



PARADIGM THEORY AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF TRANSLATION STUDIES:  
LITERATURE REVIEW AND PROSPECTS

SONG YUWEI<sup>1</sup>, LYU LIANGQIU<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Postgraduate student, School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, Beijing, China. Email: 2604391909@qq.com

<sup>2</sup>Professor, School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, Beijing, China.

\*Corresponding author Email: llq@ncepu.edu.cn



Article information

Received:19/06/2022  
Accepted: 08/07/2022  
Published online:11/08/2022  
doi: [10.33329/ijelr.9.3.21](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.9.3.21)

ABSTRACT

Since Thomas Kuhn put forward the concept of “paradigm” and related theories in the 1960s, the research on the discipline development and evolution by using “paradigm” has always been the focus of scholars. As a new discipline, the different development stages of Translation Studies are closely related to the evolution of paradigms in different periods. This paper attempts to discuss the feasibility and importance of combining paradigm theory with the development of Translation Studies. By sorting out and expounding the paradigms of Chinese and Western Translation Studies in different periods, this paper summarizes the characteristics and development rules of each paradigm in each stage of “paradigm change”. The development of translation studies generally presented the trend from traditional translation study paradigm to linguistic translation study paradigm, and then to cross-cultural translation study paradigm. Finally, this paper tries to give the review of the establishment and development of the new paradigm for Translation Studies.

Key words: paradigm; Translation Studies; paradigm change

1.0 Introduction

In the 1960s, Thomas Kuhn, an American philosopher and historian of science, put forward the concept of “paradigm” and related theories, which had a significant impact in both natural sciences and humanities. As a new humanistic discipline, Translation Studies evolved and developed over thousands of years before it became an official discipline. Translation Studies summarized, analyzed, guided, and recorded translation activities of human, deriving various study paradigms. These paradigms not only have their own laws, theories, applications, and methods, but also show different characteristics by phases with the development of society, language, and culture. This paper attempts to focus on the past and future of Translation Studies with the help of “paradigm”, explores the process of the paradigm change and the establishment of the new paradigm in the future.

---

## 2.0 Kuhn's paradigm theory and the establishment of Translation Studies

### 2.1 Kuhn's paradigm theory

The word "paradigm" has the meanings of example, norm and law. In 1962, Thomas Kuhn used the concept of paradigm to explain and describe the history of science in his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, aiming to clarify the internal essence and changing rule of scientific research. According to Kuhn, paradigms represent "the whole constituted by the beliefs, values and technologies shared by the members of a particular community" (Kuhn,1996, 175). The concept of paradigm by Kuhn is related to "scientific community". In his opinion, the scientific revolution is the process of "paradigm change", in which the new paradigm replaces the old paradigm. (Kuhn,1996) The new ideas emerging from the development of science often cannot be explained by the existing scientific paradigm. The new discourse system and new theoretical view must be established to explain the new ideas. As a result, a new paradigm is formed.

Kuhn published *The Essential Tension: Selected Studies in Scientific Tradition and Change* in 1977. In the book, Kuhn further elaborated on the concept of "paradigm", held that its actual connotation was more like "scientific community" or "disciplinary matrix" (Kuhn, 1977: 307), referred to the various organizational factors and most or all the group commitment objectives that are shared by the scholars of the specialized discipline. Therefore, according to Kuhn's paradigm theory, we can think about the development logic of Translation Studies in the relationship between paradigm and community.

### 2.2 The establishment of Translation Studies

In Old Testament of Bible, human united to build the tower that can lead to heaven— Babel. In order to stop the plan, God made people speak different languages, so that people could not communicate with each other. The plan failed and people were separated from each other finally. This story provides an explanation for the emergence of different languages and races in the world. It is interpreted as the origin of the diversity of human languages and becomes a symbol of the beginning of translation behavior whose task is to overcome the language barrier. On this basis, there is a metaphorical connection between religious mythology and translation, which is best exemplified by the International Federation of Translators (FIT) naming its journal *Babel*.

From the early translation practice of Plato and Aristotle in ancient Greece, to the translation of Buddhist scriptures by Zhi Qian and Xuan Zang in the Han and Tang Dynasties in ancient China, translation behaviors have been developed for thousands of years in both China and Western countries. However, the identity of "Translation Studies" only appeared in the academic circle for a few decades, and it is still a new discipline.

After the traditional translation study stage represented by M. T. Cicero of ancient Rome and the linguistic translation study stage represented by Roman Jakobson of Russia, at the Third International Conference on Applied Linguistics held in Copenhagen in 1972, J. S. Holmes published a milestone paper *The Name and Nature of Translation Studies*. The paper proposed the conception of the discipline naming and nature, outlined the scope and structure of Translation Studies in the future. It is regarded as the founding statement of Translation Studies in the Western translation field. Holmes mentioned that "as a new problem or set of problems comes into view in the world of learning, there is an influx of researches from adjacent areas, bringing with them the paradigms and models that have proved fruitful in their own fields" (1972: 2).

At the time when translation studies were often subordinate to other disciplines, he also stressed the need to establish new channels of communication and develop a new "disciplinary utopia". The "discipline utopia" here is just an evolution of Kuhn's concept of scientific community. With the emergence of a scientific community, a new research paradigm was born.

## 3. Paradigm change and the development of Translation Studies

### 3.1 The connotation of paradigm change

According to Kuhn, the "paradigm change" was the essence of scientific revolution. When a scientific paradigm encounters more and more difficult problems, it will be replaced by a more advantageous paradigm.

---

The change of research paradigm is the transformation of fundamental idea, basic topic, conceptual framework, interpretation principle and evaluation scale of the whole research. (Sun Zhengyu, 2005)

In Translation Studies, different scholars have different criteria for defining every paradigm change, but they generally study in the trend of traditional paradigm, linguistic paradigm, cultural paradigm. Some scholars pointed that Kuhn's theory reflected the paradigm of "pre-science—conventional science—crisis—scientific revolution—new conventional science", and showed that new methods and new tools for the development of productive forces should be the important accelerant of scientific revolution. (Gui Shichun & Ning Chunyan, 1997: 1) When discussing the progress models of Translation Studies, translation scholars also refer to paradigm change by Kuhn —science jumps directly to new ideas or viewpoints. (Vermeer, 1994: 3) However, in Translation Studies, most of the paradigm change happened gradually and slowly. In the natural sciences, a new paradigm often completely and revolutionarily overturns the old paradigm. For example, before and after scientists discovered that the earth was round, their paradigms for geophysics were completely different. The new paradigm eliminated the old paradigm directly. However, it is worth noting that the paradigm change in the humanities is characterized more by evolution and inheritance than by revolution and replacement. Therefore, the research methods of different paradigms in Translation Studies often coexist dynamically and are compatible with each other. The revolution of Translation Studies does not necessarily mean that a paradigm replaces and eliminates another paradigm.

### 3.2 Paradigm change in Translation Studies

As early as ten years ago, Chinese scholars began to conduct comparative studies on Translation Studies between China and Western countries, emphasizing that although the translation theories of both sides involve different languages and cultures, different translation materials and different ideological backgrounds, there are many similarities between them. In this paper, the evolution of translation paradigm is divided into traditional translation study paradigm, linguistic translation study paradigm, and cross-cultural translation study paradigm. Through the comparative study of Chinese and Western countries, this paper explores the process of paradigm change in Translation Studies in different stages.

#### 3.2.1 Traditional translation study paradigm in China and the West

Before the fifties and sixties of the 20th century, the western and Chinese translation study paradigms were most focused on the textual research, comparison, and rhetoric, which can be referred to as the traditional translation studies paradigm. Traditional translation scholars tended to interpret and summarize translation theories on the basis of translation practice.

In the West, most of the traditional translation scholars focused on the source language, and basically insisted on the language conversion. For example, Cicero of ancient Rome discussed that different styles should be used to translate different types of texts in his works. He emphasized the expressions of the translated texts should pay attention to the degree of fluency and rhythm, the content structure of the translated texts should pay attention to the method and sequence. In his opinion, different translations should be translated in different styles, such as a straightforward style for illustrative and explanatory texts, a humorous style for entertaining texts, and a powerful style for sentimental texts. (1997: 8-9) Horace also advocated that the methods of translation should be flexible and believed that it was not advisable to translate word-for-word or stuck to the original text. (1997: 15) Jerome put forward that Bible translation should be distinguished from literary translation, leading to a large discussion about literal translation and free translation that lasted for several years.

In China, translation practice can be traced back to the records of "*Xiangxu*" (the position of the ancient translator) as far as three thousand years ago in the Zhou Dynasty. However, either Zhi Qian, Kumarash and Xuanzang who played the important roles in the large-scale translation of Buddhist scriptures in the Han and Tang dynasties, or several translation masters in the Qing Dynasty including Lin Shu and Liang Qichao, have not formed the mature theories, or just regarded translation as a way to save the country. They had no intention to translation study, nor have they formed a community to accept and commit to the study of this paradigm. In

modern times, translation theories such as “faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance” by Yan Fu and “faithfulness, smoothness and beauty” by Lin Yutang were concise and significant, which had a profound impact on translation studies at that time and in later generations, and can be regarded as Chinese traditional translation study paradigm.

### 3.2.2 Linguistic translation study paradigm in China and the West

The traditional translation study paradigm is the embryonic form of linguistic paradigm. The transition between the two paradigms is gradual. Levy, a Czech literary translation theorist, proposed that the translation process is a decision-making process, and believed that the translator should not only interpret the original text, but also create in the process of translation. In both aspects, the translators needed to make a series of complicated decisions. (Levy, 1989: 48) In the 1920s, Linguistics became an independent discipline in Western countries, which developed rapidly and was soon applied to translation studies by scholars. The representative theories of this stage included “functional equivalence” by Eugene A. Nida and a series of famous theories of the German functional school. They focused on the analysis of language function and discourse context, to make translation studies more scientific.

The construction of the linguistic translation study paradigm in China began in the early 1980s. At that time, when people engaged in translation studies, they often put their attention on the contrastive studies of language. Through the study of translation skills, scholars suggested the readers how to grasp the language characteristics of the original text and convey them.

Since 1982, *Translator's Notes*— the journal of Translators Association of China, renamed *Chinese Translation* in 1986, has published a large number of articles on the construction of Translation Studies and hot issues in the translation field in China. In the first issue of 1982, Professor Wang Zongyan, a famous Chinese linguist, published an article introducing the linguistic translation theory of British translator David Newmark systematically. This article was a prelude for Chinese scholars to study and introduce from Western linguistics translation studies, which can be regarded as the beginning of the “linguistic turn” of Chinese Translation Studies from a certain perspective. In the same year, the forth issue of *Translator's Notes* published an article introducing Nida's linguistic translation theories by Tan Zaixi. Throughout the 1990s, the linguistic translation study paradigm dominated the mainstream of Translation Studies in China. Many scholars of Translation Studies introduced and absorbed the theories of various language schools from the United States, Britain, Germany, and other Western countries in an all-round way. At the same time, they borrowed the linguistic research methods into translation studies, including statistical analysis, case study, scientific experiment, corpus, and so on.

At this stage, the objects of translation studies were the problems related to translation practice, including the solutions to certain language problems, the training of translation talents, and so on. The readers of translation studies publications had similar requirements. They hoped that translation studies publications could publish more articles on translation skills and reviews of translated works, so that they can learn some skills and improve the abilities to distinguish between translations of different qualities. There is no doubt that Translation Studies in China, like those in the West, have benefited greatly from the formation and development of linguistic translation study paradigm. In particular, the emphasis on description over regulation in linguistic translation studies has brought about a methodological revolution in Translation Studies.(Yang Ping, 2009: 52)

### 3.2.3 Cross-cultural translation study paradigm in China and the West

In 1976, at a time when translation studies of linguistic paradigms were in full swing in western academic circles, an international conference on comparative literature was held at the University of Leuven in Belgium. A number of comparative literature scholars believed that a prominent feature of translation studies from the perspective of comparative literature was that it focused on the interaction between translation and target culture, which laid a foundation for the cross-cultural translation study paradigm. It was the “cultural turn” after the “linguistic turn”. The representatives of “cultural turn” included Susan Bassnet, Andre Lefever, and so on. They expanded translation studies from text to culture, combined text with context, history, and culture in translation studies, which was a powerful challenge to the subordinate position of translation in the traditional

sense. It further expanded the scope of translation studies and elevated the status of Translation Studies as a discipline.

Since the 1990s in China, a large number of scholars, including Wang Kefei, Wang Dongfeng and so on, have conducted in-depth studies on the cultural turn and cross-cultural translation study paradigm. During this period, many original translation works were found in university libraries or purchased by scholars themselves. Books and articles on the research topic began to be published. At that time, Chinese translation academia was no longer closed to itself. On the one hand, the scholars insisted on going their own way, while on the other hand, they have never turned their eyes away from what they considered as their academic competitors — Western translation academia. Xu Baoqiang and Yuan Wei (2001), in their edited book *The Politics of Languages and Translation*, presented the “foreign vision” of Western language studies and translation studies to Chinese readers and scholars by translating the articles of several famous Western scholars into Chinese. The main contents were the classical theories of the cultural study paradigm in the Western translation field, which involved the orientation of translation, the politics of translation, the gender in translation theories, and the shaping of cultural identity, and so on. All these were hot issues that the Western academic circle paid attention to and discussed after the cultural turn of translation studies. At this stage, scholars paid particular attention to the manipulation and influence of politics and ideology in the cultural environment on translation. By then, an academic community in cross-cultural translation study paradigm was clearly established.

#### **4. The establishment and development of the new paradigm for Translation Studies**

The characteristics at each stage of the evolution of various paradigms in Translation Studies are the results of cross-cultural and interdisciplinary development, promoting the growth and expansion of relevant scientific communities in different disciplines and eventually leading to paradigm change in Translation Studies.

In the past forty years, Translation Studies have experienced the linguistic turn and the cultural turn, each of which provided a new possibility for us to understand translation in an all-round way. (Xu Jun, 2005) After the evolution of traditional, linguistic, and cross-cultural translation study paradigms, the exploration of new paradigms of Translation Studies has become a topic of great interest to scholars. According to Kuhn, paradigm was the theory and research method accepted by a mature scientific community in a certain period. Translation studies should not only maintain the rational core of traditional paradigm, but also open up new research space. The acceptance of new paradigm means that Translation Studies need to be redefined and accept new theories and research methods. The old problems left behind are either preserved and continued to be explored in the new translation study paradigm, or abandoned as completely unscientific problems.

##### **4.1 Exploration of new paradigm for Translation Studies in the West**

In recent years, Western translation scholars have begun to turn their attention to other humanities. The application of anthropological theories and perspectives to translation studies has become one of the hot spots, which may promote the establishment and development of the new paradigm for Translation Studies — anthropological study paradigm. Kate Sturge argued that anthropology discussed “the incommensurability of language worlds and the chances of calibration between them” (2014: 17) from a relatively macro level, which referred to the role that translation can play. Moreover, anthropological research can also provide guidance in translation practice. For example, anthropological research into the concept of “culture” helps to provide a way out of the rigid dilemma of translation. (Sturge, 2014: 178). Robert Neather, a scholar who specializes in the construction of discourse frameworks for translation, has focused on the recourse to traditional paradigms by members of a certain community when conceptualizing translation. (2009: 145) In another of his papers, he introduced a new concept called the “translation zone”, developed from the anthropological concept of the “contact zone”. He believed that translation may take place at the level of “cultural representation” (Neather, 2021: 306). It can be seen that the anthropological study paradigm is essentially a gradual innovation of the cross-cultural paradigm. It proves once again that the paradigm change in the humanities is characterized more by evolution and inheritance than by revolution and replacement. Different paradigms in Translation Studies often coexist dynamically and are compatible with each other.

Other scholars have combined translation studies with cognitive science in an attempt to create new paradigms. The publication of Gutt's *Translation and Relevance: Cognition and Context* in 1991 marked the beginning of cognitive translation studies. Since the beginning of the new century, the combination of translation and cognitive science has become more and more obvious, and remarkable achievements have been made. Cognitive science provided valuable methods and inspirations for the study of the operation process of the translator's brain and the establishment of an empirical model of the translation process and brought a new disciplinary vision to Translation Studies. *Cognitive Explorations of Translation* edited by O'Brien in 2011, has achieved some recent results with a variety of research methods of cognitive translation studies and physiology to collect data from multiple channels. After the development of the last two decades, the Western translation scholars believed that the new field of translation cognitive studies was of great significance to the methodology construction of Translation Studies as an independent discipline and provided a new direction for the next paradigm change.

#### 4.2 Exploration of new paradigm for Translation Studies in China

In China, scholars have been seeking to integrate translation with other disciplines in recent years to provide new options for new paradigms of translation. Yang Ping (2009) called for the establishment of a philosophical study paradigm. She believed that philosophy has permeated all fields and all disciplines. Throughout over two thousand years of translation history, translators have put forward philosophical thoughts on translation from various angles. The thinking and research on philosophical issues have already existed in translation studies to a certain extent. The establishment of philosophical paradigm is not only helpful to improve the understanding of translation problems, but also plays a guiding role in the construction of Translation Studies. Lyu Jun put forward the new concept of constructivism paradigm. He held that complexity study must be paid attention to in Translation Studies. The paradigm change of Translation Studies in China is exactly a step out of simple science and towards complexity science, especially the constructivism in translation studies, whose thinking mode is exactly the way of thinking advocated by complexity science. Constructivism is a strong social and academic trend of thought, and also a major school of philosophy of science. Kuhn replaced the positivism of scientific logic with the structure of scientific revolution, which is to pull the group of scientists and society into the scientific construction, emphasizing that the social construction of science is the product of social practice and social system, and is the result of the interaction and negotiation of related groups. (Li Hongjin & Lyu Jun, 2016)

In 1993, Mona Baker was the first to advocate the combination of corpora and translation in her paper *Corpus linguistics and translation studies: Implications and applications*. Since then, the Western and Chinese scholars have applied corpus to various aspects of translation studies, including the study of translation language features, translator style, translation norms, translation teaching, and so on. In China, corpus translation studies has been relatively mature, and a group of scholars represented by Professor Hu Kaibao have conducted in-depth research in this field. Professor Hu believed that corpus translation studies in the future should focus on introducing more complex quantitative studies such as statistical tests into translation studies to carry out corpus-driven Translation Studies. (Hu Kaibao, 2012: 392). Corpus paradigm is expected by them to be the next new paradigm for Translation Studies.

Moreover, Hu Gengshen proposed to establish the ecological translation paradigm and to apply ecological theories and critical methods to Translation Studies. It is more meaningful today when the global ecological environment is deteriorating and scholars are increasingly concerned about the combination of environment and theories in various academic fields. Wang Ning (2021) believed that this is a paradigm change in thinking and academic research.

In recent years, Translation Studies have showed the trend of multi-disciplinary integration, and has gradually developed into an interdisciplinary study of linguistics, culturology, philosophy, aesthetics, cognitive science, social anthropology, international politics, and other disciplines. Recent developments in audiovisual translation, multimodal translation, social translation have provided various perspectives for the exploration of new paradigm. The next turn in Translation Studies may be the establishment of a new digital, interdisciplinary

paradigm. In the past few hundred years, the development of translation paradigm in the West has been ahead of that in China. Due to the differences in ideology, cultural tradition and other aspects, Chinese translation theorists have encountered multiple dilemmas in the study of translation paradigm and theory. However, in the context of globalization, although there are still differences and inequalities in translation study paradigms, the gap is narrowing, and translation studies in China have begun to occupy an important place in the world discourse system. Chinese Translation Studies should draw nutrients from its own traditions and Western translation paradigms, to improve its own applicability and scientificity and promote the disciplinary development of Translation Studies.

### Acknowledgements

Supported by “Double-First Class” Graduate Talent Cultivation Program (No. XM2212341) of North China Electric Power University.

### References

- [1] Baker, M. Corpus linguistics and translation studies: Implications and applications. In M. Baker, G. Francis, and E. Tognini-Bonelli, eds., *Text and Technology: In Honour of John Sinclair*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins. 1993: 233-250.
- [2] Cicero, M. T. On the Orator, trans. E. W. Sutton & H. Rackham, in D. Robinson, ed. *Western Translation Theory: from Herodotus to Nietzsche*. Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing, 1997: 8-9.
- [3] Gui, S. C. & Ning, C. Y. *The Methodology of Linguistics*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 1997: 1.
- [4] Gutt, E. *Translation and Relevance: Cognition and Context*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1991.
- [5] Holmes, J. S. *The Name and Nature of Translation Studies*. Department of General Literary Studies. University of Amsterdam, 1972.
- [6] Horace, Q. F. Art of Poetry, trans. E. C. Wickham, in D. Robinson, ed. *Western Translation Theory: from Herodotus to Nietzsche*. Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing, 1997: 15.
- [7] Hu, K. B. & Mao, P. F. Corpus translation studies abroad: A critical review. *Contemporary Linguistics*, 2012 (04): 380-395.
- [8] Kuhn, T. S. *The Essential Tension: Selected Studies in Scientific Tradition and Change*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1977: 307.
- [9] Kuhn, T. S. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- [10] Levy, J. Translation as a decision process. In *Readings in Translation Theory*, ed. Chesterman: Loimaan Kirjapaino Oy, 1989: 48.
- [11] Li, H. J & Lyu, J. Translation Studies: from System Construction to Complexity Studies —Trends in Transmutation of paradigms. *Foreign Languages and Translation*, 2016 (03): 14-20.
- [12] Neather, R. Translation in a “Non-Translation” Community: Practices, Ideologies and Conceptualizations of Translation in the PRC Museum Discourse Community. *Translation Quarterly*, 2009, 51: 145-176.
- [13] Neather, R. Museums as Translation Zones. In Esperança Bielsa & Dionysios Kapsaskis (ed.). *The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Globalization*. London and New York: Routledge, 2021: 306-319.
- [14] O'Brien, S. (ed.). *Cognitive Explorations of Translation*. London: Continuum, 2011.
- [15] Sturge, K. *Representing Others: Translation, Ethnography and Museum*. London and New York: Routledge, 2014.
- [16] Sun, Z. Y. The Paradigm Change of Chinese Humanities and Social Sciences Research and Some Experiences about the Liberal Arts Research. *Academics*, 2005 (02): 8.

- 
- [17] Vermeer, H. J. Translation Today: Old and New Problems, in Mary Snell-Hornby, Franz Pochhacker and Klaus Kaindl, eds. *Translation Studies: An Interdiscipline*, Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1994: 3.
- [18] Wang, N. Eco-translatology: The Rise of a Paradigm of Humanities Studies. *Foreign Language Education*, 2021 (06): 7-11.
- [19] Xu, B. Q. & Yuan, W. *The Politics of Languages and Translation*. Beijing: Central Compilation & Translation Press, 2001.
- [20] Xu, J. Promoting Cultural Diversity as a Mission of Translation. *Chinese Translators Journal*, 2005 (01): 41-44.
- [21] Yang, P. *A Comparative Study of Contemporary Paradigms in Chinese and Western Translation Studies*. SunYat-sen University. 2009.