

A Review of Research on Thick Translation

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Abstract— This article reviews the research on thick translation both at home and abroad by the documentary analysis method. It is found that, in spite of the outcomes obtained from existing theoretical and applied researches on thick translation, there are two aspects in need of improvement with regard to studying translated works with thick translation. On the one hand, the object of study is mainly literary works, without enough attention paid to texts of other types. On the other hand, discussion on the application of thick translation in specific translated works is limited to listing examples, with deep investigation into research results being ignored.

Keywords— Thick translation; research; review.

I. INTRODUCTION

Under the inspiration of cultural anthropology, the Ghanaian American scholar Kwame Anthony Appiah put forward the concept “thick translation” which refers to “academic translation that seeks with its annotations and its accompanying glosses to locate the text in a rich cultural and linguistic context” (Appiah, 1993:817). However, Appiah didn’t point out specific methods of adding annotations and accompanying glosses. Cheung (2010) once pointed that translators could design specific methods of thick translation by themselves and Appiah simply stressed that thick translation relies on context. Usually, translators could add preface and postscript, footnote, annotation and other information to a translated version so as to make the meanings of words accord with translators’ intension of translation.

Initially, “thick translation” was translated into “增量翻译” (Shuttleworth & Cowie, 2004:232), and then “深度翻译”, “厚翻译”, “厚重翻译”, “丰厚翻译”, etc. (Li & Zhang, 2015). While Duan (2016) stated that the “thickness” theory had derived from cultural anthropology, gone

through the development of new historicism, and had been further elucidated in translation studies. And thus its theoretical depth and level of efficiency in terms of application in translation studies are unlikely to be summarized by the Chinese character “厚”. As a result, it may be more reasonable to adopt the Chinese name “深度翻译”. Since the introduction of “thick translation” into translation studies, it has attracted the attention of both domestic and foreign scholars who finally achieved some meaningful research results.

II. FOREIGN RESEARCH ON THICK TRANSLATION

In 1993, It was the first time that Appiah had come up with the term “thick translation”: But I had in mind a different notion of a literary translation; that, namely, of a translation that aims to be of use in literary teaching; and here it seems to me that such “academic” translation, translation that seeks with its annotations and its accompanying glosses to locate the text in a rich cultural and linguistic context, is eminently worth doing. I have called

this “thick translation” (Appiah, 1993:817). It can be seen that thick translation is a kind of academic translation which applies to the field of cultural translation.

Appiah raised the basic concept of thick translation, but it was the British translation theorist Theo Hermans who really introduced the term into translation studies. He proved the necessity of thick translation with abundant instances and thought of thick translation “at least in part as a critique of current translation studies, and not as a generalized form of description or translation”. “As an instrument of cross-cultural translation studies, thick translation has the potential to counter the flatness and formulaic reductiveness of the jargon of translation studies, and foster instead a more diversified, richer vocabulary” (Hermans, 2003:387).

III. DOMESTIC RESEARCH ON THICK TRANSLATION

Fang (2004) introduced the basic concept of Thick Translation Theory into domestic academic circles and specially added the entry “厚翻译” in the book *A Dictionary of Translation Studies* which makes an introduction to its theoretical connotations and characteristics. During a dozen of years since then, scholars at home have been expanding the research on thick translation and achieved fruitful research results. Existing studies could be categorized into five types according to their research content: origin of theory and exploration of applicability, research on the types and functions of thick translation, research on the thick translation of translated works, application research of thick translation in allusion translation and other researches.

3.1 Origin of Theory and Exploration of Applicability

Duan (2006) studied the relationship between thick translation and thick description, and that between thick translation and new historicism. He believed that Thick Translation Theory derives from the Thick Description Theory of cultural anthropology and theories about historical context of new historicism. The research is significant to enrich theoretical discourse and widen theoretical horizon of translation studies. Under the guidance of the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s Thick Description, Sun (2010) explored the relationship between translation and cultural anthropology and then drew

the concept of thick translation put forward by Appiah. She pointed out that the essence of thick translation from the perspective of cultural anthropology is explanatory translation and discussed translation strategies like footnotes, annotations and accompanying glosses. The research drew the conclusion that thick translation provides new inspiration for translation studies and it is of important theoretical and practical values. Wang (2013) discussed the meanings and influence of “thick description” raised by the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz from the two respects of translation practice and translation studies. On the one hand, thick translation which directly derived from thick description offers a special translation strategy to cross-cultural translation activity. On the other hand, as a widely-used qualitative research method, thick description provides beneficial enlightenment for the development of Descriptive Translation Studies. Huang (2014) investigated Appiah and his research, his concept of thick translation, the purpose of advocating thick translation, the reasons for defining thick translation, specific methods of thick translation, and the common characteristics among interpretive anthropology, thick description and translation. The research pointed out the unobserved points and shortcomings of existing studies on thick translation at home.

In addition to tracing the origin of thick translation, Cao (2014) took the translated version of chapter 7 in *The Use of Life* written by the British naturalist Lubbock as the object of his research for discussing the applicability of implicit thick translation. The discussions revealed that both explicit thick translation (adding annotations outside a text) and implicit thick translation (adding words within a text) locate a text in rich linguistic and cultural background. The scholar held that we had better apply implicit thick translation which could maintain the cohesion and coherence of translated works, and thus contributing to the understanding and reception of target readers.

3.2 Research on the Types and Functions of Thick Translation

According to present studies, some scholars have explored the types, specific translation methods and functions of thick translation in translated works. Cheung (2007) expounded the writing process of *An Anthology of*

Chinese Discourse on Translation, Volume 1: From Earliest Times to the Buddhist Project as the role of editor. She analyzed the writing purpose, standard of material selection, translation strategies and the roles played by comments and annotations in the anthology from four aspects of selection, translation, comments and annotations. Moreover, the scholar explored how to present traditional Chinese culture through translation from the angle of “soft power”. It is found that the specific methods of thick translation in the translated work include contextualization, explication and grounding. Based on the cultural perspective of thick translation, Pan (2011) compared the thick translation strategies in two English versions of *A Dream of Red Mansions* and their critical meanings for cultural communication. The author then summarized five strategies, namely interpretation with annotation, interpretation within text, no interpretation, interpretation within text + interpretation with annotation, and adding the content absent from original text for supplementary explanation. Xu (2016) explored and analyzed thick translation in the English version of *I Ching* by Wilhelm/Baynes and she found: (1) Thick translation outside the text, the reader positioning of translator decided the reception of translated works; the explication of style, appendix and index facilitated target readers; setting the intelligibility as translation purpose eliminated readers’ confusion to a great extent; the foreword written by Gustav Jung made readers take much interest in the translated version. (2) Thick translation within the text, the translator spilled a lot of ink over the philosophy and wisdom of Yi-ology to emphasize its importance. All in all, there is mutual complementation between thick translation within the text and that outside the text, which makes the translation become one of the English versions of Chinese classics enjoying great popularity.

Adding annotations is an essential method of thick translation, and there are scholars who have carried out deep research on its types in specific translated versions. For instance, Wang & Yang (2012) took the English version of *An Anthology of Chinese Discourse on Translation (Volume 1)* as an example to probe into the types and functions of thick translation in English translation of Chinese classics on the basis of the paratext theory proposed by Genette.

They generalized six types of annotation appearing in the English translation, including explanation of proper noun, background information, English explanation of classical Chinese syntax, explanation of translated names, intertextuality within the text and intertextuality outside the text. Zhong (2017) carried out a research on the English version of *Wen xuan or Selection of Refined Literature* by David R. Knechtges as thick translation of academic research, which is a great achievement of his academic accumulation for a dozen of years with a great number of annotations (the length of annotations exceeds that of translation). The author found that its annotations mainly include the following respects: explanation of common words, interpretation of entity noun, textual criticisms and explanations of etymology and annotations of institutional system, conventions and etiquette.

In addition, some scholars firstly classified thick translation into different types in accordance with related theories and then studied the phenomenon of thick translation in specific translation version at length. For example, based on realia theory and paratext theory, Li (2014) classified thick translation into thick translation within text and thick translation outside text in line with the position of thick translation. The former refers to translation strategies of realia, including calque, approximate translation, transcription, descriptive translation and contextual translation. While the later refers to paratext such as cover, preface, annotation, map of character relationship, illustration and so on. And then she analyzed the cultural phenomena in the French version of *A Dream of Red Mansions* from the perspective of thick translation. In terms of its relation to translation’s main body, thick translation can be divided into three types: text-self, text-close and text-remote (Wen & Wang, 2016). They then discussed the English version of *Finnegans Wake* by Dai Cong-rong and focused on its text-close and text-remote types. Their case study demonstrated that thick translation has diversified functions, like assistance to readers, convenience for research and construction of translator’s identity and facilitation for cultural communication.

3.3 Research on Thick Translation of Translated Works

In existing literature, there are scholars having studied

the phenomenon of thick translation in single translated work. Taking the English version of *Huang Di Nei Jing* by Li Zhaoguo as corpus, Liu (2016) analyzed how a translator represents ancient Chinese philosophy views embodied in *Huang Di Nei Jing* through thick translation from four aspects of holistic view, dialectics, yin-yang theory and wuxing theory. The scholar considered that the thick translation strategy deriving from thick description of cultural anthropology could compensate the cultural vacancy of source language and provide appropriate cultural and historic context for target readers by the means of foreword, explanation, commentary and annotations and background information, which could be an effective translation strategy for the translation of Traditional Chinese Medicine. Jiang (2019) conducted a research on the contextualization of the English version of *Huang Di Nei Jing* by Wen Shude, including its footnotes, annotations in the brackets, and introduction and references outside the text. It is showed that deep contextualization of translated version has varied functions, such as interpretation of meanings, background description, layered progress and deep grounding, which is the key for the translated version to successfully present the complete picture of *Huang Di Nei Jing*.

Besides, the interpretative function, capacity of cross-cultural exchange and essence of academy of thick translation help to facilitate the translation and dissemination of Traditional Chinese Medicine Classics. It is worthy of mention that Xu & Wang (2017) and Xiong (2018) applied the forms of capital by Pierre Bourdieu to study the English versions of *T'ien-kung K'ai-wu* by E-tu Zen Sun and *Hsiào King* by James Legge respectively. And both of them reached the conclusion that two translators' thick translation strategies are the outcome of interplay among cultural capital, social capital, symbolic capital and economic capital under specific social and historical background.

The phenomenon of thick translation in different translated works has also triggered some scholars' research interest. Tan & Liu (2012) compared thick translation strategies in two English versions of *A Dream of Red Mansions* and found that the two versions are different in

style, but both of them realized the integration of acceptability and adequacy of translated works. Cao (2013) discussed thick translation and the historical and cultural attainment of translator by taking three Chinese versions of Bacon's *Of Fame* as example. The scholar advises translators to use implicit thick translation strategy which indicates adding words absent from the original work without changing meanings for the purpose of locating texts in rich linguistic and cultural background but not disrupting targets' reading. We agree with him that there should be a limit to thick translation, because too much explicit thick translation like annotation and notes will bring about reading pause. After clarifying the definition, connotation and essence of thick translation, Song (2014) explored the thick translation phenomenon in three English versions of *Zhongyong* published in America at the beginning of 21st century to verify the dual nature of thick translation with interpretability and instrumentality. The research reveals that interpretability is manifested as dense notes while instrumentality is embodied in annotations of culture and resistance to strong culture.

3.4 Application Research of Thick Translation in Allusion Translation

Thick translation of cultural allusions in certain translated work(s) failed to escape from domestic scholars' studies. Zhao (2010) explored the meaning interpretation in the process of translating allusions in Thoreau's *Walden* on the basis of thick translation. It draws the conclusion that translators need to add annotations and notes to interpret the rich linguistic and cultural contexts of source text, so as to fully represent the contextual meanings of source language and the author's purposes, due to the fact that the source text is full of deep cultural implication and unique poetic expressions. Liu & Zeng (2013) compared the translation of cultural allusions in two English versions of *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* from the perspective of thick translation and explored the significance of thick translation strategy to allusion translation. They believe that paratext (like footnotes and endnotes), annotations within the text or combination of the two is a translation method worthy of advocacy, and that detailed and closely related thick translation contributes to target readers' understanding of

allusions and realization of cultural exchange. Gu & Wang (2018) studied the translation of allusions in three English versions of *The Manual of Calligraphy* and the comparative analysis revealed that different translation purposes determine the employment of implicit or explicit thick translation and the depth of cultural interpretation.

3.5 Other Researches

Apart from the four main categories of research mentioned above, Zhang & Hu (2011) probed into the theoretical significance of thick translation as a translation method and a research method in cultural translation and attempted to explore its theoretical pattern based on previous studies. The research confirmed the importance of three essential factors in thick translation, namely discourse context, intention of subject and expression of emotion. Under the guidance of thick translation, Chen & Ye (2016) evaluated the value of compilation in the French version of *The Anthology of Jingdezhen Ceramic* by Stanislas Julien. They found that the translated work with reasonable layout, abundant content and appropriate ways of annotation is of pioneering significance in the translation practice of Chinese ceramics classics and the content of its annotations is of various research values in terms of history, technology and philology. Wu & Zhu (2018) reviewed and inspected the reception situation of thick translation theory in Chinese academic circles. It can be learned from the research that domestic scholars have achieved favorable results in sorting theoretical sources, interpreting theoretical connotations and developing application of thick translation. The research specified the essence of thick translation and distinguished it from the specific thick translation methods, which helps to avoid disorders appearing in the reception of thick translation and facilitate the health development of the new theory.

IV. CONCLUSION

It can be drawn from the review of research on thick translation that thick translation has been widely applied in the field of cultural translation as a translation method and a research method which has received much attention from Chinese scholars. We believe that thick translation can be a

feasible and effective translation method if used appropriately. In another word, proper thick translation will greatly contribute target readers' reception of source culture and thus promote cross-cultural exchange among countries. However, it's hard to know thick translation to what extent is "proper" that exactly will not decrease the reading interest of targets due to much thickness of a translated work. And thus it's a question worthy of further exploration and deep research. Moreover, it is anticipated that future researches could attach importance to texts of other types instead of repeated discussion on literary works, and that deep investigation into research results of thick translation in specific translated works is also necessary and critical.

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