Towards a Research Paradigm for Diachronic Analyses of Term Travels: A New Perspective of Term Translation Studies

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Research on term travels transcends the scope of the single discipline of historical semantics, and should be included in the transdisciplinary area of discourse studies, as such travels are discursive events in history that have both a linguistic and a social aspect. In other words, the travel of terms across cultures should be treated as discourses in history, and the three-fold nature of the concept of “discourse” sheds light upon the building of a model for diachronic analyses of such processes, which helps discourse analysts sharing the same goal work together to draw more scholarly attention to academic issues at the crossroads of history, language, and society.

Keywords: diachronic analysis, term travel, discourse studies, term translation

Introduction

Language is in constant changes. Such changes, occurring and prevailing in both oral and written forms of language (Meinschaefer, 2003), are inspected and studied in the field of historical linguistics, whose investigations are launched mainly in two directions, one concerning the identification and elucidation of generic relationships revealed in the comparison of different yet related languages, and the other dealing with changes in languages over time (Campbell, 2008; Trask, 2011). This second branch of traditional historical linguistics, also called diachronic linguistics, when focusing on semantic changes, one of the most difficult types of linguistic change to “identify principles for” (Trask, 2011, p. 303), becomes devoted to the study of meaning change along history, and gives rise to a series of rigorous studies on specific terms from different disciplines, the most typical ones among which are conducted under the titles of keywords studies (for example, Raymond, 2005) and conceptual history (or history of concepts, Begriffsgeschichte) (for example, Koselleck, 2002).

Said’s (1983) theorization of changes in theories and ideas after their transnational movements, their “travels” in his words, highlights another cause for semantic change besides time—space. As spatial movements bring about meaning change of specific terms, with “a surge of spatial imagery” sweeping across “wide stretches of the academy” after Said’s redefinition of “travel” (Livingstone, 2005, p. 93), a series of research programs on term travels across cultures (especially in the East Asian context) are carried out (for example, Chen, 2019). Such studies transcend the scope of the single discipline of historical semantics, as the transcultural and translingual

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1 This work is supported by “Start-up Funding for Doctors of College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology” and “Program for Young Teachers in Colleges and Universities in Shanghai”.

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travels of terms are all discourses in history, where the terms are translated, localized, and reformulated, with the concepts behind them re-lexicalized, re-understood, and received.

The attention paid to studies on term travels rising gradually, the category to which such studies belong remains uncertain, and a model of diachronic analyses of term travels is still absent. The study of term travels does not belong merely to historical linguistics, which stresses meaning change in the linguistic aspect; nor does it belong merely to translation studies, which rarely takes social processes into account. We argue that the study of term travels should be placed in the broad, transdisciplinary field of discourse studies, as such travels are historical events, linguistic phenomena, and social practices, and a research paradigm for the study of such processes will be presented by probing into the three-fold nature of the concept of discourse.

Discourse: A Concept of History, Language, and Society

The cross-disciplinarity of the field of discourse studies, a common ground for necessary interactions between different research fields on their investigations into “the relationship between form and function” concerned with different discursive representations (Renkema, 2004, p. 1), causes different views upon the notion of “discourse”, and makes the definition of it an even more conspicuous problem to be discussed. Discourse, a term with a comparatively short history, various usages, diverse definitions, and significant meanings (Chen, 2017), is not a term with a commonly-accepted definition. In Key Terms in Discourse Analysis, Baker and Ellece label “discourse” as a term with “several related and often quite loose meanings” (2011, pp. 30-31), and list seven situations where the term can be used, instead of providing the readers with a settled definition, echoing with Hyland and Paltridge’s description of “discourse” as “something of an overloaded term” (2011, p. 1).

We propose that “discourse” is a three-dimensional concept. Historically, discourses are events, where there are subjects and objects of actions; linguistically, the discourse is a unit or structure; socially, discourses are practices. Careful inspection of this notion in these three dimensions helps formulate a model for diachronic analyses of term travels.

The Historical Dimension of Discourse and Term Travels

The historical dimension of discourse is the very basis of the concept’s meaning, as it is the specific historical and socio-political conditions that produce and receive specific discourses and construct their meanings (Angermuller, Maingueneau & Wodak, 2014). In other words, the formation, construction, development, and reception of any discourse in any context are confined to specific historical periods, and thus the notion of history plays an important role in the field of discourse studies.

History and discourse are intimately interwoven concepts. As Foucault suggests, discourse analysis is useful only when placed within the agenda of “a history of systems of thought”, which means the functioning of this method requires “the role of historical contextualization” (Hook, 2007, p. 132). Terms travel in specific historical periods, and the change of time means a change of the context, as well as a change of the “system of thought”, which explains for possible semantic changes after their transcultural journeys.
The Linguistic Dimension of Discourse and Term Travels

Discourse is intrinsically a linguistic structure, and term travels are by nature linguistic phenomena, which appeals to inspection of specific semantic features. In *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics* (1985) and *A Dictionary of Language* (2001), Crystal defines “discourse” as a continuous stretch of language longer than one sentence, pointing out its basic feature as a linguistic structure in line with the concepts of morpheme, word, clause, and so forth.

Theorists who view discourse as a linguistic structure fall into two groups, one regarding the concept as a purely linguistic structure, and the other considering it an interactional structure. The two groups, as is in accordance with Levinson’s (2001) categorization, are text grammarians and speech act theorists. The first group sees discourse as nothing but sentences connected with each other, and what a sentence to a discourse is what a clause to a sentence. Discourse, for them, is merely a static object of linguistic research, and the study of discourse is also called “text analysis” (see Harris, 1952).

Seeing discourse as purely linguistic lays emphasis on its form, paying particular attention to its “wellformedness” (Bussmann, 2000, p. 131). The second group of theorists strikes a balance between form and function, regarding discourse as interactional. Pike (1954) defines discourse as the product of an interactive process in a socio-cultural context. Cicourel regards discourse as a notion opposed to written prose (Bussmann, 2000). Coulthard (1977) sees discourse as interaction in conversations, which means more than a string of grammatically well-formed utterances. For speech act theorists, it is “a form of acting” (Renkema, 2004, p. 12), and carries the purpose of communication.

More truths are seen in the viewpoint of the second group, which can be explained as a result of the debate on the nature of language between formalists and functionalists in the new age, where form and function become considered as complementary rather than irrevocable (for example, see Newmeyer, 2010). Discourses are interactional processes where dialogues, negotiations, and conflicts between different parties take place, and term travels are such linguistic phenomena, as negotiations on the translation of the imported concept behind the travelling term and clashes between different thinking paradigms behind the imported concept and traditional local concepts often come after the transcultural movement of a term. The analysis of term travels, in the linguistic dimension, pays particular attention to the meaning construction of the travelling term and the re-formulation of semantic fields as a result of such processes.

The Social Dimension of Discourse and Term Travels

From a Marxist and Structuralist view, discourse is a dynamic and social structure, which is temporary and incomplete, and leaves much room for struggles (Phillips & Jørgensen, 2002), while this view is rejected by later theorists, who defines discourses as social practices, which serves as an intermediate organizational entity between social structures (such as languages) and social events (such as texts) (for example, see Fairclough, 2003). Gee’s (2000) definition of discourses as social practices, mental entities, and mental realities, van Leeuwen’s (2014) definition of it as recontextualization of social practices, and van Dijk’s (2014) context models that relate the discursive and the social all echo with the point of view that discourse is a social practice, and indicate that discourse is a place where the linguistic and the social converge (Bounnafous & Temmar, 2013),
which is in accordance with Saussure’s study of language, where a “social aspect” is considered along with the “individual aspect” of language (2001, p. 9).

Discourses are both socially-constituted and socially-constitutive, in “a dialectical relationship” with social contexts (Fairclough, 2013, p. 92). They are, on the one hand, shaped by social reality in social processes and, on the other, part of social processes that influence and even form reality. Term travels, as discourses, are such processes, where official terms (in another language) are assigned to the concepts in travel as official translations, and such concepts are spread, promoted, and finally accepted, which are results of institutionalization, whereas people’s social behaviors, which are driven by their cognition of certain concepts, change, as a result of the update of their thinking paradigms owing to such travels, suggesting the impact of the discourse back on society. The analysis of term travels should, in the social dimension, aim at an exploration of the tensions between the subject and object of such processes, which exert influence on social cognition, as well as an explanation for the reception of the concepts in travel, which requires inspection of institutional factors.

The Historical Sociolinguistic Analysis of Term Travels

The three-fold (history-language-society) nature of discourse sheds light on the construction of a model for the analysis of term travels. As discourses, the travels of terms across cultures are historical events with linguistic and social attributes, and the analysis of such processes should accordingly be made in these three aspects.

“History” in the Study of Discursive Events

In general, there are three ways, as is classified by J. Angermuller, D. Maingueneau and R. Wodak, in which the concept of “history” intervenes in the study of discourse: “historiography as discourse”, “discourse analysis as a methodological toolkit for historians”, and “historical discourse analyses” (2014, p. 319). The first presents a view on how to perceive history. Certeau (1988) regards the writing of history the making of it; as such, history becomes a unity of different discourses, being linguistic in form, as Barthe commentates, the linguistic existence is the only existence a fact possesses (1981), and being both socially-constituted and socially-constitutive in content, which is a view on history, discourse, and the history-discourse relationship that matches ours.

The second category includes research done by scholars with the belief that meaning production is “subject to certain constraints encoded in the formal-linguistic organization of textual material” (Angermuller, Maingueneau & Wodak, 2014, p. 320), among whom the analysts using the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) are typical. The DHA analysts make full use of the historical sources, usually in form of texts, and take into account the specific background of the social-political fields, where the events are “embedded” (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, p. 35), which is a method to process historical materials we share. Their focus is on discursive strategies, whereas ours, in the historical dimension, is on the paths of travels.

The third category is a broader one, with a focus on “historical changes in meaning creation” (Angermuller, Maingueneau & Wodak, 2014, p. 321), shared by a series of influential studies within different academic fields rich in empirical investigations into the discourse and their formations concerned with “their historical change over time” (Landwehr, 2008, p. 14), namely Foucault’s study of the history of power and knowledge, Skinner and Pocock’s rewriting of the history of Western political thought, and Burger and Luckmann’s study of meaning and knowledge production. The study of term travels falls into this category, digging into historical materials that
reflect shared knowledge of different societies as well as varying and changing cognition of such knowledge owing to the transcultural movement of certain terms that carry it.

Term travels, as discourses, are discursive events in history that connect the linguistic and the social. The analysis of such travels, with regard to their histories, should focus on the itineraries. Said’s (1983) theoretical model of the travels of ideas has three stages—a point of origin, a path, and a destination—and it sheds light on the analysis of the itineraries of travelling terms, which first seeks answers to the following questions concerning the first stage: Where is the point of origin? What is the term that travels?

As for the second stage, a detailed description of important timepoints, locations, and people and communities are required. By timepoint, it means the specific time when a travelling term arrives in a certain place; by location, it means the places where the term arrives and is translated; by people and communities, it means the subjects who introduce or translate the travelling term to the local people. More importantly, the following question should be answered: What new term is used by those people at that time in that place to denote the concept behind the term that travels there?

Term travels are essentially concept travels, and translation, what happens after the term travels into a different culture, is part of such processes. When entering a new culture, the travelling term, in its new forms, becomes different in meaning. The construction and re-construction of meaning, also part of term travels, is a dynamic and diachronic process that calls for semantic analysis in the linguistic dimension.

**Meaning Construction of Discursive Events**

The alterations of travelling terms after their accommodation within new contexts are first reflected by linguistic variations: changes in form take place, a definite result of translation, followed by changes in meaning, as well as in the semantic relations of the travelling concept. The diachronic analysis of the travels of terms, in the linguistic dimension, consists of two stages: an analysis of meaning changes of the term that travels, and an analysis of structural changes of the semantic field to which the travelling term belongs.

Semantic changes are inevitable in term travels, as we hold a monistic view on the nature of language and believe that a change of form equals a change of meaning. Such changes can be categorized into seven types (for details, see Radford et al, 2000; Campbell, 2008; Trask, 2011): widening, the enlargement of the range of meanings of a term; narrowing, the diminution of the range of meanings of a term; amelioration, the change of the meaning of a term that enables it to denote something more positive; pejoration, the change of the meaning of a term in a more negative direction; semantic merger, the loss of a formerly compulsory distinction in meaning; semantic split, the gain of a formerly absent distinction in meaning; semantic shift, the complete change of the referent of a term. As for the analysis of the change in meaning of travelling terms, the question to be answered is: What type of meaning change occurs when the travelling term enters its target culture and becomes a new term in another language?

Meanwhile, the meaning of a term is in relation with other terms, and related terms form a group, a restricted set of terms called “field” (Lehmann, 2002; Lehrer, 2011). Some believe that Trier, the first who introduces Saussure’s principles into the area of semantics, is the first to introduce the concept of “semantic field” (Bussmann, 2000; He & Wang, 1995), whereas others assert that the theory of semantic fields is put
forward by a group of scholars, among whom Ipsen is the earliest, and its origin can be traced back to Humboldt and Herder (Lyons, 1977).

The semantic field theory (or the lexical field theory) holds that “a word … always forms a structured set of elements together with other conceptually related words that have a reciprocal influence upon each other” (Bussmann, 2000, p. 275), and the meaning of a word is determined by its values in both the paradigmatic relations and the syntagmatic relations of other words in the same field (Wang, 2014). Semantic fields are both externally and internally structurable, as specific relations can be formed between different fields as well as the elements, items, or subsets inside a certain field (Ballweg-Schramm, 2015).

Both Trier’s paradigmatic relations and Porzig’s syntagmatic relations should be incorporated in producing a satisfactory theory of semantic structure (Lyons, 1977), and the fundamental premises of such a theory include: first, the meaning of a single term relies on the meanings of other terms in the same semantic field; second, an individual semantic field is “a seamless mosaic”, and the whole set of all semantic fields of a certain language forms “a self-contained picture of reality”; third, the semantic change of a single term causes the change in the structure of the semantic field (Bussmann, 2000, p. 275).

In the study of term travels, such a theory on term relations can be applied to comparative analyses in the following aspects: a. a comparison between the semantic fields that cover the same conceptual field in the target language before and after the entering of the travelling term; b. a comparison between the semantic fields that cover the same conceptual field in the target language at different timepoints after the entering of the travelling term; c. a comparison between the semantic fields that cover the same conceptual field in the source and target languages. Comparative analyses in such aspects seek answers to the questions that follow: What changes does the travelling term bring to the semantic relations of the terms in the semantic field to which it travels? What changes of the semantic field take place when the local terms of the target culture and different versions of translation of the travelling term co-exist? How does the structure of the semantic field to which the term travels differ from the corresponding field at the point of origin after a period of struggle?

Social Elements in Discursive Events

The process of meaning construction of the travelling term in the target culture is full of struggles, as conflicts concerning choices of translation of the travelling concept occur, and such conflicts are intrinsically results of clashes between different thinking paradigms – the paradigm behind the term that travels (which, for instance, represents a more civilized and developed culture in the Chinese context in the 19th century) and that behind the local terms, which stand for the local traditions, and all quarrels about issues in the linguistic aspect are embedded in the complicated social processes, where the promotion, circulation, and reception of the travelling terms are governed by both cognitive and institutional constraints.

The clashes of thinking paradigms are seen in the tension between the subject and object of the social practice, the former promoting the circulation of the travelling concept, and the latter swinging between the traditional and the novel. The reception of the concept that enters the target culture is part of social cognition, and an explanation for its reception on the cognitive side answers partially the question How is the travelling term received by the people of the target culture? As social practices are guided by not only cognitive but also
institutional forces, the reception process of the travelling term should also be inspected from a sociological perspective, seeking the other part of the answer to the previous question.

Foucauldian theory on power relations sheds light on the sociology of term travels. Power is omnipresent: it is everywhere, and comes from everywhere (Foucault, 1990), and the functioning of power relations in Said’s theory on theory travels is clearly shown in his assertion that such travels necessarily involve “processes of representation and institutionalization different from those at the point of origin” (1983, p. 226). Term travels encompass multifarious interactions, such as “institutions, organizations, agents, their epistemological norms, and so on” (Neumann & Nünning, 2012, p. 8), and such processes, implicated in the knowledge-power interaction, are more than academic issues (Cooke, 2009). Instead, the mobility of these processes is “bound up with social and political concerns” (Neumann & Nünning, 2012, p. 8). Social and political factors prevail in the travel processes, influencing the choice of translation of the travelling term and the circulation and promotion of the concept behind the term, and thus a careful account of such factors should also be included in the answer to the previous how-question.

An explanation for the reception of the travelling term from the previous two perspectives also depicts the picture of society’s shaping the discourse. As is explained in the part that discusses the social dimension of discursive events, discourses, as social practices, also shape society. To answer the question *How does the travelling term re-constitute society*, the analyst should probe into the change of people’s behavioral modes, as a result of people’s changed cognition of certain concepts, as well as specific changes of social events (such as the amendment of certain laws).

**Conclusion**

In light of the three-fold nature of discourse, we propose that term travels, which are discursive events in history that have both a linguistic and a social aspect, can be analyzed in three dimensions. Historically, the itineraries of such terms should be tracked and described in detail, and the translations of the terms at different time in different places by different groups of people should be carefully recorded; linguistically, the construction of meaning of the travelling terms should be inspected, with the semantic changes of the concepts behind the terms as well as the structural changes of their semantic fields analyzed; socially, the cognitive and institutional factors that influence the reception of the terms as well the concepts behind the terms should be studied, with the dialectical relationship between such travels and social reality explained. In the sections concerning each dimension, questions are posed in italics, as guidelines for a comprehensive diachronic analysis of a case of term travel.

Every term is distinctive, and every case of term travel is different: in some cases, the terms are not translated, while in some others, the translation of the terms involves complicated multilingual processes. What we provide in this article is merely one of the possible models for analyses of term travels, and the assumption that such travels can be analyzed within the framework of a single model might be a simplification of the real situation. Nonetheless, the three dimensions are seen in all cases of term travels, and the inclusion of the study of such processes in the area of discourse studies helps analysts sharing the same goal work together to draw more scholarly attention to such issues at the crossroads of history, language, and society.
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