

ONOMÁZEIN

Journal of linguistics, philology and translation



PONTIFICIA UNIVERSIDAD
CATÓLICA DE CHILE
FACULTAD DE LETRAS

REVIEW

Lingshun Zhou:
***A TBC Approach to the English
Translation of Chinese Folk Language***

(Beijing: Social Sciences Academic
Press (China), 2022. 408 pages)

Liming Huang*

Yangzhou University
China
huanglm348@163.com

ONOMÁZEIN 69 (September 2025): 216-221
DOI: 10.7764/onomazein.69.12
ISSN: 0718-5758



69

September
2025

1. Introduction

Folk language, as a carrier of regional culture in a certain society and widely used in the common people's daily life, exists both in the East and in the West. Can “folk language” be translated? Several relevant studies on dialects and vernaculars have been conducted to answer the question involving translation strategies (Yu, 2017; Braga-Riera, 2018), ideology and socio-cultural context (Berthele, 2000; Määttä, 2004). However, few systematic analysis has been made on the English translation of Chinese folk language including dialects, idioms, obscenities, etc. ***A TBC Approach to the English Translation of Chinese Folk Language*** is a timely endeavor to offer insights into the translation of Chinese folk language from descriptive analysis. By providing authentic data extracted from the self-built Goldblatt's translation corpus, it informs readers of a holistic understanding of Goldblatt's English translation of Chinese folk language under the theoretical guidance of translator behavior criticism (TBC).

Translator behavior, as an objective existence in translation activity, has been broadly discussed in translation pedagogy and translator training (Wilss, 1996; Johnsen, 2014), in cognitive translation studies (Hubscher-Davidson, 2009 and 2016), and also in sociology of translation (Enríquez-Aranda, 2016; Liang, 2016; Sánchez Nieto, 2022), nevertheless, it is rarely mentioned in translation criticism. Based on the text-oriented criticism within translation, and the culture-oriented criticism outside translation, the theory of translator behavior criticism (TBC theory) is constructed by Zhou (2014) to focus on translator behavior in the two angles of intra-translation (linguistic level) and extra-translation (societal level), which is regarded as the third stage and a new theoretical approach in translation criticism. As a contemporary Chinese translation theory aimed at improving the objectivity and the operability of translation criticism, TBC theory has been widely deployed in research design and a series of research findings have been published in China's core journals, furthermore, it has also attracted international attention for its theoretical originality (Teng and Crezee, 2022).

2. The Book

The book starts with an introduction to theoretical framework, research objects and research methods. Besides, five concrete research topics involving different research problems are also introduced, which are, respectively, given deeper analysis in the subsequent five chapters.

* The work is supported by the PhD Candidate Research & Practice Innovation Project of Jiangsu Province [Grant Number: KYCX21-3173]

The core of translator behavior criticism lies in that it investigates the interactions among translator's volition, translator's identity, role shifting of identity, translator's behavior and the quality of translated texts. Many terms are contained and explained in TBC theory such as translator as body of willpower, linguistic being and societal being, continuum of translator behavior, socialization in behavior, intra-translation behavior, extra-translation behavior, translator identity and role, role shifting in translator, which can be directly applied as theoretical tools to analyze issues in case studies. Translation does not take place in a vacuum, "there are indeed translators behind the translation, people behind the texts" (Chesterman, 2009: 14), those concepts and terms of TBC theory are used to make criticism on the English translation of Chinese folk language from the perspective of dynamic translator behavior in the book, which is greatly different from the traditional translation criticism only focusing on texts. Besides, self-built corpus data and translator's interview data are interpreted with TBC theory in each chapter's analysis, which ensures the reliability, the validity and the objectivity of research results in the book.

After briefly introducing TBC theory and its functions as a descriptively analytical tool in translation studies, the first chapter gives a clear definition of "folk language" and discusses scope and significance of studies on folk language translation. Folk language refers to all the expressions characterized by the distinct local features and popularized in folk society, which to some extent reflects local conditions, custom and cultural traditions, including idioms, proverbs, aphorisms, two-part allegorical sayings, slangs and obscenities (21). Besides, chapter 1 also points out the existing problems in this field, and sheds light on the human-centered approach (focusing on translator behavior) to the current study.

Chapter 2 probes into the internal relations between Howard Goldblatt's translation views and his translator behaviors. As a well-known translator, Goldblatt puts priority on fidelity both in his ideas on translation and in his translation practice. However, several studies once criticized Goldblatt for his deleting, rewriting and free editing in translating Mo Yan's novels, which is inconsistent with his "fidelity". For addressing the issue, based on interview data and authentic materials extracted from the parallel translation corpus of Chinese folk language, the author finds that Goldblatt's "fidelity" does not only focus on original text in linguistic level, but also take target readers and sales market into consideration in the level of translation as a social activity, which is differentiated from the traditional concept "faithfulness/fidelity" in text-oriented translation studies. Besides, the assumption "Goldblatt's style of free translation" is verified by his translation views and behaviors. In his view on fidelity of translation activity, "Goldblatt's style of free translation" includes not only the "direct translation" agreed in the circles of translation studies, but also the domesticating ways. It refers to all sorts of translation styles, except for the so-called "dead" or "rigid" translation. As for the English translation of Chinese idioms in broad sense, Goldblatt tries to be close to the source text, which indicates that it is culture that he aims to spread by translating Chinese literary works.

In chapter 3, English translation of “狗” (gou, dog) by Goldblatt is examined by the exhaustion of all the facts concerning “狗” in Mo Yan's novels and “dog” in Goldblatt's translations. Corpus data manifests that Goldblatt is inclined to directly translate “狗” into “dog” when he deals with Chinese folk language involving “狗”, which overturns the traditional prejudice that “狗” is used negatively in China while “dog” is used positively in the West. Furthermore, Goldblatt's behavior in the English translation of Chinese obscenities is also described and interpreted. Based on translation corpus data, it is found that he tends to choose a domesticating way in his translations for economically seeking the similar communicative function embodied in Chinese obscenities. His domesticating behavior is attributed to both the nature of obscenities (linguistic level) and his fidelity to potential readers (societal level). After all, the communicative functions of obscenities in context are more important than the linguistic styles of them.

Based on the research findings in the previous chapters, chapter 4 takes a new look at specific translation strategies of Chinese folk language in the perspective of Goldblatt's translator behavior, such as thick translation. Thick translation is actually a manifestation of translator's multiple identities in translation practice, in this view, the label “scholarly translator” is attached to Goldblatt for his another identity as a sinologist and his translator behaviors are inevitably influenced by his own academic studies. In addition, when discussing folk language translation, the rustic flavor of folk language is required to be gradated to “understandability” in linguistic level (or intra-translation), and “effectiveness” in societal level (or extra-translation). Chapter 5 is devoted to analyze external factors influencing translator behavior, including translator's cooperation model and the subjectivity of Western editors. More importantly, the theoretical maxim of “meaning-function-style” is constructed, which is not only used to prescribe translation practice of folk language, but also used as an objective principle of criticizing the translation of folk language.

Chapter 6 is the conclusion. It articulates all the findings in this systematic study, summarizes implications and limitations, and makes suggestions for future studies in the aspects of translator behaviors as a group, synchronic comparison in different scholarly translators, etc.

3. Comments

Three striking features of this book are particularly worth mentioning. As the first monograph concerning the translation and its criticism of Chinese folk language, the book contains interesting research topics and findings, such as probing into the potential reasons of translator's domesticating behavior in translation of Chinese obscenities, gradating rustic flavor of folk language, and systematically demonstrating the inner relations between views and behaviors of a translator. Unlike the traditional translation criticism studies focusing on source-target texts, the current study, starting from translator behavior, is carried out on the

“human-centeredness” approach to make objective criticism on folk language translation. Besides, this book bridges the gap between translation theory and translation criticism practice, with detailed case analysis, the theoretical interpretation and the applicability of TBC theory to translation criticism studies are fully demonstrated in the book. The theoretical maxim of “meaning-function-style” for translation practice and translation criticism is also applicable to the translation of folk language in other languages, not only limited to Chinese folk language.

Another merit is that “folk language” is firstly studied as a term and given a clear definition in the book. On this basis, “translation of folk language” is regarded as a promising field in the circle of China's translation studies, which needs to be deeply explored in the future. Some important terms and concepts of translation studies are received new interpretations in the current study. With the help of translation practice of Chinese folk language by Howard Goldblatt, fidelity, domestication, direct translation, free translation and thick translation are all re-interpreted in the perspective of translator behavior. It exhibits the local characteristics of Chinese translation studies and its theoretical contributions to the global translation community.

Thirdly, the author spares no efforts to build parallel translation corpus of Chinese folk language and collect translator's interview materials. Supported by those authentic and large-scale data, the qualitative and descriptive analysis based on TBC theory tends to be more effective, objective and reasonable, which is the main advantage of mixed research method. In addition, gradational analysis of research objects and continuum analysis of translator behavior are also appropriately implemented in the book. It is suggested that researchers should adhere to the “problem-oriented” principle and continuously extend TBC theory in gradation analysis so as to address problems in translation criticism studies. On the whole, scholars, practitioners, graduate students and general readers who are interested in folk language translation, translator behavior studies, translator studies, translation criticism and corpus-based translation studies will find this monograph prominently valuable for its discussion of both Chinese folk language and its translation criticism.

4. Bibliographic references

BERTHELE, Raphael, 2000: “Translating African-American Vernacular English into German: The Problem of ‘Jim’ in Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*”, *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 4 (4), 588-613.

BRAGA-RIERA, Jorge, 2018: “Translating Literary Dialect: Victorian English in Peninsular Spanish”, *Speech, Language and Hearing* 21 (2), 98-101.

CHESTERMAN, Andrew, 2009: “The Name and Nature of Translator Studies”, *HERMES - Journal of Language and Communication in Business* 42, 13-22.

ENRÍQUEZ-ARANDA, Mercedes, 2016: "Translation Norms in the Light of Practical Research in Literary Translation", *Onomázein* 33 (1), 88-106.

HUBSCHER-DAVIDSON, Séverine, 2009: "Personal Diversity and Diverse Personalities in Translation: A Study of Individual Differences", *Perspectives* 17 (3), 175-192.

HUBSCHER-DAVIDSON, Séverine, 2016: "Trait Emotional Intelligence and Translation: A Study of Professional Translators", *Target* 28 (1), 132-157.

JOHNSEN, Ase, 2014: "Revision and Cohesion in Translation", *Translation and Interpreting Studies* 9 (1), 70-87.

LIANG, Wen-chun, 2016: "Translators' Behaviors from a Sociological Perspective: A Parallel Corpus Study of Fantasy Fiction Translation in Taiwan", *Babel* 62 (1), 39-66.

MÄÄTTÄ, Simo K., 2004: "Dialect and Point of View: The Ideology of Translation in *The Sound and the Fury* in French", *Target* 16 (2), 319-339.

SÁNCHEZ NIETO, María Teresa, 2022: "Multiple Translatorship, Voice, and Translation as Reinstatement", *Onomázein* 57 (3), 142-166.

TENG, Wei, and Ineke CREZEE, 2022: "Translation Theories in the Context of the Chinese Language: How Applicable are They to Community Translation?", *New Voices in Translation Studies* 26, 110-135.

WILSS, Wolfram, 1996: *Knowledge and Skills in Translator Behavior*, Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Yu, Jing, 2017: "Translating 'Others' as 'Us' in *Huckleberry Finn*: Dialect, Register and the Heterogeneity of Standard Language", *Language and Literature* 26 (1), 54-65.

ZHOU, Lingshun, 2014: *A Theoretical Framework for Translator Behavior Criticism*, Beijing: The Commercial Press.