

Chinese Translation Discourse: Variational Translation Theory

-- Retrospect and Prospect

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Abstract: Compared with full translation and based on a large number of translation variation phenomena, variational translation is a discourse of native translation studies with Chinese characteristics. After twenty years of development and research, the research scope of variational translation theory has gradually expanded and improved, but the literature review in recent years has lagged behind. Based on some well-known literature databases at home and abroad, Citespace, a bibliometric analysis tool, was used to review and visualize the development of variational translation theory at home and abroad in the past 20 years. The analysis data covered 760 relevant literatures. Based on the relevant data, the research frontiers and trends of variational translation theory are forecasted, and the new research fields of this theory in both theoretical and empirical research are explored. The existing problems in variational translation theory are summarized, and some feasible considerations about the construction and dissemination of Chinese native translation discourse are proposed.

Keywords: Chinese translation discourse, Variational translation theory, Citespace.

1. Introduction

For a long time, the translation field has been focusing on complete translation, that is, complete, faithful and equivalent translation, while non-complete translation is neglected. However, Professor Huang Zhonglian innovatively put forward the "variational translation theory" for non-complete translation activities. Since Professor Huang systematically proposed the variational translation theory, there has been a history of twenty years in the research and development of the theory. Variational translation theory is a systematic translation theory based on a large number of variational translation phenomena, and is a translation discourse with Chinese characteristics. At present, researches related to this theory mainly involve literature research, theoretical research and empirical research. However, at present, there are only a few reviews on the research of variational translation theory that can be retrieved on CNKI, and the latest review was as early as four years ago, which is quite inconsistent with the current research in full swing. Therefore, it is necessary to systematically summarize the new research in recent years. Different from previous reviews, this paper not only reviews the current research status of Huang's theory in China, but also summarizes relevant journals outside China. Has this theory proposed by Chinese scholars also been studied by foreign scholars? What is its development status? What kind of problems exist in domestic and foreign research? All these issues require further exploration. In addition to searching the related research at home and abroad from 2002 to 2022 with the help of CNKI, SAGE, EBSCO, Web of Science and other foreign language databases, new literature analysis method is also used, that is, Citespace. Through this software, this research conducts quantitative analysis and content sorting on the retrieved documents, reviews the development of variational translation theory in the past 20 years, looks forward to the future research trend of this theory, analyzes the research fields of this theory at theoretical and empirical level, and induces and explores new application fields of this

theory based on the development characteristics of the current information age. The systematic generalization of variational translation theory provides a new perspective, a new method and a new theory for translation studies, makes a great contribution to the construction of the discourse power of translation studies in China, and provides a reference for this paper to analyze the problems, strategies and directions of the discourse construction of translation studies in China.

2. An Overview of Variational Translation Theory

The idea of translation variation originated from Yan Fu. By using Yan Fu Corpus, Professor Huang has studied a large number of variational translation phenomena in Yan's translation and found that his translation is basically not a complete translation and his translation practice contains a variety of non-complete translation methods. Through further research on Yan Fu's thought, Professor Huang pointed out in his book *A Research of Yan Fu's Thought of Translation Variation* that the three words of "faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance" are actually guiding principles for non-complete translation activities, and the seven adaptation techniques used by Yan Fu—amplification, omission, edition, narration, condensation, combination and rewriting are his practical principles. [1]

The variational translation theory was innovatively proposed by Professor Huang based on Yan Fu's extensive practice of variation translation. It refers to the translation activities in which the translator absorbs the central content or part of the original text by means of extension, selection, enrichment, interpretation, consolidation, transformation and other adaptation techniques according to the special needs of the readers.[2] The core content of variational translation theory includes seven adaptation techniques and eleven variational translation methods, and also covers the essence, system, unit, process and other important contents of variational translation. The biggest difference between the

theory of variational translation and the traditional translation lies in "change", which takes readers as the center, gives full play to the translator's subjectivity, and makes appropriate "change" to the original text, so as to deal with the contradiction between content and form in the process of translation and convey the information of the original text.

3. Review of Research on Variational Translation Theory

Since the variational translation theory was systematically proposed in 2002, it has been developed for more than 20 years, and related academic research has increased dramatically. Based on well-known databases at home and abroad, this paper uses bibliometric analysis tool—Citespace to understand the development of variational translation theory from various literature databases, excavates academic frontiers and research trends, carries out data quantitative processing on relevant research literature at home and abroad, and visually analyzes the recent 20 years of domestic and foreign research on variational translation theory, and reviews relevant research on this theory.

3.1. Literature Source and Data Processing

The literature for domestic research is sourced from the CNKI database. With the help of the advanced retrieval function of CNKI, this paper searches relevant researches with the keyword "variational translation theory", filtering out invalid, irrelevant and republished literature, and selects a total of 760 articles from 2002 to 2022, including 292 academic journals and 467 academic dissertations, and one monograph. Different from subsection sampling and classified statistics, this paper uses Citespace, a bibliometrics tool, for data visualization analysis of the selected literature, which can more clearly sort out the past research track, show the research trend and direction of variational translation theory, and dig out the frontier of the subject. Compared with CNKI, Citespace has larger data capacity and can analyze tens of thousands of pieces of data at the same time. By sorting out the literature related to variational translation theory with the software, and taking the year of publication as the key word, we can see the annual trend chart of the literature publication of the related research. Since 2002, the number of publications related to the theory has generally increased. During the decade from 2002 to 2012, although relevant researches also showed an upward trend, the growth rate was particularly slow. It can be seen that the development of variational translation theory in this decade was not satisfactory, and its popularity in the translation field was not high. Since 2013, the number of relevant researches on variational translation theory has increased significantly, especially from 2020 to 2021, reaching the peak of the number of researches on variational translation theory. At present, the statistics of relevant literature in this paper are only up to 2022. However, it can still be seen that the study of translation theory is developing continuously and has become a hot topic in academic research.

3.2. Review of Variational Translation Theory Research in China

As a native translation theory with Chinese characteristics, variational translation theory has filled the gaps in translation theory research at home and abroad to a certain extent, and its academic research in China has been fruitful. As for the

research on variational translation theory in China, this paper mainly processed the imported literature data through Citespace software, and selected the publishing institution as the data analysis type. It can be seen that the proposal of variational translation theory made the domestic translation theory and practice get rid of the excessive dependence on foreign translation theories. A large number of translation major students choose it as their theoretical basis in translation practice. In the research related to variational translation theory, 467 dissertations accounted for more than 61% of the total number of publications, which shows the practical guiding significance of the theory. Especially in the context of the information age, some text types pursue the timeliness of information transmission. For translators, flexible selection of variational translation methods can save working time to the greatest extent and improve translation efficiency. The traditional full translation strategy is not highly applicable, so the variational translation theory has become the theoretical basis of some translation practices.

Then, keywords are taken as the analysis type in the imported literature, and the keyword frequency statistics chart is sorted out according to the keyword co-occurrence chart. As can be seen from the statistical chart of keyword frequency, the frequency of studies with "variational translation theory" and "translation variation" as keywords is very high, accounting for a large proportion. The research on the theory itself mainly covers the interpretation of "translation variation", the explanation of the basic theory of translation variation, and the translation strategies of it, including seven adaptation techniques and eleven variational translation methods. In the study of translation practice, the variational translation theory is usually used as the theoretical basis for the study of academic journals and dissertations to carry out translation or interpretation (alternate interpretation) practice. In terms of the register, the application of this theory mainly involves popular fields such as subtitle translation, publicity translation and tourism translation. Compared with the three categories of *Variational Translation Theory* mentioned by Professor Huang, namely literary works, social science works and scientific works, it has greatly expanded.

As far as subtitle translation is concerned, it includes film subtitle, TV subtitle and documentary subtitle. The biggest feature of this kind of text translation is that it is restricted by both time and space. The audience should finish reading the subtitles in a limited time to continue the following plot, and the translation should be displayed and completed in a limited space. In addition, each group of subtitles has a limit on the number of words, too long will affect the viewing effect of the film. Therefore, it is necessary for the translator to use some adaptation techniques to appropriately "subtract, narrate, and modify" the original text.[3] In external publicity translation, variational translation theory is also applied to the translation of intangible cultural heritage, folk culture and corporate external publicity materials. The purpose of external publicity translation is mainly information transmission and imperative function. Translation that follows the original text closely and is too faithful will seriously affect the effect of external publicity. [4] The variational translation theory has also become the best choice for tourism translation. The translation according to the time and the specific needs of tourists can make the tourism text detailed and slightly appropriate, which is more conducive to the dissemination and exchange of information. [5]

In addition, variational translation theory has also been applied to literary translation, scientific English translation and news translation. Translation in the field of literature is mainly the analysis of the translated version and the exploration of translation strategies through this theory. While scientific and technological works focus on the transmission of information and content, aiming at spreading new theories, new technologies, new inventions, etc., and readers are more inclined to be concise when reading such texts, which also determines the wide applicability of variational translation theory in scientific and technological works. In addition, the characteristics of today's society are rapid and concise. For the text whose main function is to convey information, such as scientific and technological English, we should also strive to keep up with the pace of scientific and technological development. [6] In terms of news translation, it is mainly used in mobile news and entertainment news. News focuses on the conciseness of language. The use of variational translation methods such as selection, reduction, and compilation can make news more timely and meet readers' rapid capture of key information.

3.3. Review of Variational Translation Theory Research Outside China

As one of the native translation theories in China, the variational translation theory is of universal significance in guiding the practice of variational translation in different languages. Then what is the research status outside China? How international is this theory in the English-speaking world? In a review study published in 2018, Jiao[7] searched the relevant research in three foreign language databases—the Core Paper database, SpiScholar academic resources online and EBSCO, and the results showed that there were no academic papers on variational translation theory. Based on the above research, this paper re-searches the relevant foreign literature to explore the research status of variational translation theory abroad. Through more than ten well-known foreign language databases such as SAGE, EBSCO and Web of Science, this paper searched the foreign development of variational translation theory. The results show that although the current publications on this theory in foreign language database has partially improved compared with the "zero" number of papers published in previous years. And 19 papers have been published, the related research retrieved in the foreign language database is very few compared with domestic research, and these papers published in foreign language journals are basically made by Chinese scholars. The research content is also similar to the relevant researches in China, mainly focusing on the study of variational translation theory itself and the application of it. The theoretical research mainly focuses on the exploration of the factors that influence translation variation and the reflection on the current situation of translation variational. [8] Translation practice studies involve studies on tourism materials based on the variational translation theory, studies on the translation of literary works by combining qualitative and quantitative methods with the theory, or theoretical demonstration of translation variation in external publicity texts by combining the theory of translation with the theory of communication. In addition to the above researches on foreign literature, Professor Huang has published a large proportion of his papers in English, and has systematically explained the scope, methods and standards of variational translation theory. A total of 15 papers of Huang are the main

part of the external translation of this theory.

4. Application Prospect of Variational Translation Theory

The variational translation theory is rooted in Chinese translation practice. According to the actual needs of the development of the times, it will further develop in the future translation studies and become a prominent learning in the translation field at home and abroad. In this paper, based on the keyword burstness chart processed by Citespace, the research trend of variational translation theory is prospected and new application fields of variational translation theory are explored in the future.

4.1. Research Trend Outlook

In Citespace, the more burst nodes in a cluster, the higher the activity in this field, and it also shows the emerging trend of related research. Based on the data collation of keywords by Citespace and the adjustment of relevant thresholds, this paper collates and draws a keyword burstness chart, showing the top 30 keywords with the highest outburst intensity. Through the keyword burstness chart, we can understand the research trend of specific keywords in the set year region, so as to look forward to the frontier of the discipline.

Since 2005, "translation variation" has gradually become a hot research topic, with its outburst intensity reaching 9.01, and its research popularity continued until 2011. Since 2002, keywords such as "full translation" and "translation theory", which are closely related to "translation variation", have a strong intensity of emergence. And relevant researches on variational translation theory have gradually transferred from theoretical research to empirical research, and have been applied in the field of oral and written translation, translation teaching and other practical fields. Skopos Theory also has a strong emergence, with an intensity of 3.94, and the study of variational translation theory combined with Skopos Theory has lasted for nearly 10 years. In the last four years, subtitle translation, science and technology translation, news translation and other registers are also popular. In addition, the theory has been applied to the exploration of translation methods, the empirical research of translation and the analysis of translation methods. Through the analysis of the emerging research keywords in recent years, the current research hot spots can be understood, and the annual trend of the research of specific keywords can be forecasted through the keyword burstness chart. Some keywords with high outburst intensity can also become turning points in related fields.

4.2. New Exploration in the Research Field

As can be seen from the above, Skopos Theory has a strong emergence in the relevant studies of variational translation theory, but the comparative study of variational translation theory and other translation theories has been weak in recent years, and can be developed into a new research topic. Through horizontal comparison with other translation theories, the characteristics and academic value of the variational translation theory can be more clearly demonstrated. In the aspect of empirical research, in addition to the above-mentioned hot research areas, it is also possible to expand the new field of application.

4.2.1. Theoretical Research

In previous studies, the variational translation theory is usually compared with Skopos Theory at the theoretical level,

because some scholars believe that there is a certain similarity between this theory and Skopos Theory. Both variational translation theory and Skopos Theory have reconsidered the nature of translation, repositioned the status of original text, questioned the concept of faithful equivalent translation, emphasized the importance of translators and readers, and challenged the concept of "original text first". [9] From the perspective of Skopos Theory, there are as many as 27 studies on the phenomenon of translation variation in different texts and contexts. Variational translation theory and functionalist Skopos Theory both move from an ideal state of translation practice to a real state.

Thinking from this perspective, deconstructive translation and variational translation theory also have some similarities. Jacques Derrida's deconstructive translation view of "Différance" is a translation concept that opposes the center, opposes the binary opposition, and advocates differences and diversity. [10] Deconstructive translation views the original text from a new perspective, fundamentally dissolves the traditional concept of fidelity in translation, no longer takes "fidelity" as the only principle in translation, changes people's traditional views on the relationship between the original text and the translation, and highlights the translator's creative position in the translation process. Li [11] also points out in her research that a common point between variational translation theory and deconstructionism is that they both highlight the centrality of the translator's subject. However, there is only one comparative study on variational translation theory and deconstructive theory, and relevant studies can be further expanded and improved.

The "Variation Theory", which is particularly similar in name to the variational translation theory, can also be studied further. Professor Cao's [12] "variation" refers to creative treason in the process of translation. Due to cultural reasons, translators and readers, variation theory holds that the translated text cannot be completely identical with the original text. The variation theory focuses on the study of the "variation" of literary works in cross-cultural communication. In the process of communication and transmission of different cultures, some differences will inevitably appear, which requires the translator to make a creative conversion between the original text and the target text. In fact, this is also the emphasis on the translator's subjectivity, as well as the recognition of the "change" in the translation process. However, what are the similarities and differences between the two phenomena of "variation" and "translation variation"? It is still an unexplored field in the study of variational translation theory and needs to be further expanded.

4.2.2. Empirical Research

Although current research has greatly expanded the application scope of variational translation theory, with the advent of the information age, the way of information acquisition and dissemination also has changed a lot. The way of existence of language is more changeable, so the applicability and value of variational translation theory in multi-modal language forms need to be further explored.

On the one hand, the variational translation theory can be applied to game translation, but there are few researches that apply it to this register. Take, for example, original online games with Chinese characteristics, in which there are many elements of traditional Chinese culture. During the course of the game, players do not have enough time to scrutinize the complete translation of the content of the original text.

Compared to static written text, online game text is a multimodal information mode, in which text, sound, images, and images can coexist at the same time, and consideration should also be given to translation. What's more, the space existence of online games is also greatly limited. Translation should not affect the overall visual effect, but also facilitate players to obtain core information in a short time. Proper translation can attract layers and make them get a good sense of experience, so as to enhance the commercial value of online games and help spread Chinese culture. [13]

On the other hand, the variational translation theory can also be applied to the translation of lyrics. The biggest difference between the translation of lyrics and the above application fields is that the translation should not only convey the content of the original text, but also take into account the rhythm and melody of the music. To some extent, the translation of lyrics is equivalent to a process of refilling words. In this case, the content and form of the original text will inevitably affect the singing effect of the song. And lyrics translation for the translator is also very high requirements, not only to master translation, but also to master the knowledge of music theory. The goal of song translation is not only to fully reproduce the meaning of the lyrics, but also to complete the transformation and reproduction of language, literature and music. [14] Therefore, the translation of lyrics is not a simple process of equivalent translation. The variational translation methods of this theory, such as reduction, compilation, narration and reformation, can be used to achieve better singing effects by taking into account the original content, lyrics style and rhythm.

5. Constructing Chinese Translation Discourse

Nowadays, cultural discourse power has become an important embodiment of cultural soft power and an important part of a country's competitiveness. Under the background and policy guidance of "going global" of Chinese culture, Sinochem's excellent culture has begun to continuously enhance its influence worldwide. How can Chinese translation theory go to the world? This paper puts forward two points of consideration: first, it is necessary to continuously develop and perfect the relevant theoretical and practical research of variational translation theory, and actively improve the existing problems in the development of it. The second is to break the dilemma of the development of variational translation theory, and to mobilize various forces and methods to jointly promote the translation and introduction of native translation studies.

5.1. Problems Existing in Variational Translation Theory Research

At present, there are still some problems in the construction of the discourse system of translation studies in China. Although the research on variational translation theory is on the rise in general, the research quality still needs to be further improved. In addition, the current register study of variational translation theory mainly involves language research, but language is not only a purely textual form. And the theoretical exploration of translation studies has always taken speech as the research object. However, in the context of the information age, the forms of language existence are also more diverse. Nowadays, language, image, sound, video, hypertext and other complex media jointly construct the

meaning of text [15]. Therefore, translation in the information age should also be conducted under the premise of multimodality. Moreover, there are repeated studies on the application of variational translation theory. For example, there are as many as 85 researches on the translation of news, about 62 researches on the translation of tourism register, and about 26 researches on the translation of external publicity. The researches on other fields of application are slightly insufficient. More importantly, the interdisciplinary study of variational translation theory still needs to be developed. Translation studies are interdisciplinary studies, and interdisciplinary studies also provide a driving force for translation studies. For example, it is more convenient to use bibliometrics tools based on scientometrics and data visualization to carry out visual analysis on researches related to translation theory, which is more conducive to tracing research results and looking forward to the frontier of the subject. It also helps to avoid the duplication of research contents to a certain extent and open up new research fields. Besides, in the field of humanities and social sciences, the use of corpora to summarize and generalize the translation phenomenon has great advantages. [16] The variational translation theory can also be combined with sociology to study variational translation behavior in a grand social context and explore the social and cultural factors behind it.

5.2. "Going Global" in Chinese Translation Research

The development of variational translation theory in other countries is not ideal in terms of its retrieval in foreign databases. The translation and introduction of local translation theories such as variational translation theory are generally insufficient. Throughout the history of Chinese translation, it has spanned thousands of years, among which there are many influential translation theories, such as Fu Lei's Spirit Likeness, Xu Yuanchong's Theory of Three Beauty and Qian Zhongshu's Sublimation Theory. In the 21st century, three major Chinese translation theories have been developed, namely, eco-translatology, Variational Translation Theory and Harmonious Integration Translation Theory. Rooted in excellent Chinese culture, these new translation theories have become local theories with Chinese characteristics in the new era.

However, western translation theory has been a hot topic in domestic translation studies for a long time, and the translation theories of Western translators such as Nida, Newmark and Catford have also become the subject of many domestic scholars' researches on translation theory and practice. How can Chinese native translation discourse, represented by the variational translation theory, go global and become an internationally influential translation theory in the context of the increasingly mature development of western translation theories? Firstly, the variational translation theory needs to be gradually developed and perfected. Secondly, according to the current literature retrieval of this theory in foreign databases, most of the papers related to it were published by Professor Huang. Therefore, in order for variational translation theory to be known and well known to the international world, it requires the joint efforts of domestic scholars to improve the overseas popularity of it. Based on this, academic ideas can be further exchanged through translation academic conferences and international academic seminars, and relevant researches and discussions can be initiated in international forums. Professionals and

authoritative scholars in translation studies can also give lectures on variational translation theory in foreign universities through international platforms, so as to provide more contact channels for foreign scholars interested in variational translation theory.

6. Conclusion

The development of the variational translation theory is of great significance both in theory and practice. In theory, the proposal of this new translation theory fills the gap in translation studies at home and abroad, provides theoretical support for the phenomenon of translation variation, and enables domestic translation studies to get rid of the dependence on foreign translation theories, so that there are more options for translation studies. In practice, the variational translation theory provides a theoretical scheme for the practice of variational translation and a new guidance for the translation practice of each register. The system of variational translation research is actually an applied theory, which pays attention to the guiding significance of the theory, namely the specific operation method, and has strong practical significance. Even in some specific fields, variational translation is more practical than full translation. In the context of Chinese culture going global, when translating and introducing various types of Chinese works to the outside world, variational translation is more suitable than full translation. In a word, variational translation theory has been continuously applied to translation theory and practice in different fields, including English, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, French, Russian and other languages. However, its range of applicable language needs to be further expanded. As a discourse of Chinese translation studies, the development of variational translation theory abroad is far less than that at home, and the construction of the discourse power of Chinese translation studies is a long way to go. Finally, it is expected that the review and prospect of the study of variational translation theory can provide some reference for the study of translation theory and practice.

Acknowledgment

Supported by SWPU Translation Research Center + TRC202210.

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