Opinion

Ambiguity of Being and Its Translation

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Abstract

"Being" has three functions of identity, predication and existence in the history of Western philosophy. However, it is difficult to find its corresponding word in Chinese; therefore, there are lots of disputes and confusions on the translation of "being". Owing to the big gap in language and culture between China and West, linguistic representations are also different. In the process of translating, different cultures and philosophical connotations of "being" should be taken into account. In a word, "being" has different meanings in different contexts, so it cannot be translated into the only meaning "是" in Chinese.

Keywords: Being; Translation; Copula; Existence

Introduction

In the history of western philosophy, the ancient Greek philosopher Parmenides was the first to study "being" as a basic category, and then "being" has been a core category in western philosophy and the basis of the whole western metaphysics. In different contexts, "being" has different meanings, and any definite meaning will eventually be questioned and revised, so the translation of "being" is also controversial. This paper will examine the philosophical connotation behind "being" from both logical and semantic respects and meanwhile explore its translation.

Beginning with Translation

In China, the discussion of translation of "being" has begun since 1980. In the past several decades, the academic circle has not reached an extensive consensus on the translation of "being" yet. Some scholars even believe that the concept is strictly untranslatable (Plato, 1982), or it can only be transliterated as "庇因" (Wang & He, 2014). In history, the most common translations of "being" are "存在", "有" and "是", and the last translation has been more popular in recent years. In the translation of Plato's *Parmenides*, Chen Kang definitely translates it into Chinese "是". Chen (Plato, 1982) points out

that the literal translation will not only create a new term for the Chinese philosophical circle, but also give Chinese readers a chance to practice a new way of thinking.

Wang Zisong and Wang Taiqing (2000) also writes an article about the translation of "being", arguing that the traditional translation of "存在" is difficult to express the full connotation of "being", and advocates the translation of "是". Xiao Shimei (2000) holds that "有" and "存在" in Chinese do not include the meaning of "是", so it is not complete to translate "being", and "being" in western philosophy can only be understood as "是". Wang Lu (2008) also advocates that "being" should be translated as "是", the main reason of which is that "存在" does not reflect and cannot reflect the meaning of the word "being" as a copula. However, whether the word "being" should always be translated as "是" will be discussed below.

At abroad, C. H. Kahan, who conducts systematic research on "being", argues that there are three major usages of "being": copula, existence and truth-value judgment. Among them, the usage of copula is the most basic, and existence and truth-value judgment can be reflected by copula usage, that is, "being" contains

the meanings of "existence" and "truth-value judgment". It is worth mentioning that the British Sinologist A. C. Graham points out that in Indo-European languages, "being" has the meaning of both "existence" and "essence", but they are inseparable in ancient Greek. When ancient Greek philosophy is translated into Latin by Arabic, because there is no word in Arabic corresponding to "being", it can only be translated as "existence" or "essence" respectively according to its meaning. The same is true of translating "being" into Chinese because there is no corresponding word in Chinese too, thus creating obstacles for the target language reader to understand and translate Western metaphysics.

Translation of "S is P" and "There be"

The basic functions of "being" are reflected in such sentence structures as "S is P" and "There be". In the former structure, "being" plays the role of linking the subject and the predicative in the categorical statement, but it has different meanings. In the latter structure, "being" means existence. The functions are mainly expressed as follows:

Identity

Under such a circumstance, the subject and the predicative linked by "being", have the same reference. For example,

i.   Scott is the author of Waverly.

ii.   The evening star is the morning star.

iii. Cicero was Tully.

In the examples above, the subject and the predicative linked by "being" are equal or identical, that is, "Scott = the author of Waverly", "the evening star = the morning star", and "Cicero = Tully". In this circumstance, "being" is generally translated into Chinese "是". If translated into Chinese "存在" or "有", it is not only logically incomprehensible, but also semantically inexplicable.

Predication

As a copula, "being" is a marker of a sentence whose function is to make sentences. In detail, "being" is used to connect the subject like singular terms (proper names) or general terms (common nouns) with the predicative like general terms (common nouns, adjectives, prepositional phrases, etc.). The statement thus formed is called predication. For example,

i.   Snow is white.

ii.   Samson is a warrior.

iii. Alabama is between Mississippi and Georgia.

Obviously, "is" in each example should be translated into Chinese "是". Of course, "is" in the last example can also be omitted when translating according to Chinese expression.

Existence

"There be" structure is a common sentence pattern in English, which means the existence of people or things. This structure is an inverted structure, in which "there" has no real meaning. The noun following "be" is the subject of the sentence. For example, there is a book on the desk. Of course, this sentence is different from the sentence "A book is on the desk." In the former sentence, "is" means existence but in the latter sentence, "is" is used as a copula, indicating predication. Generally, "being" in "There be" structure is translated into Chinese "有". If translated as "是" or "存在", it does not conform to the Chinese expression.

To sum up, in the three relationships above, "being" is used in all contexts in English, but in Chinese "是" is only used for identity and predication, but not for the existence. Hence, it is improper to translate "being" into Chinese "是" from beginning to end.

Translation of "S is"

In the history of western philosophy, the distinction between the meanings of "being", especially the meaning of "是" and that of "存在", has already appeared since Aristotle. However, the Greek itself hinders the progress of "division", so that the meaning of "existence" is not discussed as an independent philosophical concept.

However, from the perspective of the whole history of western philosophy, the initial distinction of the meanings of "being" does not hinder the pursuit of "combination" of its meanings. Due to the long-term pursuit of unique meaning of "being", it is difficult for us to understand and translate "being". To a large extent, the history of western metaphysics is a history of the debate on "being".

First of all, let's take a look at the sentence pattern "S is" and its translation. In Indo-European languages, especially in Medieval Latin, "be" can also be used as a notional verb. For example,

God is.

Such a sentence pattern is very popular in the Indo-European language family, but it rarely occurs in Chinese. How do we understand and translate "is"?

As we know, the medieval Anselmus' ontological argument of the existence of God is premised on "being". Later, "Being" was used to refer to "God", and became the largest and most universal philosophical category. The medieval philosopher Albert pointed out that in the proposition like "S is", the copula "is" meant the existence of the thing represented by the subject (Chen, 2011). The logical formula can be expressed as: $x (x=God). That is, there is an x, and an x is God. According to this interpretation, "God is." means "God exist." Obviously, the meaning of "is" used in the sentence pattern "S is" is different from that of "S is P". In other words, "S is" is not an omission of "S is P", but a special sentence pattern.

Hence, "God is." can be translated into Chinese as "上帝存在。" The problem is that "being" also means "existing" in the Indo-European language family. Can we still translate it into "上帝是"? In Chinese, "是" is mainly used as a linking verb, connecting the subject and the predicative, and is not used as a notional verb alone, so it is not advisable to translate "God is." into Chinese "上帝是。" Of course, language is changing and developing, and different languages also influence each other. If some day Chinese is influenced by western languages and "是" can also be used as a notional verb

alone to indicate "existence", then it is feasible to translate "God is." into Chinese "上帝是。" In short, we can comprehend "being" in western philosophy from the perspective of "being" itself. However, if we persist in translating "being" into Chinese "是" regardless of its context, it will inevitably be too arbitrary. In fact, there are different Chinese words to distinguish "being" of predication (是) and "being" of existence (有，存在). Why do we not use the language facilities that help to reduce confusion, but use the unique word to produce confusion?

I think, therefore I am.

This statement is the first principle of Descartes' philosophy, on which he founds his whole metaphysical edifice. Descartes tries to find the undoubted thing by means of "universal suspicion", and finally finds that although we can doubt all things present, there is something that cannot be doubted, and that is "I doubt" itself, because even if I doubt "I doubt", it still proves "I doubt".

"Doubting" means "thinking", and "thinking" must have the existence of a thinker "I", so Descartes forms his first principle "I think, therefore I am." from the universal doubt. Generally, the Chinese translation of this principle is "我思，故我在。" and "am" is interpreted as "exist".

Actually, the word "am" in the first principle shows the essence of the entity, namely, "I think". In other words, the essence of the "self" lies in the attribute of thinking. According to this interpretation, the Chinese translation "我思，故我在。" is prone to misunderstanding, because "I think" does not mean "I exist", but the essence that "I" has (Zhao, 2004).

In Descartes' view, "I" is only a thing of thinking, a mind, or a reason. Here, "I" is beyond the body, because "I" can also imagine having no body, but in any case cannot imagine that "I" has no thinking, for thinking is an essential attribute of "I". Therefore, we can translate Descartes' first principle into Chinese "我思，故我是。"

Furthermore, this proposition is different from the basic creed of medieval theologians, i.e. "I am who I am." because this creed shows that the "being" of God does not need any premise, but the "being" of "I think, therefore I am." is based on "I think".

Consequently, different interpretations of the same pattern "S is" have different translations. Whether the translations are accurate or not depends on the philosophical connotation behind them, and meanwhile we should take into account the characteristics of the target language.

Translation of "to be"

Next, let's look at the translation of "to be" in other propositions. For example,

To be is to be perceived.

Berkeley's proposition is usually translated into Chinese "存在即被感知。", i.e. "to be" is interpreted as "existence". So it is stubbornly misunderstood as a model of subjective idealism. Berkeley himself is regarded as a "crazy piano" for believing that

feeling is the real existence. His doctrine is treated as a fallacy that it can be easily defeated with a kick on a stone, or by lifting a hand.

How can Berkeley, a famous empirical philosopher in the 18th century, put forward such an "absurd" proposition that is easily knocked down and often laughed at? It is due to the misunderstanding caused by translation. In fact, although Berkeley completely deviates from Locke's materialist empiricism and moves toward subjective idealism, he does not deny existence of things outside feeling. In Berkeley's view, things are sensible, and sensible things are composed of a variety of sensory properties that cannot exist without feeling, and we can know what things are only through feeling.

That is to say, there is a necessary connection between "what is the thing" and "property of the thing", rather than to attribute the existence of external things to feeling. Thus, it is better to translate "to be" in this proposition into "是" (what it is) rather than "在" (what there is), and the proposition can be translated into Chinese "所是即所知。", which means that the property of things is acquired through perception.

To be is to be the value of a bound variable.

This sentence is a proposition of the ontological commitment put forward by Quine, a famous American philosopher in the 20th century. Quine believes that the ontological problem is simply about the question of "what there is". However, when discussing ontology, we should distinguish two different problems: one is the problem of "what there is", and the other is the problem of saying "what there is". The former is about "ontological facts", and the latter is about "ontological commitments". Besides, Quine argues that pronouns are the basic means of reference, and existence is to be in the range of reference of a pronoun. According to Quine (1961:13), "The variables of quantification, 'something', 'nothing', 'everything', range over our whole ontology, whatever it may be." Therefore, we translate this proposition into Chinese "存在就是成为约束变项的值。" and "to be" means "existence". If this sentence is translated as "是就是成为约束变项的值。", the target language reader cannot know what it really means.

It is not difficult to find that there are different usages and meanings of "being" of different contexts. No word such as "是"、"有" or "在" in Chinese have all the functions of "being" in western philosophy. When translating one language into another, we not only clarify the original philosophical connotation, but also take into account the differences brought about by different languages and cultures. Deng Xiaomang (2003: 38) concludes, "For the word 'being' in western philosophy, if we directly translate it into Chinese '有' or '存在', it is partial, but there is another trouble to translate it as '是' directly. The former does ignore the characteristics of western languages and cultures, but the latter also neglects the connotation of Chinese culture. So we should not try to seek the unique translation of this word; on the contrary we should give corresponding translation according to different contexts and meanwhile make an interpretation, which seems to add trouble, but in fact it may be more in line with the original text [1-11]."

Conclusion

The history of western metaphysics shows that "being" never has a unified meaning, and philosophers in different periods always pursue the unique and definite meaning, thus falling into endless debates. It is generally agreed that "being" has all the meanings of "是", "有" and "在" in Chinese, but no corresponding word in Chinese has all the meanings of "being". As a result, in the process of translating, we should understand and translate the meanings of "being" according to different contexts, rather than replace a universal meaning with a specific meaning, or translate a general meaning into a singular meaning regardless of its context.

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Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest.

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