

# On Inspiration of Ma Jianzhong's Thought on Translation to Contemporary Translation Teaching

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**Abstract:** At the end of 19th century, Ma Jianzhong put forward his “Perfect Translation” theory based on comparative linguistics, which is different from the Chinese traditional views of translation, yet his theory was ignored by the then authorities and the Chinese academic community. Today it is of positive significance for us to draw on the profound connotation of Ma’s translation thought. The major aspects of the inspirations are that development of the students’ bilingual proficiency should be put in a central position in the teaching programs, with emphasis on linguistic analysis and functional analysis, and the teaching design and translation teaching method research should be emphasized, giving prominence to the functional approach, and the wide-ranging scope of background knowledge and social function of translation are also important.

**Keywords:** Ma Jianzhong; Thought on translation; Translation teaching

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## 1. Introduction

In the winter of 1894, Ma Jianzhong advanced the concept of “perfect translation” in his “Proposal for Setting up a Translation Academy” based on comparative linguistics. Ma Jianzhong’s “perfect translation” theory represented a new change, which is a new approach, different from the basic ideas of China’s traditional translation theory. The concept of “perfect translation” laid a foundation for the development of modern Chinese translation theories, while the proposed “translation academy” provided the framework for setting up the translation academy oriented to educating translation talents in late Qing Dynasty, though not realized.

Now some scholars in China, Wang Hongtao (2005) for example, are making efforts to study his “perfect translation” theory for the purpose of obtaining some new insights to contribute to construction of Chinese modern translation theory. As Ma’s translation consideration has a close bearing on translation teaching, there are some ideas in his theory that can throw some inspiring light on translation teaching today.

## 2. Ma Jianzhong's Thoughts on Translation

Ma Jianzhong was a Chinese official and scholar in the late Qing Dynasty. He is the author of *Ma's Grammar* (Mashi Wentong), a voluminous well-known book, representing the first work in China that researched Chinese grammar through adopting the way of western traditional linguistic theories. It's of essential significance in China's linguistic history. In “Proposal for Setting up a Translation Academy” in 1894, when China was badly defeated by Japan, he put forth his views on translation---“perfect translation” theory, a new theory that is different from the Chinese traditional views of translation. In this treatise, he stated an approach to translation based on the west traditional linguistics.

He pointed out the lack of competent translators at that time as a huge obstacle in the translating work of China. In his opinion, the quality of translators is decisively important to realize perfect translation, for if one can't master the two languages and does not know clearly the discrepancy and similarities between them at various levels, it is impossible for one to do a good job of translation, and if the translator is not versed in the source language and target language, he will not express adequately the meaning or thought of the source text, not to say the style. Therefore, he can't exactly convey the ideas of the original text in the target one, even possibly misleading the target readers. Taking into consideration the situation in the translation field at that time, Ma proposed “perfect translation” theory, pointing out a new way for training the future competent translators, and guiding them in translating according to

those views he proposed.

### **3. Current Picture of Translation Teaching**

#### **3.1 Position, properties and task of E-C translation teaching**

In departments of foreign languages in universities of China, for those majors in foreign languages, the introductory translation course is an advanced course designed to develop their skills in performing translation and the ability to apply the foreign languages they are learning. The course includes two parts: E-C translation and C-E translation. At present in China, the translation teaching programs involving English as a foreign language are divided into three levels: teaching translation, as a means of foreign language teaching with no other aims than at developing students' language proficiency; translation teaching, as one of the major courses for foreign language major students, with the property of transition, which is an advanced course for the students majoring in English as well as an elementary course for professional translator training; translation teaching, as the major course of translation professional training, with the aim at cultivating the professional competence of translators (Li & Huang, 2004).

#### **3.2 Some Problems in Current Practice of Translation Teaching**

Under the converging effect of the current factors which are changing, translation teaching presents some problems under the current teaching conditions. First, it lacks of high efficient and state-of-the-art teaching methods. For the time being, the translation teaching in foreign languages departments of universities, generally speaking, is troubled by low efficiency of teaching. Second, teaching materials needs to be improvement. A multitude of translation textbooks were published in the past two decades, none of which, however, can be universally recognized as an authoritative one. The application of new materials will undoubtedly inject new energy into translation teaching. In addition, too much attention paid to translation product and lack of tests of high validity should also be considered.

#### **3.3 Necessity of Improving Translation Teaching**

In the context of intercultural communication between China and other countries, translation is being more and more important. Translation between English, the world's most widely used language, and Chinese, the language used by the largest population in the world, is most internationally significant, and hence the significance of introductory translation course teaching to EFL students as individuals and to China. We should, absorbing the positive elements of the traditional views, work hard to explore some new methods for translation teaching. The purpose of finding problems is not for problems' sake, but for detecting inspirations of Ma Jianzhong's Thought, so as to improve the effectiveness of translation teaching and the students' translation proficiency.

### **4. Inspirations of Ma's Translation Thinking on Translation Teaching**

Ma's exposition involved contrastive study of languages, translation process, text analysis, equivalent translation, the readers' response and other modern translation concepts. Therefore, based on Ma's thoughts on translation practice and translation teaching, the author proposes two suggestions below for improvement of the contemporary translation teaching oriented to the undergraduate English majors.

#### **4.1 Attaching Importance to Contrastive Study of Languages**

In Ma's Proposal, he outlines an approach to translation drawing on the insights of what must be termed (with some hindsight) contrastive linguistics. In order to succeed at his task, the translator needs to analyze with the minutest care the source and target languages. By placing together for comparison individual words and sentences from the two languages, he seeks to identify the causes for similarities and differences in expression, and only after the thoroughly understanding the original would he proceed to translate.

In this way, the translator can have a good comprehension of the rich meaning, information, and message of the original text which he will be in a solid position to convey accurately on the basis of such comprehension in the target text. Thus a period of study of translation on the basis of contrasting the two languages is indispensable to an introductory course of translation.

#### **4.2 Adopting Process-oriented Approach**

The theoretical background of process-oriented approach is built on communicative theory, which started in the 1970s. The process-oriented approach can encourage the students to learn translation from translating, trains their abilities of practical operation and oral expression, with the teacher as the organizer, instructor, assistant and promoter of constructive learning, not simply initiator of knowledge or agent infusing knowledge to learners. "Therefore, process-oriented approach attaches importance to translation process as well as techniques and puts emphasis on how to obtain knowledge and how to cultivate students' communicative competence" (Su

Hang, 2001: 99).

Ma Jianzhong was not only a pioneer in research of translation on the basis of the comparative study between the languages involved in translation, but also one who paid special attention to the translation process. Since the translation is an integral and systematic process, there is no better way than the process-oriented approach for translation teaching. As Ma sees it, translation teaching should be conducted with specific teaching objectives, which are determined by many factors, the major ones of which are the social-cultural conditions where the teaching is to be brought about, the market demand for translation abilities of the graduates, and students' psychological needs. To nurture translators that meet the demand of the labor market makes it a must to take a process-oriented approach to teaching translation.

## 5. Conclusion

At the end of 19th century, Ma Jianzhong put forward his "Perfect Translation" theory based on comparative linguistics, which is different from the Chinese traditional views of translation, yet his theory was ignored by the then authorities and the Chinese academic community. Today it is of positive significance for us to draw on the profound connotation of Ma's translation thought. Ma's perfect translation is an ideal for translation study, and as for the undergraduate English majors, the first stage of teaching and learning translation represents the initial effort towards the ideal. The major aspects of the inspirations are that development of the students' bilingual proficiency should be put in a central position in the teaching programs, with emphasis on linguistic analysis and functional analysis, and the teaching design and translation teaching method research should be emphasized, giving prominence to the functional approach, and the wide-ranging scope of background knowledge and social function of translation are also important.

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