

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF VIETNAMESE TRANSLATIONS OF *THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA* BY ERNEST HEMINGWAY

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Abstract. Literary translation plays a significant role in the development of any literary tradition. Translation Studies, in the case of *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway, uses a comparative approach to analyze and interpret the similarities and differences between various translations, then clarify the translation strategies of contemporary translators. This comparison aims to highlight the role of internal and external textual factors in translation that affect the readers' reception process.

Keywords: literary translation, *The Old Man and the Sea*, Ernest Hemingway.

1. Introduction

Ernest Hemingway is a renowned figure in American literature. He first worked as a journalist before devoting himself entirely to writing some books like *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), etc. Nevertheless, only after the release of *The Old Man and the Sea* in 1952, he achieved enormous success and numerous awards, most noticeably the Pulitzer Prize in 1953, and the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1954. It took only two years (1956) for this work to be quickly published in Southern Vietnam. After meticulous research, there have been nine Vietnamese translations of *The Old Man and the Sea*:

1. Ông lão và biển cả (1956) - translated by Mac Do (Quan Diem Publishing House, Saigon)
2. Ông già và biển cả (1962) - translated by Huy Phuong (World Publishing House, Hanoi)
3. Ngư ông và biển cả (1967) - translated by Bao Son (Ngay Nay Publishing House, Saigon)
4. Ngư ông và biển cả (1973) - translated by Mac Mac (Saigon)
5. Ông già và biển cả (1999) - translated by Nguy Mong Huyen (Hanoi)
6. Ông già và biển cả (1999) - translated by Le Huy Bac (Van Hoc Publishing House, Hanoi)
7. Ông già và biển cả (2017) - translated by Dam Hung (My Thuat Publishing House, Hanoi)
8. Ông già và biển cả (2024) - translated by Hien Trang (Van Hoc Publishing House).

These statistics are synthesized from the researcher's document collection process, gleaned from the introduction by Le Huy Bac (the translator of *The Old Man and the Sea*), and the data collected by Bui Thi Kim Hanh in her Master's Thesis (*Translating Issues in Hemingway's 'The Old Man and the Sea' in Vietnam*, 1998) [1] and Doctoral Thesis (*Hemingway in Vietnam*, 2002) [2] in Hanoi National University of Education. Four remaining texts have been identified and translated by Mac Do, Huy Phuong, Le Huy Bac, and Hien Trang. Additionally, most previous research about this artwork through translation approaches, including the above, mainly focuses

on the linguistic aspects but not the cultural, social, or political ones, owing to the lack of theories that have been translated or appeared in Vietnam.

Translation Studies, especially Translation Theories, has a long history. Translation, firstly, is the process of converting from one language to another or shifting the cultural boundaries, and social and political backgrounds among regions, areas, and countries. It should also be considered “a transmission of ideas, concepts, structures, or even literary movements from one form to another” [88; 4]. Even before this discipline's emergence, there were a variety of translation debates mainly based on the experience of translating religious texts in the West. These debates often centered around “faith” and “freedom”, “word for word/ literal” translation (following so closely the form of the source text), and “sense for sense/ free” translation (allowing the sense or content of the source text to be translated) [5]. In the Orient – a similar discussion took place by looking at Yan Fu’s three criteria for translation: “Faithfulness – Expressiveness – Elegance” (Tín – Đạt – Nhã) [6]. In response to the growing demand for literary translation, a plethora of essays suddenly increased in the early 20th century before the linguistic approaches in the 1950s (e.g. Eugene Nida, Catford) with the development of concepts such as “formal equivalence,” “dynamic equivalence,” and “functional equivalence,” which focus on the equivalent effect of messages, expressions or process between the source text and the target text [7, 8]. In the 1990s, the “cultural turn” brought new methods into translation practice that considerably altered most literary scholars’ mindset at that time. These include “domestication/ familiarised” (bringing the original work closer to the target audience) and “foreignization” (bringing the target audience closer to the original work) [9]. Another significant approach that emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s was Postcolonial Translation Theory, which primarily challenges the ‘Westernization’ strategies in translated texts [10]. Additionally, Interdisciplinary Studies gained prominence by incorporating political, social, and gender perspectives into the theoretical translation studies. Hence, in the bigger picture, Translation Studies can surpass the debates between ‘literal and ‘free’ translation, the conception of “les belles infidèles” (the unfaithful beauties). It can also explore the translator’s fidelity to expand the scope of historical phenomena, or cultural, political, and social change.

After a brief overview of the translation strategies of Mac Do and Huy Phuong, this study underscores the similarities and difficulties through linguistic and cultural approaches between the two most widespread Vietnamese translations, by Le Huy Bac and Hien Trang. There are also two expert interviews conducted about the translation or publishing process of Vietnamese translations of *The Old Man and the Sea*, one with Hien Trang (22/03/2024), and another with Le Huy Bac (16/04/2024). Therefore, based on their translations and interviews, it brings a comparative analysis to interpret their translation strategies and then highlights the role of internal and external textual factors that affect the readers’ reception process nowadays through political, social, and economic aspects or even the translators’ background.

2. Content

2.1. Research on the Translation Strategies of Mac Do and Huy Phuong

The Vietnamese translation by Mac Do (Saigon, 1956) – *Ông lão và biển cả* – is based on the original English version of Hemingway; however, it adopts a relatively free style which is one of the characteristics of the early period of Vietnamese literary translation. He paid special attention to lexical fields related to fishing but did not always name them accurately in Vietnamese, or even left them untranslated (marlin, bonito). He constantly split long sentences into 2 to 4 shorter ones and added words, phrases, or punctuation marks to express emotions or simply shorten them (E.g. “Eat them, fish. Eat them. Please eat them” – 3 sentences is translated as “Rĩa đi, rĩa đi chú mày!” – 1 sentence [11]).

Huy Phuong's translation, on the other hand, took a different approach by using the intermediary French translation *Le Vieil Homme et la Mer* by Jean Dutourd), and sometimes referred to the Chinese one. As a result, the translation involved at least two layers: the first one is languages, culture, and artwork's background, and the other is the translators' explication. J. Dutourd, who viewed this work as a fairytale story, began the French translation by transforming Hemingway's opening "He was an old man" into "Il était une fois" (Once Upon a Time) – a common beginning of fairytale motifs [12]. He expressed his opinions by choosing proper words and breaking a long original sentence into 2-4 short, concise, and simple French ones that convey the fairytale sense. Through J. Dutourd's translation, Huy Phuong also translated precisely according to the split sentences [13], especially, "added adjectives, adverbs, or implied parts that Hemingway intended to leave untold" [1]. The Vietnamese translator also appears to consider the old man's fishing in the original work as the Southern people's one in Vietnam, which Vietnamizes this context with labor songs (with the beginning motif "Đô ta"/ Let's go), or translating proper nouns like "Nữ Uớc" (New York), "khách sạn Vọng Lâu" (Terrace), "Xăngchiago" (Santiago), "Manôlin" (Manolin), etc. The reason that is 'Huy Phuong's translation of elegance is the best' in the Vietnamese translation of *The Old Man and the Sea* before 1975 [3] because not only it was influenced by the interpretation of the French translation, but also he believes that "many important issues about life and human fate in a society still inhabited by impoverished and solitary fishermen like Santiago" [14]. It shows that Huy Phuong explicated the old man's hardship in the marlin fishing process as a consequence of poverty and loneliness, rather than emphasizing the modern existential struggle, where individuals, despite recognizing the inherent limitations of certain endeavors, persist in their fight.

Both translators translated quite freely (splitting long sentences, adding expression words, and punctuation marks), and "Vietnamized" Hemingway's work to overcome linguistic and cultural barriers. These translations, consequently, show a noticeable divergence from the original text. Huy Phuong's translation (published in Northern Vietnam) – not the translation of Mac Do, Bao Son (published in Southern Vietnam) – was widely taught in high school literature textbooks in the 1990s, although it was the only one that used the French translation (not the original one) [1]. This shows that Southern-translated literature (1945-1975) always requires literary scholars to re-evaluate its contribution to Vietnamese (translated) literature.

2.2. Research on the Translation Strategies of Le Huy Bac and Hien Trang

2.1.1. A Comparative Analysis of Translations by Le Huy Bac and Hien Trang

When comparing the translations by Le Huy Bac and Hien Trang, one of the noticeable features to differentiate them is how they handled pronouns. Because Vietnamese is fairly flexible with personal pronouns, it can convey a wide range of nuances. In the phrase "the old man", is translated as "ông già" in the title while both translators called it "lão" throughout the texts. It not only reflects his age but also conveys a colloquial tone, close to working-class people. However, in the monologue between the old man and the marlin using I/me and he/him, Le Huy Bac used the pronouns "ta" – "người" ("tao" – "mày"), while Hien Trang translated them as "ta" – "hắn" ("ta" – "người"). In our evaluation, Trang's translation is closer to the original text and captures the old man's respectful attitude towards the marlin as an adversary and a noble creature: "Hắn là người anh em của ta. Nhưng ta phải giết hắn và tiếp tục mạnh mẽ để làm được điều đó" ("He is my brother. But I must kill him and keep strong to do it").

The translations by Le Huy Bac and Hien Trang could accurately capture the lexical fields related to fishing, which the translations before the 1975s could not, including fishing operations, fishing tools (coiled lines/ sào sắn, gaff/ lao móc, harpoon/ cánh buồm, etc.), or various types of fish (sardine/ cá mòi, dolphin/ cá dorado/ cá heo, etc.) in the Gulf Stream. Both translators decided to keep the name of characters and locations in the original form like "Manolin", "DiMaggio",

Terrace), or Spanish (non-English) words like “Que va”, “agua mala”, and “bodega”, which reflects the translators’ deep awareness of the original work with “foreignization” strategies. Hien Trang, on the other hand, tends to “domesticate” some foreign factors by generating Vietnamese idioms to bridge the linguistic and cultural gap. For example, when predicting the fish’s actions, the old man thought, “If you said a good thing it might not happen”. While Le Huy Bac literally translates as “Nếu người ta nói ra điều gì tốt lành thì nó sẽ không xảy ra”, Trang used an idiom “nói trước bước không qua” that can carry a familiar sense for Vietnamese readers. There are a variety of translation strategies, where “linguistic features related to the source culture (such as dialect or unfamiliar lexical items) can be underlined as defamiliarized elements in the text, or be domesticated in some way, or be circumvented altogether” [21; 15].

Another difference between these two translations is in how Le Huy Bac and Hien Trang handle the telegram style in Hemingway’s writing from his previous journalism experience. Le Huy Bac’s translation aligns more closely with the Iceberg Theory of Hemingway with approximately the same word count. Furthermore, Ernest Hemingway often employs declarative sentences, which are simple but implicit, and a high frequency of conjunctions “and” that are not familiar to Vietnamese writing. Le Huy Bac translated them with short sentences in a calm but assertive tone, and replaced “and” with some punctuation marks, while Hien Trang maintained all, and even added some conjunctions (có lẽ, và, hơn nữa, với) [16]. Trang’s strategies, consequently, sometimes slightly lose the connection between Vietnamese words and sentences within the paragraph, thus failing to capture Hemingway’s style and nature’s vitality in *The Old Man and the Sea*.

* **Original text:** He came out unendingly and water poured from his sides. He was *bright* in the sun and his head and back were dark purple and in the sun the stripes on his sides showed *wide and a light lavender*. His sword was as long as a baseball bat and tapered like a rapier and he rose his full length from the water and then re-entered it, smoothly, like a diver and the old man saw the great scythe-blade of his tail go under and the line commenced to race out.

* **Le Huy Bac’s translation:** Nó nhô lên bất tận, nước đổ rờn rờn từ hai bên sườn. Thân hình *bóng nhẫy* trong ánh nắng; đầu và lưng màu tím sẫm; trong ánh nắng, những đường sọc hai bên mình nó *nom đỏ sô, phớt hồng*. Cái kiếm của nó dài bằng cây gậy bóng chày, thon như một lưỡi kiếm; nó vươn hết độ dài thân hình lên khỏi mặt nước rồi nhẹ nhàng lao xuống như một tay thợ lặn; ông lão nom thấy cái đuôi hình lưỡi hái đỏ sô chìm xuống và sợi dây câu lại hút theo.

* **Hien Trang’s translation:** Nó không ngừng nổi lên và nước trút xuống từ hai bên sườn của nó. Nó *sáng chói* dưới ánh mặt trời, và cái đầu, cái lưng của nó mang màu tím thẫm, và dưới ánh dương, những vạch kẻ sọc bên sườn nó hiện ra *rồng bản và phơn phớt màu oải hương*. Cái kiếm của nó dài như một cây gậy bóng chày và thon như thanh kiếm mảnh, từ dưới nước nó trôi lên toàn bộ chiều dài cơ thể và rồi lại lặn xuống, một cách uyển chuyển, y hệt một tay thợ lặn, và lão thấy được cái lưỡi hái vĩ đại nơi chiếc đuôi của nó lặn xuống, sợi dây câu bắt đầu lao theo.

In this example, Le Huy Bac recreates Hemingway’s style by employing strong verbs and adjectives such as “nhô lên bất tận” (“came out unendingly”), “đổ rờn rờn” (“poured”), “bóng nhẫy” (“bright”), and using commas to separate clauses instead of conjunctions. Sometimes, while he opted to use inversion to make the Vietnamese sentences more flexible (e.g. “The boy and I will splice them when we are home” – “Thằng bé sẽ cùng mình nối lại khi về đến nhà”), Hien Trang adopts a more literal approach, aiming to closely align the sentence structures of English and Vietnamese (e.g. “Thằng nhóc và mình sẽ nối chúng lại khi ta về đến nhà”). Both translators, during expert interviews, acknowledged the distinction between the author’s style and conventional English writing style [17, 18]. This difference, however, was variously addressed, depending on each translator’s experience and interpretive skills throughout the translation process. In general, Le Huy Bac’s translation demonstrates the foreignization strategy at that time, while Hien Trang’s version tends to incline more towards domestication. Her translation appears

to disrupt the conciseness in the monologues and dialogues of the old man with himself, Manolin, or even the marlin. Although these strategies make this version more easily comprehensible to the public reader, she cannot fully capture the stylistic features of Hemingway's works and the hidden iceberg technique.

2.1.2. An Interpretation of Translation Strategies of Le Huy Bac and Hien Trang

We argue the differences between these two translations due to two main reasons. Firstly, how the translation strategies of Le Huy Bac and Hien Trang reflect their perspectives they approached the original work because their viewpoints directly determine their rendering in the translation process. Le Huy Bac, in an interview, assumed that “to translate the old man's work and feeling, we have to *role-play* and *imagine* how he fished, how he talked, how he thought” [19]. This immersive approach, through role-playing and imagination, gave him a deeper connection with the protagonist's mindset to interpret the original work as a reader and a translator. Hence, he not only translated the text accurately but also captured the essence of Hemingway's style. Hien Trang, in the expert interview, assumed that she explicated *The Old Man and the Sea* from the young boy Manolin's perspective – “a child observing the old man whom he always admires and respects” while representing the younger generation's view of classic works [18].

The professional backgrounds of both translators directly relate to literature-researching and writing, a considerable advantage in handling this work. As a professor who specializes in American literature with a profound understanding of American literary context, Le Huy Bac demonstrates impressive analytical skills in researching *The Old Man and the Sea* from various perspectives, including a close study of the original work itself and an exploration of its intertextuality, reflecting its relation with other texts. On the other hand, Hien Trang, as an author, should be examined through the interaction between her creative process as a writer and her recreation as a translator. Her latest work, *Quán bar trong bụng cá voi* (2024), may influence her Hemingway's short story translation. According to Trang, she prepared to translate *The Old Man and the Sea* with complete respect and no restriction from the publisher right after finishing *Quán bar trong bụng cá voi*. This novel, as a result, marks the connections with her translation of Hemingway's work (2024) in the lexical fields related to fishing such as “shark”, “dolphin”, “tuna”, “bonito”, “marlin” (cá mập, cá heo, cá ngừ, cá ngừ bonito, cá kiếm, etc.), or a rich knowledge of American – English literature such as *The Old Man and the Sea* (Ernest Hemingway), *Ulysses* (James Joyce), and *Moby Dick* (Herman Melville) [20]. There are a lot of introspective passages where the protagonist's personal thoughts are expressed, conveyed through many conjunctions, long sentences, tons of consumptions, and comparisons in her latest book. These intersections between the two works, as a writer and a translator, make her translation more attractive.

As a result, Le Huy Bac did not simply “transform the text in a purely Vietnamese accent” [19] but adhered closely to Hemingway's grammatical structures and word choices. His translation leaves a strong impression due to its timeless value, particularly in its profound understanding of the original text, which surpasses the translation consciousness prevalent in Vietnam in the late 1990s. As for Hien Trang's text, she partly ‘domesticates’ Hemingway's work while remaining a certain openness in her explication of the original work. Literary translators sometimes are willing to ignore some clarity or precision in expression to achieve the ‘foreignization’ strategy, which makes Vietnamese sentences more flexible. ‘Foreignization’, in this way, does not mean the ambiguity in literary creation, but rather their attempt to keep the original English structure and convey the author's intent. Hence, to explore the literary afterlife, we should research it in various forms, including its translation and the translation reader's reception, especially in notable artworks.

2.3. The Effect of Internal and External Textual Factors in Translation

To create a translation, a translator plays a crucial role in both the internal factors, such as perspective, interpretation, creative abilities, etc., and other external ones in translation, such as culture, politics, society, and education, which are captured in the translation history of *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway.

Firstly, the power of translators and the publishing house is how they choose a literary work to translate, which is personal and ideological. For example, the selection of prize-winning works is sometimes considered following the translation trends; however, this is the translator's strategy because these works have been highly regarded by the award committees. On the other hand, most international literary awards are Western-centric, meaning that in fact, most of these 'objective' evaluations are Western positions. Choosing an artwork to translate depends on not only the target's culture but also their intention of cultural dissemination. Every translation, whether intended or not, serves specific purposes related to many external factors in translation. The first edition of Le Huy Bac's translation - *Ông già và biển cả* - was published by Van Hoc Publishing House in collaboration with Dong Tay Culture Language Centre. This was part of a project to release a series of translated literature designed for educational purposes. They followed this structure: Introduction, Translation, Criticism, and Appendix (including the footnotes of some confusing words). The final aim of this translation project is to serve as an available source of foreign literary works for both students and teachers to easily get access.

Not only the artwork selections, but the translations also reveal the historical nature of language. While Huy Phuong described the marlin taking the bait as “như một kẻ mày râu nam tử”, Le Huy Bac demonstrates some influences from this expression (“hết một trang nam tử”), and Hien Trang, who admitted in the interview that she only read Huy Bac's translation, translated as “như một trang nam tử”. Although there are some slight differences among these translations, their connections still exist (from 1956 to 2024), that underscore some internal factors in translation.

* **Original text:** He took the bait like a male and he pulls like a male and his fight has no panic in it.

* **Le Huy Bac's translation:** Cu cậu đớp mồi hết một trang nam tử và cái cách cu cậu kéo cũng là của đấng hào hoa.

* **Hien Trang's translation:** Hắn đớp lấy mồi câu như một trang nam tử, kéo như một trang nam tử và sự chống trả của hắn xem ra chẳng có tí hoảng loạn nào.

The more translations there are, the more perspectives there are to explore an artwork. The latest translations might take advantage of referring to how the previous ones were conducted. According to Le Huy Bac, he also consulted previous translations when encountering confusing sections, sentences, and words. Additionally, the editor, at that time, compared incomplete parts to the Russian version to assist the translator. This shows that throughout the translation process, the translator never works in isolation, they are constantly influenced by the complexity of language, the layers of meaning, and the challenges posed by the original text. In the expert interview, assumed that the title *The Old Man and the Sea* (*Ông Già và Biển Cả*) – after his careful research and consideration – should be republished with the Vietnamese title *Ông Già và Biển*. “Biển cả” is equivalent to “deep sea”, in which “deep” is an adjective that must be added before “sea” to become “biển cả”, hence, his translated title creates balance and harmony in language but “loses Hemingway's implied intent” [17]. However, this title has become familiar to the public, so it is difficult to change it immediately. Hien Trang – a reader of Huy Bac's translation – is familiar with this expression that she also titled her translation *Ông Già và Biển Cả*. That is why new translations are always necessary to bring new foreign elements to enrich Vietnamese culture and widen the young artists' knowledge about the multicultural foundation of world literature.

Furthermore, the equivalent reception effect might be difficult to measure, as the translator can only guess the original readers' reception effect and interpret it in his own way. He still has to preserve his Vietnamese identity, and 'the purity of Vietnamese' while deeply understanding the foreign culture. Preserving, however, does not mean that you have to 'Vietnamize' all the foreign factors into the translated text as Water Benjamin once assumed 'It is the task of the translator to release in his language that pure language which is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work' [22; 20]. The translator's creativity lies in how he handles 'untranslatable' factors, which originate from cultural, political, social, and ideological differences, and surpass the normal equivalent effect between the source text and the target one.

3. Conclusions

This study shows that the diversity and richness of translation history in Vietnam are not constrained from *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway but also extend to other translated literary works. Additionally, the translated literature always demands deeper research and more to provide examples for translators to reference or to supplement strategies for training translators and publishing their translations in the future. This research, therefore, emphasizes not only the crucial role of Vietnamese translators but also their contribution to translating and interpreting these artworks. By introducing a completely different language, culture, politics, and society, they have shaped the literary afterlife while expanding the national literature and the readers' mindset and aesthetic experience after engaging with the translation.

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