

# Translators' Subjectivity, Cultural Representation and Readers' Option in Thick Translation

Yanlin Wang\*

Northwest Normal University, Lanzhou, Gansu Province, China

\*Corresponding author. Email: mykyky@163.com

## ABSTRACT

Thick translation originated from the thick description in cultural anthropology, breaking through the limitations of other translation theories and strategies with providing the pro-found cultural background of the source text. Research in China on thick translation has mostly focused on theoretical elaboration and the interpretation of existing translation texts, discussing the value of thick translation theory from the perspective of the subjectivity of the translator and the representation of the source culture in the translation. On the basis of the related research, this paper further proposes that by endowing the translators with subjectivity and representing the source culture, the thick translation theory makes the reader's option possible and valuable.

**Keywords:** Subjectivity, Cultural representation, Option, Thick translation.

## 1. THICK DESCRIPTION AND THICK TRANSLATION

### 1.1. Thick Description

Thick description was first proposed by the British scholar Gilbert Ryle. In his book *The Thinking of Thoughts*: "What is 'Le Penseur' Doing", the story about two boys rapidly contracting the eyelids illustrates the complexity and different levels of meaning. Later, the American scholar of cultural anthropology Clifford Geertz turned the anthropological research into interpretative approach, no longer simply describing cultural phenomena, but from multiple dimensions and multiple levels interpreting cultures.

Geertz believes that culture is a web of significance woven by human beings, and the classification of culture belongs to the interpretive science of searching for meaning. Geertz (1973) put forward in the book *Cultural Interpretation*, that as an interweaving system of interpretable signs, culture is not a force, that is, it is not based on a certain cause of social events, behaviors, systems or processes [1]. It is a kind of background in which the above-mentioned things can be understood intelligibly, that is, thickly, describing something. Thick description is an anthropological research method that

emphasizes the representation of the actual scene of the field survey as accurately and completely as possible providing convenience for readers to understand. Geertz abandoned traditional anthropological theories, surpassed the simple opposition between cultural etic and emic, focused on interpretation itself, emphasized the subjective initiative of anthropologists, and explained that no matter what level of the interpretation is, the interpretation would mix the subjective intention of the interpreter. The analogy to cultural interpretation is used by the American scholar Kwame Anthony Appiah in translation.

### 1.2. Thick Translation

Apia published an article *Thick Translation on Callaloo* in 1993, and first proposed the term thick translation. This theory originates from the lack of source culture in the translating process from oral documents from Ghana in Africa into English. Based on this, Apia believes that the meaning in literary translation is concealed and uncertain. Both translators and ethnographers are mediators of heterogeneous cultures.

According to Apia's interpretation, thick translation "places the text in a rich cultural and linguistic context through annotations and accompanying annotations" [2].

The target language text contains a large number of explanatory text materials such as footnotes, translation readers with background knowledge and information, so as to arouse the attention and interest of target readers to the source culture to achieve better acceptance. Explanatory text materials, including preambles, footnotes, endnotes, in-text explanations, extra-text explanations, translators' notes, postscripts, etc. can all be used as a form of thick translation. The target readers provide cultural background knowledge to facilitate readers' understanding of cultural context.

Thick translation has been far beyond the traditional domestication or foreignization, and examined the text from a more macroscopic perspective, providing a new perspective and basis for cultural translation theory and practice. This article mainly discusses the thick translation from the perspective of the translator's subjectivity and the cultural representation, further on the basis of the both, reader's options become possible, which matters much to balance weak culture and strong culture.

**2. THICK TRANSLATION RESEARCH IN CHINA**

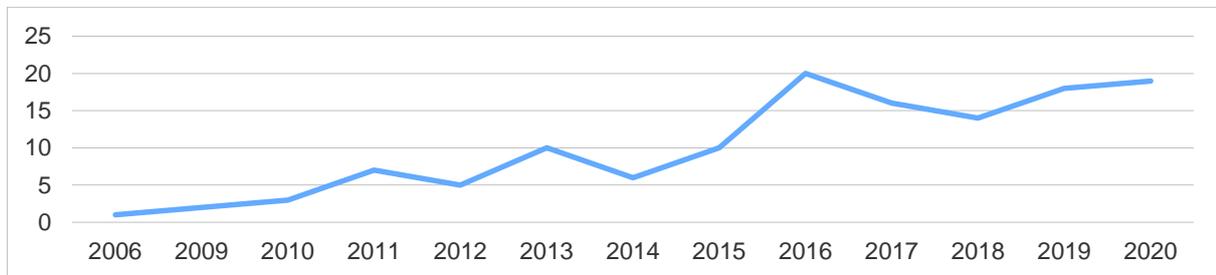
This is the retrieved result in the CNKI with different Chinese expressions of thick translation. According to the retrieve of papers on thick translation, a total of 112 papers from 2006 to 2020 were found. According to the data from CNKI and as shown in Figure 1, the research on thick translation in China started from 2006 and

annotations, and explanations. The purpose is to provide

scholars have been gradually attracted since then while before 2013, researchers were not attracted much. Table1 shows the distribution of key words in the retrieved papers from 2006 to 2020.

It can be inferred from the distribution of the key words that the research content related to thick translation is mainly concentrated on the translation of culture-loaded texts. From the search results, it can be seen that the objects of deep translation in domestic research are concentrated in classical works and cultural classics. As well as literary translation, there are more reviews and analysis of existing translation works, mainly on famous translation texts, so as to discuss the applicability of thick translation to the above-mentioned subject texts.

The papers focus on the analyses and discussions on existing translation texts using thick translation theory, and typical and excellent new translation texts have not appeared in large numbers, which is a loss for the effective dissemination of national culture. Some translations are very suitable for using the thick translation strategy, but unfortunately they have not adopted it, such as the works of Li Zhengshuan (2013) *The English Translation of Tibetan Mottos and Poems*. In the practical application of thick translation theory, it is worthy of our further exploration.



**Figure 1** Papers on thick translation

**Table 1.** Key words distribution

Key words	frequency
Thick translation	98
Translation Strategy	18
English translation	16
Apia	13
Western Samoa	10
Thick description	9
English translation of classics	8
Legge	6
Cultural Anthropology	6
Cultural transmission	5
Hermans	5
Thinking way	4
Paratext	3
Interpretative Anthropology	3
Translation process	3
The Yellow Emperor's Internal Classic	3
Lao Tzu	3
Jingdezhen Pottery Record	4
Tao De Jing	3
A Dream of Red Mansions	3
Calligraphy Manual(Shupu)	3
The Analects	6
Allusion translation	3
Chapter Novels	3
Target language readers	3
Readers	9

### 3. TRANSLATORS' SUBJECTIVITY

British translation theorist Theo Hermans introduced thick description and thick translation in the book *Intercultural Translation Studies as Thick Translation*. Hermans believes that cross-cultural understanding is a complex and endless process [3]. Thick translation shows that complete translation is impossible and it highlights the subjective status of the translator and denies that translation is a transparent or neutral description and brings narrative language into the description, so that the description has a clear time [4].

The source text authors are the holders of the source language and culture. They create works through their own observation and thinking of their own people, as well as their own emotional experiences. All the perceptual knowledge and rational thinking contained in them reflect the interpretation of their own culture. The translator is to give the interpretation of this interpretation precisely. Through various methods and strategies of thick translation, the cultural background is constructed outside the translation, so that the translator presents in the translation process in an explicit manner. Through the reconstruction of the cultural and historical background, the target language readers can better understand the source culture, thereby promoting a deeper understanding and respect for the culture of

others. Although the strong emergence of source culture is achieved through various texts such as footnotes, marginal notes, translations or explanatory texts used in thick translation, for weak source culture, thick translation is undoubtedly a good method to "weaken the cultural aggression which attempts to assimilate the culture of others" [5].

Thick translation focuses on the cultural background of the translation text, and puts emphasis on assisting the target language readers to enter the deep fundamentals of words [6]. As a result, while the subjectivity of the translator is manifested, it also creates the explicit characteristics of the translation, which draws the reader's attention to a broader cultural background of the source language. This is interference to readers' reading, and it also makes the source culture appear in the translation with a strong posture.

In the process of using thick translation strategies, the subjectivity of the translator stands prominent. This is different from the implicitness of the translator in other translation strategies. The translator can break the limitations of the translation and has more freedom and initiative to construct the cultural background of source language and transfer the cultural information. The freedom and initiative is very valuable to translators, which is equivalent to turning "dance with fetters" into a "dance with freedom" or "dance with less fetters" to a

certain extent, and this will inevitably enable translation to become a freer and more graceful dance.

#### **4. CULTURAL REPRESENTATION THROUGH THICK TRANSLATION**

Translation is not only an inter-lingual communication, but also a complex practice supported by the cultural background of the source language and the target language. Thick translation respects the complexity and particularity of culture, uses various strategies to realize the cultural background in the translated language, and reflects the strength of cultural interpretation. Through the interpretation of “discourse context, subject intentions and emotional expression, cultural differences remain in the text as cultural reality, so that readers of the target language have the opportunity to understand these differences, so as to realize the self-representation of national culture” [7].

Fang Zizhen (2011) discussed the cultural representation in the English translation of Chinese traditional poetry. It reflects the form of thick translation such as in-text paraphrases, footnotes and commentaries, which is conducive to readers' cognitive context and provides cognitive effects [8]. Martha P.Y. Cheung (2004) proposed that “thick translation is a way of cultural representation” [9]. This kind of cultural representation hopes that readers can respect and deeply understand the source culture, so as to realize the dialogue between “self” and “other”. Thick translation is a translation strategy that reproduces culture, revives tradition, and expands discourse space. Similar views such as Yin Peixian (2013) did not use the expression of cultural representation, but proposed that the translation constructs the third space of understanding, that is, the cultural network generated by the original text [10].

The thick translation strategy is very friendly to texts with cultural factors, such as cultural classics, literary classics, tourism texts, etc. It can break through the restrictions of translation and provide a cultural background that is easier for readers to understand, so as to realize the transmission of cultural information. It is very effective to complete the process of cultural representation.

#### **5. READERS' OPTIONS FROM TRANSLATORS' SUBJECTIVITY AND CULTURAL REPRESENTATION**

Translator's subjectivity and cultural representation make the reader's option possible. In the study of thick translation, from the perspective of text information transmission, as well as from the perspective of the subjectivity of the translator and the perspective of the construction of source culture, the researchers affirmed the positive role and value of thick translation in practical application. However, rare articles emphatically point out

that the use of thick translation strategies gives readers unprecedented options in the entire translation process. In the whole translation process, readers are almost in the most passive state, and can only passively accept the limited information provided by the translation. Under the strategy of thick translation, translators have the rights to accept or refuse the cultural information transmitted from the source language. Various annotations and sub-texts have a rich cultural background provided by translators under the thick translation strategy, which greatly expands the range of readers' options.

Readers' position in the entire translation process is raised for the first time due to the option of the cultural space constructed in thick translation. This option invisibly relieves the so-called invasion of strong cultures or the decline of weak cultures in other translation strategies. To provide readers with rich cultural information, readers can choose (to what extent) to enter this cultural space constructed by thick translation, and then choose whether to voluntarily form an understanding and respect for other cultures.

#### **6. CONCLUSION**

Translation is the important space where two cultures meet, so the translation process is a negotiation process between the two cultures. In this paper, the translator's subjectivity, the cultural representation and readers' option have been discussed in thick translation. The translators' subjectivity is highlighted in the thick para-texts, through which the cultural representation is achieved. The cultural representation brings the possibility for reader's option toward the source culture.

Readers' position has been raised in thick translation process.

Although the thick translation strategy is friendly to translation of classical works, cultural classics, literary works, etc., it is not limited to the above subjects. As long as the text is richly loaded with cultural or background information, the thick translation strategy can be effectively used.

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