The *Tao Te Ching*: Translation Theory and Semantic Variance

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Inception

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Abstract

Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching* is a classic and fundamental Ancient Chinese philosophical, poetic, and religious text that dates back to 4th to 6th century BCE. This text is intrinsic to philosophical and religious thought in Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, and is used as a source of inspiration for artists around the world. Because of its inherent poetic ambiguity, some of its translations have been criticized for appropriating Chinese culture for Western perspectives, while others have seen it as a way of making the spiritual text accessible to larger audiences. In this paper, I compare and examine four different English translations of the *Tao Te Ching* using linguistic frame semantic theory. I argue that semantic variance occurs in each because semiotics are frame dependent, and meaning changes depending on the cultural and temporal frames both the translators bring through their use of fidelity and license when translating, and that the audiences bring when interpreting the artefact. Although variances are present between source text and different translated texts, the translation of the *Tao Te Ching* has managed to continue to extend its life and bridge the language gaps between cultures, spreading interpretations of its

philosophical teachings, and enriching not only the target language, but also the source text in the process.

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Translations of ambiguous poetic, sacred, and philosophical texts offer challenges when portraying cultural and semantic ideas. These challenges and variances become apparent when an artifact is translated multiple times by multiple translators over many generations. The *Tao Te Ching,* an influential and fundamental Ancient Chinese poetic and philosophical text, is an excellent point of reference, as it has been translated over 300 times in numerous languages since its origination in 4th Century BCE. Damian J. Bebell and Shannon M. Fera explore different English translations in their study "Comparison and Analysis of Selected English Interpretations of the *Tao Te Ching*," and find many variances between them, concluding "that careful attention should be granted towards the documentation and understanding of the circulating translations" (144). This paper considers Bebell and Fera's analysis of the translatability of a written text, analyzes the social and cultural backgrounds of the translators in their use of "fidelity" and "license," examines the variances found between four different translations of the *Tao Te Ching,* and relates these to semantic and semiotic translation theories, with the conclusion that semantic and semiotic meaning varies cross-culturally and temporally. As shown in the careful examination of four separate translations of section one of the *Tao Te Ching,* semantics are frame dependent, and meaning changes depending on the cultural frames both the translators and audience bring to the artifact. This investigation furthers Bebell and Fera's research by examining alternate versions of the *Tao Te Ching* and relating them to linguistic frame semantic theory to account for such variances. It is important to investigate variances between translated texts like the *Tao Te Ching* in order to uncover the temporal life of an artifact and the complex cultural ecosystems that reshape and give new life to a text.

John Edwards, in the book *Multilingualism: Understanding Linguistic Diversity,* notes that the translatability of a written piece is often met with contrasting attitudes. On the one hand, translation is sometimes critiqued on the grounds of colonial appropriation, especially with sacred writings, what Edwards describes as "voice appropriation." On the other, it is commended for allowing access to cultural ideas or "bridging language gaps" (Edwards 59). Translation also has the potential to prolong the life of a piece that may otherwise be lost temporally. Edwards states that "every act of translation involves interpretation and judgement," or as Walter Benjamin terms it, "fidelity and license,"[1] as all interpretation of meaning derives from the act of individual rationalization and decoding, and changes depending on the position of the interpreter (Edwards 61-2). The translator's use of fidelity and license becomes even more apparent with philosophical and poetic artifacts, where the use of abstract and ambiguous language promotes the interpretation of multiple meanings: "poetic or philosophical productions also lay traps with their use of metaphor, allusion or dense, abstract reasoning," which, when translated by multiple translators, makes for an interesting area of comparison (Edwards 63).

The *Tao Te Ching* (also known as the Tao Teh Ching, Dao De Jing, 道德經, The Book of the Way and of Virtue, and so forth) is a classical Chinese philosophical, religious, and poetic text that dates back to the 4th to 6th century BCE. Although these dates and the existence of the original author remain a topic of debate, its origination is credited to Laozi (or Lao Tzu), whose name means "Old Master," with Tao meaning "The Way." This text is fundamental to philosophical and religious thought in Taoism, Buddhism, and

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[1] Walter Benjamin defines fidelity and license similarly to Edwards, as "the freedom to give a faithful reproduction of the sense and, in its service, fidelity to the word." See Benjamin, *The Task of the Translator, selected Writings Volume 1* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 259.

Confucianism, and has been used as a source of inspiration for artists all around the world. Its "rhetorical style combines two major strategies: short, declarative statements and intentional contradictions," making it an interesting text for translation as it is intended to be ambiguous, leaving room for interpretation where meaning can change the more times it is read, even with only a single reader (Austin 158). As it was originally written in ancient Classical Chinese, many of its original ideas may have been lost over time, but through numerous translations (over 300), some of its ideas have been revivified for contemporary and Western audiences.

This comparison of English translations of section one of the *Tao Te Ching* intends to show how the interpretation and judgment of translators when selecting words suggests different semantic and cultural insinuations for readers of the same text. Sajjad Kianbakht's study, "Cultural Conceptualizations, Semantics and Translations," which relies heavily on Ana Maria Rojo Lopez's article, "Applying Frame Semantics, A Practical Example," uses frame semantic theory to approach translation studies in order to explicate the problems of semantic variances and relationships between source texts and target texts, and the environments of cultural elements.

"Frame semantic theory," commonly associated with Charles J. Filmore, relates linguistic semantic knowledge to larger frames of knowledge. This position suggests that a word cannot be fully understood unless one has access to the word's relating semantic frames and, as language and culture cannot be separated, it is important to consider the cultural contexts surrounding both the source and translated texts when understanding the semantic and semiotic meaning. Kianbakht describes a frame as consisting of:

>   a group of words as well as cultural conceptualizations and
>   the situation it initially implies. . . With every utterance, the
>   associations that we refer to stored cognitive models and
>   cultural conceptualizations from which we try to call up

> similar experiences" and as everyone experiences the world differently, the experience recalled by each links different associations. (2169)

Rojo similarly describes a frame as a "structure of knowledge that represents the world view of a particular society, that is, its beliefs, values and emotions, prototypes of people and things, of sequences of situations and events, social scenarios and the metaphorical and metonymical structure of thoughts" (313). These accounts of associative conceptualizations in frame semantic theory help to explain the variances found within cross-cultural and cross-generational translations as contextual and cultural frames differ in the cognitive recall process for every individual.

For this analysis, I compare section one of four different English translations of the *Tao Te Ching* in order to examine the translators' use of interpretation and judgement, and the way their social and cultural position can change the consequential implications of a text. The translators I chose for these analyses are Gia-Fu Feng, Stephen Mitchell, John H. McDonald, and Ron Hogan. Gia-Fu Feng's edition was translated in 1972. His translation is significant as he was born in Shanghai, China, and was a teacher and practicing Taoist, giving him a spiritual and cultural emic perspective to the text (Komjathy 3). Stephen Mitchell published his translation of the *Tao Te Ching* in 1988. He is a renowned American poet and translator and has translated over twenty pieces, many of them religious and classical, into English. His version of the *Tao Te Ching* is often recommended to first time readers and is still popular to this day. His Western, Zen spiritual, academic, and poetic background makes for an interesting perspective for his translation (stephenmitchellbooks.com). John H. McDonald's translation was published in 1996 for the public domain. It is a significant translation, as it is known for its use of modern language and clarity, and because of its free access online (McDonald). Ron Hogan's 2004 version is an interesting and controversial translation, as he did not translate it from Chinese, but rather was inspired by Mitchell's and other English translations,

meaning it is a translation of a translation. Hogan tried to simplify and clarify the text by making it less "poetic" and more of a "dialogue" in order to focus more on the underlying advice within the text. His version is commended for making the text accessible to a wider audience but is criticized by scholars and Taoists because it is seen as "unfaithful" to the original (Hogan Foreword). These translators are significant because of their social, cultural, philosophical, religious, and academic backgrounds as well as the years that these texts were translated for temporal textual understandings.

Section one of the *Tao Te Ching* begins with a brief description of what Tao is not. Both Mitchell and Feng's first two sentences are translated identically as, "The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao" and "The name that can be named is not the eternal name." McDonald's is similar, but rather translates "told" as "described" and "named" as "spoken." Although these words are similar, their insinuations and syllable lengths make for a slightly different interpretation: to "tell" seems to imply less detail than the word "describe." Also, to "name" something can both be done internally, in a written, or a spoken manner, whereas "spoken" implies only being said aloud. Hogan's translation simplifies these lines further to "If you can talk about it, it ain't Tao. If it has a name, it's just another thing" (Hogan). By adding the pronoun "you," the translator makes the phrase personal and possessive, as in belonging to the reader, and the word "talk" implies it is only if it is spoken aloud. By using the words "ain't" and "thing," Hogan also creates an informal voice to imply a casual context. This choice to use informalities speaks to the fine line between making a text accessible to a Western audience and being unfaithful to the original.

Feng translates the next line, "The nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth" ("Compare Translations"). This time McDonald's translation is similar to Feng's, but rather than using the term "beginning" he uses the term "boundary." The word "beginning" implies the start or creation of "heaven and earth," whereas

"boundary" can imply both beginning and end, or marking a division or border, to separate rather than to begin. The word "heaven" also implies Christian connotations, signifying a Western religious conceptual framework. Here, Mitchell's translation takes a different path: "The unnameable is the eternally real" ("Compare Translations"). Using "unnameable" changes the meaning to "cannot be named," whereas "nameless" suggests it "does not have a name." Mitchell's translation inspires Hogan in this line, who simplifies it to "Tao doesn't have a name," but, by adding the name "Tao," this line is a contradicting statement.

Feng's next sentence is translated to "The named is the mother of the ten thousand things," and McDonald's is "The named is the mother of creation" ("Compare Translations"). The numbering of "things" appears to set a limit to what is named, whereas "creation" can be seen as endless, implying different temporal contextual connotations. Mitchell translates this line to "naming is the origin of all particular things," and by changing the verb "named" to the noun "naming" he denotes a present tense or an ongoing act of naming ("Compare Translations"). Here, Mitchell also uses "origin" rather than "mother" which, rather than implying a feminine matriarchy, implies the beginning of existence from an unknown source. Again, Hogan seems to simplify Mitchell's translation further to "Names are for ordinary things" ("Compare Translations"). These all seem to imply that if something has a name it is profane, although differing temporal and contextual connotations are apparent between authors.

Mitchell's next paragraph translates "Free from desire, you realize the mystery. Caught in desire, you see only manifestations" ("Compare Translations"). McDonald's translation is close: "Freed from desire, you can see the hidden mystery. By having a desire, you can only see what is visibly real" ("Compare Translations"). McDonald, by using the past tense "freed," suggests that at one point the individual was not free and had to achieve freedom, and

his use of the word "hidden" insinuates that the mystery was concealed, rather than Mitchell's translation as "realize," which implies the individual is becoming aware of the mystery. Mitchell's use of the word "caught" implies being "stuck" or "trapped," whereas McDonald's "having" infers a type of possessive ownership and responsibility of the individual. Mitchell's use of the word "manifestation" appears to have a more abstract active meaning than McDonald's "visibly real," which appears more tangible. Neither of these passages flow as nicely as Feng's, who uses the rhetorical figures of repetition and polyptoton:"[2] "Ever desireless, one can see the mystery. Ever desiring, one sees the manifestations," where the use of the word "ever" implies the concurrent nature of the desire ("Compare Translations"). Hogan's translation appears as more of a command than a suggestion: "stop wanting stuff; it keeps you from seeing what's real. When you want stuff, all you see are things" ("Compare Translations"). Again, Hogan uses the term "things" and "stuff" to create a casual context, simplifying the meaning of the passage.

Mitchell's "mystery and manifestations arise from the same source," and McDonald's "mystery and reality emerge from the same source" are similar ("Compare Translations"). However, using to "arise" seems to imply "ascension" whereas to "emerge" suggests to "come from." For both, "This source is called darkness," but for Feng "These two spring from the same source, but differ in name; this appears as darkness," to "spring" implies a type of sudden movement, and is more detailed ("Compare Translations"). The use of "appear" seems to have less agency, rather than "source," which implies directly where something comes from.

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[2] The rhetorical device *polyptoton* is a form of repetition that is used to emphasize a repeated root word which here is "desire." Such phrases are used to add musicality and rhythm, and add emphasis complexity, simplicity, paradox, or irony to a sentence.

In the final paragraph of section one, both Feng and Mitchell translate "darkness within darkness," but McDonald uses "born from" rather than "within" ("Compare Translations"). McDonald's version suggests that darkness creates itself which is established further by the final line "the beginning of all understanding," connecting "born" and "beginning" ("Compare Translations"). Feng's final line is "The gate to all mystery" and Mitchell's is "The gateway to all understanding," which both imply that the doorway to "mystery" or "understanding" can be opened or closed, but "mystery" implies more abstraction than "understanding," which can be comprehended ("Compare Translations"). This careful examination of the four separate translations of section one of the *Tao Te Ching* shows that semantics are frame dependent, and meaning changes depending on the cultural frames both the translators and audience bring to the text.

In Kianbakht's study "Cultural Conceptualizations, Semantics and Translations," he proposes a second notion of "Functional Equivalence" in translation theory. He categorizes two modes of equivalence, "functional equivalence," in translation works to modify the meaning of the source text to fit the cultural context of the target text, and "correspondence" in translation works to activate the intended knowledge of the source text (2170). The challenge in identifying equivalence between the source text and translated text of the *Tao Te Ching* occurs because of the age of the text and language used during that time. Literary Chinese is not practiced commonly today and uses no punctuation and has few words which remain as fixed verbs. However, in analyzing Hogan's translation of Mitchell's already-English translation, one might conclude that he uses the mode of functional equivalence over correspondence because he works to make the text more accessible to a culturally Western audience. The choices between functional equivalence and correspondence accounts for some of the variances found between the English translations of the *Tao Te Ching.*

Between source text, translated target text, and reader, and the cultural and contextual frames each brings to the writing, translating, and the reading experience, a significant number of variances will co-occur. Rojo argues, "only if the TT [target text] linguistic elements activate the relevant frames for the interpretation of the text, will readers be able to draw the correct contextual inferences on the basis of their frame-based knowledge. From this point of view, the translator becomes a bilingual and bicultural 'mediator' between two different conceptual systems" (Rojo 315). This is why it is essential for the translators to be sensitive and aware of cultural and contextual systems.

The art of translation and the role of the translator has kept the *Tao Te Ching* alive globally since its origination in the 4th century BCE and has continued to pass down its philosophies since its creation. Although variances occur between translators and translations, so does semantic understanding between readers of the same text. Even if variances have occurred from the source text to the translated ones, the translation of the *Tao Te Ching* has managed to continue to extend the life of this text and to bridge language gaps between China and the rest of the world, spreading interpretations of its philosophical teachings, and enriching not only the target language but also the source language in the process.

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