

Accuracy and Readability: On the Translation of “Thick Translation”

ZHENG Yaying, JIANG Cheng

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

The theory of “thick translation” is of great significance to translation research, translation practice, and translation teaching. However, to date, the chaotic phenomenon of “thick translation” still exists. In this paper, the four most representative translations of the term begin with a view of the historical information of the source language and the Chinese definitions of the translations in dictionaries, followed by technical terms translation, namely, accuracy and readability, then analyzes and discusses the four translations and suggests that the appropriate translation is “深度翻译”.

Keywords: technical term translation, “thick translation”, accuracy, readability

Introduction

Since its introduction, the term “thick translation” has attracted the attention of scholars in translation circles both at home and abroad. 1993 saw the first introduction of this new term “thick translation” by the American philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah, which refers to “the placement of a text in a rich cultural and linguistic context through annotation and accompanying notes” (Appiah, 1993, p. 817). Nowadays, “thick translation” is widely used in translation research and translation practice as a translation strategy and translation research method to facilitate the understanding and appreciation of the target language readers by adding explanatory textual materials such as footnotes, translation notes, and explanations to the translated text (Li & Zhang, 2015). However, the translations of “thick translation” in domestic academic circles are different, and the following four translations are representative: (1) “深度翻译”: “Thick translation” has a deep theoretical origin with “thick description”, which constructs a historical context and sets up a historical atmosphere for the translated text (Duan, 2006); (2) “丰厚翻译”: This translation is used in view of the translator Zhang Peiyao’s translation of “thick translation” (Zhang, 2007); (3) “厚翻译”: In the review of *Selected Chinese Translation Discourses* compiled by Zhang Peiyao (first volume), it is pointed out that “厚翻译” is a translation policy that can promote and facilitate western culture’s understanding and respect for Chinese culture (Li, 2008); (4) “厚重翻译”: For the metaphorical translation of Chinese medical texts, it is the best choice (Shen, 2009). It can be seen that the same original language terminology concept corresponds to different “equivalent terms” in the target language, and this will inevitably affect the learning, promotion, and

ZHENG Yaying, Master, postgraduate student, College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.

JIANG Cheng, Doctor, associate professor, College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.

use of the terminology and seriously affect the stability of the terminology (Wei, 2010). As Liang Qichao said, “The difficulty of translating books is more than the difference in names” (Liang, 2002, p. 150). In order to ensure the unity of terminology, it should be classified as one, so as not to confuse us. In the face of different equivalence terms, how to choose the right one? From the viewpoint of terminological properties, all four Chinese translations have the simplicity of terminological properties, but they are different in terms of rationality, especially in terms of accuracy and readability, thus affecting the univocity of the original terminology, i.e., a term can only express one concept, which ultimately affects the stability of the terminology. In this paper, four Chinese translations of “thick translation” from the principles of accuracy and readability will be discussed.

Current Status of Domestic Research

The current status of domestic research on “thick translation” reflects to a certain extent the attributes of the four Chinese translations, such as rationality and stability. The author searched by keywords on “China Knowledge Network” (as of October 29, 2021), and found 164 academic journals related to “深度翻译”, 22 academic journals related to “丰厚翻译”, 30 academic journals related to “厚翻译”, and 11 academic journals related to “厚重翻译”.

The bar chart is drawn based on the above data, as shown in the following figure.

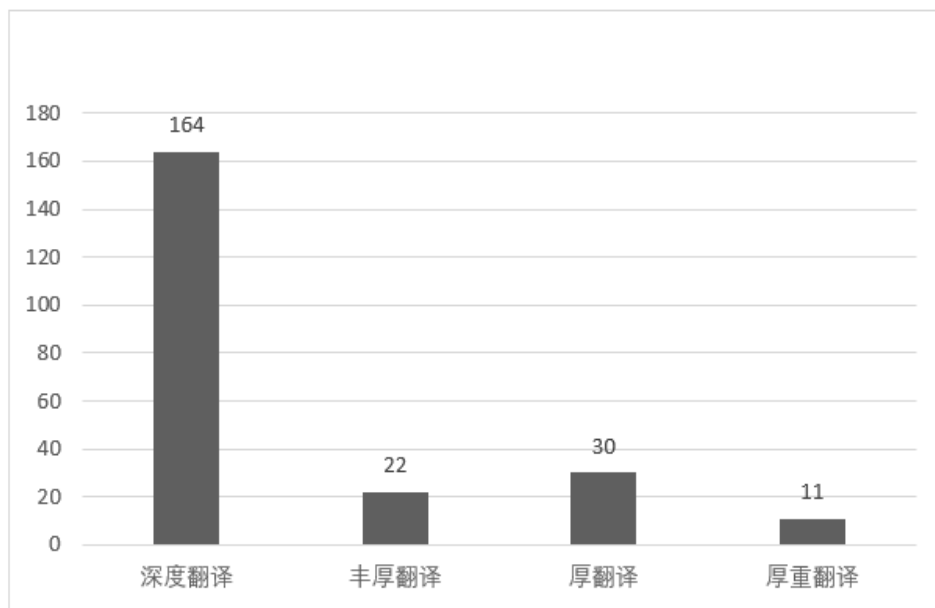


Figure 1. Four Chinese translations.

It is easy to see that the literature related to “深度翻译” is the most, followed by “厚翻译”, and the literature related to “厚重翻译” is the least. The translated version generally accepted by domestic scholars is “深度翻译”.

Based on the above data, the author also divided the data by year, and drew a linear graph of the attention trend of the four terminology translation types in the past 10 years (January 1, 2011 to December 31, 2020), as shown in the following figure.

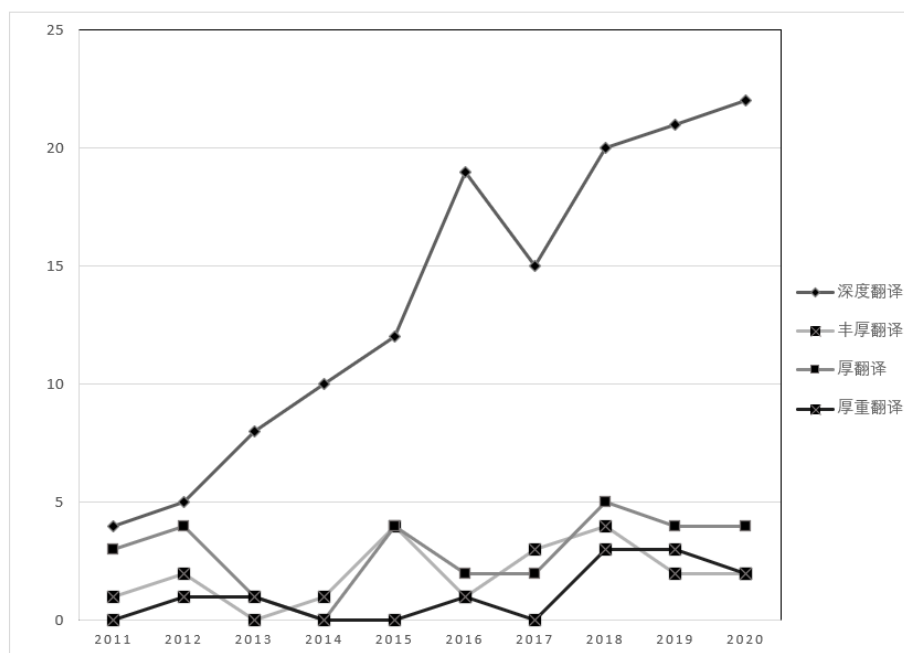


Figure 2. The trend of research attention.

As shown in the figure, from 2011 to 2020, the research and discussion related to “深度翻译” by domestic scholars show an increasing trend year by year, while the overall trend of research attention on the other three translation terms is comparatively stable, and there is even no relevant discussion and research in some years.

From the above two tables, both in terms of the total amount of research and the yearly attention, the research attention of “深度翻译” is more stable and on the rise, which also reflects that the translation of the term is more stable and has a certain degree of rationality.

In the following, the author will discuss the four translations of “thick translation” from two levels of rationality.

Accuracy

The principle of accuracy in the attribute of rationality refers to the fact that “the determination of a term must conform to the semantic connotation of the concept it represents and ensure its accuracy” (Wei, 2010, p. 166). Semantic tracing can precisely uncover the meaning of the original language, because

certain terms or phrases in a language contain deep and ephemeral information that is difficult to see or grasp from the surface of the language structure itself. Translation involves the conversion of information between two codes, and expressing the core information is its most basic task. (Zhong, 2003, p. 73)

In order to explore the semantic connotation of the translation of “thick translation”, it is necessary to trace the information back to the time when Appiah introduced the term. The philosopher Appiah (1993), who first introduced and fixed the concept of “thick translation” in the field of analytic philosophy, argued that philosophical controversies can be attributed to linguistic problems, from which he pointed out that “thick translation” is a literary translation, an academic translation, and a translation that places the text in a rich cultural and linguistic context. In generating and fixing this concept, Appiah points out that the purpose of

“thick translation” was to provide a way to respect the culture of the other and to perceive the diversity of human cultural life in the liberal and relativistic environment of the American mind at the time. It was to provide a thick description of the context of the African oral literature of the time and to provide a deep and realistic understanding of it.

Following the historical message of Appiah’s terminology, it is easy to see that translating “thick translation” simply as “厚重翻译” completely ignores the good intentions behind the author and puts more emphasis on the possibility that it may make the translation bloated and thicken the translation, and at the same time make the text dull and discourage the readers. And also this version ignores the translator’s efforts for cross-cultural and cross-linguistic communication, the vast culture of the source language that the translation strategy brings to the readers, and the positive significance of the strategy among the author and the translator. Similarly, translating “thick translation” into “厚翻译” or “丰厚翻译” simply conforms to the literal intent without preserving the more important semantic connotation, and stays on the word “thick”, which only translates the superficial meaning but not the deeper meaning at all.

On the contrary, from the result of semantic traceability, “深度翻译” is exactly in line with the semantic connotation carried by its ephemeral information. The “thickness” in texts is showed in the historical and cultural dimension: The translator reinterprets the text through the annotations, explicating the deeper meaning of the text and stretching the depth of the text vertically. The commentary within the text places the reader completely in the vastness of culture and knowledge, and this interpretation builds a deep cultural world for the originally thin translation. For example, Wen Shude strives to objectively present the true face of *Huangdi Neijing* to readers, allowing them to understand the true meaning of traditional Chinese medical theory in a thicker context; at the same time, “thickness” is also reflected in the references outside the translation and the introductory remarks outside the text, leading readers to deeper inquiry and reflection (Jiang, 2019). In *The Interpretation of Culture*, Geertz points out that culture is a web of significance woven by people themselves, and the analysis of culture is not an experimental science in search of laws, but an interpretive science in search of meaning (Geertz, 1997). Anthony Pym’s concept of “cross-culturality” suggests that in the process of cross-cultural translation, the translator does not belong only to the target culture or the source culture, but also to the overlapping or intersecting parts of these two cultures, i.e., “cross-culture” or a third culture. The first person to interpret the source language culture is the holder of the source language culture who can make the first-rank interpretation, while the translator looks for the laws of construction of cultural meaning beneath the cultural surface through reinterpretation, i.e., interpretation above interpretation. As Geertz argues, “Understanding a people’s culture exposes their normalness without reducing their particularity. It renders them accessible: setting them in the frame of their own banalities, it dissolves their opacity” (Geertz, 1997, p. 14). This is the real meaning of “thickness” in thick translation.

The semantic connotation carried by the translation “深度翻译” and the ephemeral information contained in “thick translation” are highly integrated and have sufficient semantic connotation rationality.

Readability

The principle of readability in terms of rationality refers to the fact that “the terminology should be determined in accordance with the formal characteristics of its genre and ensure its acceptability” (Wei, 2010, p. 166). The most obvious feature of Chinese as an ideographic language is “reading the text to make sense”, and if the “sense” of the target language term after “reading the text to make sense” can be successfully traced back

to the semantic connotation of the source language term, then the acceptable translation of the term can be achieved. The acceptability of the translation of the term will be greatly improved. On the contrary, the acceptability of the translation of the term in domestic academic circles will affect the enthusiasm and attention of academic researches, thus to a certain extent indicating whether the term conforms to certain formal characteristics of its genre.

Since the concept of “thick translation” was proposed, it has been used as a translation research theory and translation practice strategy to actively respond to cultural diversity and promote cultural exchange. First of all, let us look at the Chinese etymology of the word “thick”, which is explained by *The Contemporary Chinese Dictionary* as “thick, weighty”, as opposed to “thin”. This makes the word “thick” in “thick translation” easy for the target language readers to associate with the negative meaning of “thick and heavy”, as if “a thick quilt is thick and weighty”, which runs counter to the real theoretical concept. At the same time, translating the term as “thick translation” is to emphasize more that the translation strategy of “thick translation” will unavoidably bring about the defect of heavy content in the translation, which also shows from the side that “thick translation” is easy to know and difficult to implement. Then the question arises, if the disadvantages brought by “thick translation” outweigh the advantages and make the translation work difficult to do, why scholars still continue to pay attention to this theory, and why translators still cling to this theory? This is completely contrary to the original intention of Appiah’s concept. The translation of “厚重翻译” does not make sense in terms of acceptability, and this translation is not desirable.

If we look at the target language readers’ perception of the concept of “厚翻译”, it is easy to stay on the effect presented by the translation. It just increases the thickness of the translation, and the translated version becomes “thick”, and the readers’ perception of the real theoretical concept of “thick translation” stops at this point. Looking back at “丰厚翻译”, it contains the connotation of “厚翻译”, but there is another difference, that is, the word “丰”. There are two ways to interpret the word in “丰厚翻译”: One can explain it in the sense of an adjective and the other in the sense of a verb. In the author’s opinion, when it is used as an adjective, it refers to richness and heaviness, i.e., the translator makes the translation achieve the effect of richness and heaviness after using the strategy of “thick translation”. At the same time, the word “丰厚” has the meaning of “many and thick”, which is similar to the meaning of “厚重”, which also describes the effect of the translation under this strategy. As Yang Quanhong (2013) points out in his evaluation of *Selected English Translations of Chinese Translation Discourses* compiled by Zhang Peiyao, the “Discourses” under the strategy of “thick translation” enriches the readers’ background knowledge information, but inevitably increases the heaviness of the translation. Although the content of the translation is thick, it is not as smooth as it should be. When the word is used as a verb, “丰厚” refers to a kind of action that enriching the translation to make it thicker. This action brings the identity of the translator from behind the scenes to the front of the stage, so “丰厚翻译” breaks the illusion of “transparency” or “neutrality” (Hermans, 2003). In this way, “thick translation” is wrapped in the concept of “translator’s subjectivity” and sneaks into the concept of “thick translation”. However, the first interpreter of the source language culture can only be the holder of the source language culture, and the translator can only make reinterpretation.

Therefore, it is too much to interpret “thick translation” as a strategy that increases the length of the translation and makes the translation “thicker”. According to Duan Feng (2006), the use of “深度翻译” to explain “thick translation” is due to the fact that the theory of “thickness” originates from cultural anthropology, and has been further developed in translation studies through the development of the new historicist literature.

The theoretical thickness of “thick translation” and the effective degree of its application cannot be summed up only by the word “厚”.

The reason why domestic scholars generally accept the term “深度翻译” is that the formal characteristics of its genre are more fully rational, and “thick” does not correspond to “thickness” as a matter of course, but points to “depth”.

Conclusion

In this paper, we analyze the translation of the term “thick translation” from the point of view of the rationality in terminological properties, and conduct a semantic tracing of the ephemeral information of the source language term to find its real semantic connotation. The Chinese definitions of the target language term are sorted out, and it is concluded that the translation of the term as “深度翻译” has sufficient rationality in terms of accuracy and readability and is in line with the formal characteristics of the target language. In addition, once this translation is stabilized, it is more conducive to the learning, promotion, and use of the term, and the word “深度” in “深度翻译” can also help stabilize other terms in the domestic academic community and reduce the term translation chaos. For example, “thick contextualization” is translated as “深度语境化”, “thick description” is translated as “深度描写”, etc., which reflects another attribute of the term—productivity. Determining the Chinese translation of “thick translation” not only helps to standardize the translation of this single term, but also facilitates the standardization construction of the whole terminology community and ensures the quality of terminology translation.

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