
Translation as Transcultural Rebirth: Translator Visibility and Auto-Translated Subjectivity in the Fiction of Haruki Murakami

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Abstract

Haruki Murakami stands out as one of the most translated authors globally, while also being recognised as one of Japan's most prolific literary translators. He has translated into Japanese more than fifty works of American fiction, encompassing the complete oeuvre of Raymond Carver and significant novels by F. Scott Fitzgerald. This study posits that the connection between Murakami's translation methodology and his original literary works is fundamentally structural and constitutive, rather than simply one of influence. This paper employs Lawrence Venuti's theory of translator visibility, particularly the domestication/foreignization distinction articulated in *The Translator's Invisibility* (1995). It introduces the concept of Auto-Translated Subjectivity, which refers to a mode of authorship where the writer's native language is regarded as a target language that necessitates foreignization from within. Evidence is derived from compositional accounts, critical scholarship, and detailed textual analysis of *Norwegian Wood* (1987) and *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* (1994–95). This study illustrates how Murakami subverts Venuti's conventional notion of the invisible translator, positioning himself prominently in both his translations and his original literary works. The conclusion posits that within Murakami's literary biography, translation serves not as the afterlife of the text, but rather as its origin.

Keywords: Translator visibility, Lawrence Venuti, Haruki Murakami, Translingual minimalism, Auto-translated subjectivity, Foreignization

Introduction

Haruki Murakami holds a unique place within the realm of global literary studies. He stands as the most internationally successful Japanese novelist of his generation, with his fiction translated into over fifty languages. However, critical discourse has persistently

neglected a crucial aspect essential to any comprehensive understanding of his literary identity: before becoming the subject of translation, Murakami was, and remains, a prolific translator in his own right. Beginning in the early 1980s, he has undertaken the translation into Japanese of the complete published works of Raymond Carver, as well as major novels by F. Scott Fitzgerald, particularly

The Great Gatsby (2006), alongside significant works by J.D. Salinger, Truman Capote, Tim O'Brien, and John Irving, resulting in a translation bibliography that exceeds fifty titles (Nihei, 2016; Goossen, 2021).

The dominant critical approach has been to interpret Murakami's connection to American literature through the lenses of influence or cultural hybridity. Rubin (2002) illustrates how Murakami intentionally developed what he refers to as a 'plainstyle', a consciously simplified, unembellished form of Japanese, as a departure from the norms of postwar Japanese literary prose. Nihei (2016) enhances this discussion by positing that translation functioned as a testing ground where Murakami engaged in linguistic experimentation. What these accounts fail to fully theorise, however, is the exact mechanism by which translation practice, not reading or influence, alters the structure of original prose at the level of syntax and rhythm.

This study engages with Lawrence Venuti's theory of translator visibility, utilizing it as the central theoretical framework for analysis. This work introduces the notion of Auto-Translated Subjectivity, which articulates a form of authorship where the prose in the writer's native language is shaped by the internalised rhythms of a foreign language. Consequently, the native language is perceived as a target language that necessitates an internal process of foreignization. This paper argues that Murakami composes original Japanese prose that is inherently partially translated, a condition that is both intentional and productive. This document is structured in the following manner: Section 2 delineates Venuti's theoretical framework; Section 3 investigates Murakami's translation practices concerning Carver and Fitzgerald; Section 4 scrutinises compositional evidence for Auto-Translated Subjectivity; Section 5 offers detailed analyses of translingual minimalism; Section 6 considers the implications for world literature; and Section 7 provides a conclusion.

2. Theoretical Framework: Venuti's Translator Visibility

2.1 Domestication and Foreignisation

Lawrence Venuti's *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (1995) serves as the foundational framework for this analysis. Venuti delineates two contrasting strategies in translation: domestication, which involves an ethnocentric adaptation of the foreign text to align with the cultural values of the target language, resulting in a transparent

and fluent style that diminishes the foreignness of the original; and foreignization, which adopts a method that challenges the prevailing cultural norms of the target language, preserving the distinctiveness of the source text and highlighting the translator's interpretive role (Venuti, 1995, p. 20). The translator's invisibility, characterised by domestication, should not be regarded as a neutral aesthetic decision; rather, it functions as an ideological mechanism that diminishes the distinctiveness of the foreign text while reinforcing the dominance of the target culture.

In opposition to domestication, Venuti promotes foreignization as a more ethically sound approach, one that highlights the translator's subjectivity. He revisits Schleiermacher's essential distinction between guiding the reader to the author (domestication) and directing the author to the reader (foreignization). According to Venuti (1995), the translator who resists political norms incorporates elements of the syntax, rhythm, and cultural specificity from the source language into the target language, thereby engaging in a practice that fosters productive estrangement.

2.2 Extending Venuti: The Translator-Author Paradox

Venuti's framework was developed to elucidate the connection between a translator and a text from another culture. This study productively expands the discussion to a scenario for which it was not originally intended: the implications of a translator also being the original author, who has dedicated decades to internalising the syntactic and rhythmic patterns of the texts being translated. The paper suggests that in this scenario, the translator's subjectivity is auto-translated, embedded not within a foreign text but within the author's own original prose. The native language is subjected to a foreignising practice: the author composes in a manner that diverges from the idiom of his mother tongue, infusing it with the influences of a foreign syntax acquired through translation.

This inverted Venetian reading highlights a paradox central to Murakami's literary identity. According to Nihei (2016), Murakami stands out as a prominent translator in Japan; his name is associated with a translation that ensures it achieves bestseller status, frequently displayed more prominently than that of the original author. However, this visibility of the translator extends beyond mere translations; it permeates his original fiction, which bears the imprint of the translation practice that produced it. The term "Auto-Translated Subjectivity" designates this excess.

3. Murakami as Translator: The Foundational Practice

3.1 The Carver Connection

The most significant connection in Murakami's translation career is his ongoing interaction with Raymond Carver. In the early 1980s, Murakami encountered the works of Carver and dedicated himself to translating the complete body of Carver's literature,

ultimately achieving this goal with the multi-volume series titled *Carver's Dozen* (Nihei, 2016). The importance of this project is found not only in its magnitude but also in its approach: translation should not be viewed as a simple act of reading; rather, it is an intricate process involving a detailed, line-by-line and word-by-word syntactic learning experience. Translating Carver involves engaging with his minimalism through the intricacies of sentence construction: the succinct syntax, restrained dialogue, emotional subtlety, and intentional avoidance of explanatory narration. Goossen (2021) notes in his examination of Murakami and the translation culture that Murakami's translations contributed to Carver's status as a bestseller in Japan, as readers actively pursued works by Murakami, the translator. Hirata, a scholar of Japanese literature at Tufts University, noted that Carver's understated prose style is evident in Murakami's writing and highlighted notable similarities in narrative detachment between the two literary works (Rubin, 2002). In his interview with the Paris Review regarding the Art of Fiction, Murakami explicitly discussed the relationship: "The authors I have translated have all produced works from which I could gain insights... I acquire a great deal from the writers of realism. Their work necessitates a meticulous examination for translation, revealing the intricacies within" (Murakami, 2004). For Murakami, translation represents a profound and intricate process of learning the fundamental techniques of another author's artistry.

3.2 Fitzgerald and the Aesthetics of Longing

Murakami's translation of F. Scott Fitzgerald, particularly his 2006 interpretation of *The Great Gatsby*, presents an additional aesthetic dimension. While Carver exhibited a concise use of language and emotional control, Fitzgerald presented a style characterised by lyrical beauty, rhythmic grace, and a persistent sense of nostalgic sadness. Goossen (2021) posits that Fitzgerald and Murakami exhibit a notable aesthetic alignment. Fitzgerald infused his prose with a jazz swing, while Murakami has incorporated jazz rhythms and elements from novels like *The Great Gatsby* to shape his literary style. Jay Rubin notes that 'rhythm is perhaps the most important element of his prose' (Goossen, 2021).

The cultural politics surrounding the translation of *Gatsby* hold significant relevance to the Venutian argument. Goossen (2021) notes that Murakami's name was positioned above Fitzgerald's on promotional materials, an example of translator visibility as theorised by Venuti. In the afterword, Murakami contended that the translation of *The Great Gatsby* necessitates the translator to transcend the literal meanings of words to grasp the overarching themes in a manner that resonates, a conceptualisation of translation as a form of original creative authorship, consistent with Venuti's advocacy for a practice that emphasises the translator's subjectivity (Goossen, 2021).

4. Auto-Translated Subjectivity: Compositional Evidence**4.1 Writing Against the Mother Tongue**

The most straightforward compositional evidence for Auto-Translated Subjectivity is Murakami's extensively recorded practice of employing English as an intermediary language in the creation of original Japanese prose. In discussions regarding the creation of his inaugural novel *Kaze no uta o kike* (*Hear the Wind Sing*, 1979), Murakami recounts the process of initially drafting the opening in English, subsequently translating his own English text back into Japanese (Nihei, 2016; Ono, 2020). His articulated rationale was to eliminate the grammatical and rhetorical complexities that conventional literary Japanese encouraged, the burden of the postwar 'I-novel' tradition, the aesthetic demand for sincerity, and instead create a prose style that was clear, straightforward, and rhythmically minimal.

Jay Rubin (2002), the primary English translator of Murakami, characterises this compositional approach as essential: his Japanese prose attains a 'plain style' that represents a significant departure from traditional Japanese literary norms, which early critics deemed 'unnatural', notably, due to its syntactic influence from English. Ono (2020), in an article for The Paris Review blog, explores this phenomenon within the broader context of Japanese writers who have enhanced their language through interactions with foreign languages. He highlights that in his memoir

Novelist as a Vocation, Murakami admits to having read very few Japanese novels, which left him without a clear understanding of what constituted a Japanese novel when he initially attempted to write one, rendering his use of English not merely a stylistic choice but an essential aspect of his writing process.

4.2 Self-Back-Translation and the Fluid Original

Additional evidence is provided through Murakami's method of self-back-translation, which has been thoroughly documented by Takahashi (2022) and was initially recognised by Sato (2013). In the case of Murakami's narrative 'Rēdārnhōzen' (Lederhosen), which was initially published in Japanese in 1985, the English translation by Alfred Birnbaum appeared in *The Elephant Vanishes* in 1993. Following this, Murakami created a new Japanese version not by revisiting his original text but by translating Birnbaum's English rendition back into Japanese. This process involved accepting nearly all of Birnbaum's domesticating modifications, which included reordering, omissions, and even a mistranslation (Takahashi, 2022; Sato, 2013).

Takahashi (2022) posits that this action contests the traditional ontological precedence of the original in relation to translation. The current argument holds importance as it demonstrates that Murakami views his prose as inherently influenced by translation; the English version is not merely a secondary reproduction but a legitimate creative expression.

The author's readiness to regard the back-translated text as superior to the original Japanese exemplifies Auto-Translated Subjectivity in its most direct sense, with the translated version being afforded equal authority.

5. Translingual Minimalism: Close Readings

5.1 Norwegian Wood and the Syntax of Restraint

Norwegian Wood (1987) serves as a prominent textual illustration of translingual minimalism. The novel exhibits short declarative sentences, a careful management of emotional expression, and a deliberate avoidance of metaphor, elements that reflect in Japanese the syntactic tendencies of Carver's minimalist style. Rubin (2002) contends that early Japanese critics of Murakami characterised his writing as 'unnatural', implying it was un-Japanese due to the plain style that contrasted with established literary norms, appearing foreign in nature. The experience of encountering Murakami's Japanese as stylistically foreign aligns perfectly with Venuti's theory: it presents a text that defies the conventions of its own language, thereby introducing the influence of an alternate linguistic realm.

The novel's exploration of grief serves as a model for understanding this complex emotion. The narrative response to Kizuki's death, and subsequently to Naoko's, is characterised by a straightforward declarative acknowledgement of events, where the emotional resonance is derived more from what remains unsaid than from overt expression. The technique of meaningful absence serves as the hallmark of Carver's minimalism, as highlighted by Strecher (1999), who observes that Murakami's characters pursue identity through narrative deflation instead of expression. In *Norwegian Wood*, this deflation is syntactically represented in a prose that, as Rubin (2002) notes, appears in Japanese as though it has already undergone the influence of English.

5.2 The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle and the Foreignised Self

The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle (1994–95) advances translingual minimalism into a more formally ambitious domain. In his interview with the *Paris Review*, Murakami mentioned that he composed substantial sections of this novel while residing at Princeton and Tufts. This time of deep linguistic engagement with English is recognised by Nihei (2016) as a crucial factor in shaping the novel's stylistic attributes. The concise and clear prose of *Norwegian Wood* is intricately woven with surreal narrative frameworks and an overarching sense of existential ambiguity.

The protagonist of the novel, Toru Okada, exemplifies a form of Auto-Translated Subjectivity, as he navigates his identity through interactions with individuals who communicate in ways that are unfamiliar to his typical experiences. The narrative operates on a plot level to reflect the same foreignization of Japanese reality that is evident in Murakami's prose style. Strecher (1999) observes that in Murakami's fiction, the pursuit of

identity 'is not the least bit involved with the assertion of a national identity', a statement that equally pertains to the novel's formal identity: the Japanese prose critically examines indigenous literary conventions rather than affirming them, resulting in a foreignized Japanese that reflects the evident influence of its translation history.

6. Implications for World Literature and Translation Theory

The argument presented in this paper carries substantial implications for the fields of world literature studies and translation theory. The prevailing model for comprehending literary circulation, linked to the works of Casanova (2004) and Damrosch (2003), envisions texts transitioning from peripheral languages to the metropolitan centre via translation. Murakami's situation fundamentally complicates this model: his fiction is presented in a pre-translated form, shaped by the rhythms of the language into which it is destined to be translated. The structural pre-translatability documented by Goossen (2021) as the effect of Murakami's enduring connection with American literature arises not from commercial considerations but from a compositional practice that has integrated English minimalist syntax into the internal framework of his Japanese prose.

Nihei (2016) articulates Murakami's employment of translation as a method of cultural distancing, a conscious self-foreignisation that enables him to compose in Japanese free from the constraints of its literary traditions. This exemplifies Venuti's concept of foreignisation; however, in the context of Murakami, the text undergoing foreignisation is not a source text from another language but rather his own native language. Takahashi (2022) contends that the Lederhosen self-back-translation undermines the fundamental principles of translation theory, particularly its dependence on the notion of the original text. If Murakami perceives his Japanese original and the English-mediated re-translation as equivalent, it exposes the instability of the traditional hierarchy that prioritises the original over the translation. The concept of Auto-Translated Subjectivity further elaborates this notion: within Murakami's literary works, one finds that there is no original text that exists before translation, as the Japanese prose itself is a product of the translation process.

7. Conclusion

This study contends that Haruki Murakami's original Japanese prose is not solely shaped by American minimalism but is fundamentally constructed through his translation practices. Furthermore, it posits that Lawrence Venuti's theory of translator visibility offers the most insightful framework for comprehending this foundational relationship. The concept of Auto-Translated Subjectivity illustrates how Murakami's extensive translation work on Carver and Fitzgerald, performed not via reading but through the syntactic effort of translation, has influenced the rhythm and emotional tone of his original Japanese fiction. Murakami applies foreignization to the Japanese language, positioning it as a target for defamiliarisation through the influence of English minimalist syntax.

The outcome is a narrative that embodies the essence of its translation history, a Japanese text that is perpetually situated at the intersection of English. This should not be viewed as a deficiency in cultural authenticity; rather, it represents a nuanced literary approach that interrogates the traditional understanding of the literary original. The wider theoretical implication suggests that the field of translation studies encompasses resources that reach well beyond the examination of translator-text dynamics. When examining a writer who also engages in translation, Venuti's framework illustrates how literary identities are shaped not merely by influence but through the deliberate, embodied, and syntactic effort involved in translating the sentences of others. In Murakami's work, translation transcends the simple act of serving another author's text. It is to establish one's own. In his literary biography, translation is not merely a subsequent phase of the work; rather, it serves as its origin.

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