. The reason for our borrowing the result of other science is not to change our translation studies to another one. No matter what background translation studies is under, translation should be itself. Meanwhile, whatever activity we look upon translation as, we could not deny the fact that we should regard translation as itself. (2007:3-4)

VI. Conclusion

This paper discusses the relations between the replication and transmission process of “meme” and translating activity, and attaches importance to the nature of “meme” theory which is imitated “gene” theory. Although the author of this paper believes that there are some correspondence between “meme” and the signifiee of “core”, “deep structure” and “pure language”, she also believes it provides a new perspective for translation studies and makes the translation studies more prosperous.

However, the author of this paper believes that this kind of transdisciplinary study has great impact on the ontology study of translation studies. The focus of translation studies has greatly deviated; less and less scholars pay close attention to the study of translation itself. Although the author of this paper is of limited capability and knowledge, she also wishes and calls for the combination of descriptive and prescriptive studies of translation studies. Only in this way can translation studies be an really independent field.

Notes:

[1] Cao Minglun. The Way of Translation (Fan Yi Zhi Dao) [C]. Bao Ding: Hebei University Press, 2007.
[2] Chesterman, Andrew. Memes of Translation [C]. Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1997.
[3] Dawkins, Richard. The Selfish Gene [C] (on line). London: Oxford University. Available from: http://www.rubinghscience.org/memetics/dawkinsmemes.html. Nov. 20, 2008.
[4] Gentzler, Edwin. Contemporary Translation Theories(Revised Second Edition) [C]. Shanghai: SFLEP, 2004.
[5] He Zhiran. “Memes in Language”[J]. Language Sciences, 2005 (6), 54-56.
ZHANG Ting (1978- ) Lecturer of Foreign Language School, Hubei University for Nationalities. She is currently Ph.D. Candidate of Foreign Language School, Sichuan University. Her research fields cover Translation Theory and Practice. Address: Foreign Language School, Hubei Institute for Nationalities, Hubei Province, P.R. China; Postcode: 445000; E-mail: daisyzt@163.com