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On The Textual Analysis Package of Variational Translation Theory and its Potentials on Sociolinguistics` Research on Language Variations

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Abstract

Variational Translation Theory originates from translation studies and possesses a mature toolkit for text analysis. It demonstrates conceptual feasibility and practical potential for application in sociolinguistics` research on variations. By utilizing such toolkit, researchers can more comprehensively exhaust variations occurring in specific linguistic units of their study subjects. From a theoretical perspective, this contributes to a more thorough and profound understanding of the underlying mechanisms of language evolution. From an applied perspective, it enhances the practical significance of research outcomes, particularly in the field of SFL didactics.

Keywords: Inter-disciplinary Researches, Research on Language Variation(s), Research Methodology, Sociolinguistics, Theory of Variational Translation

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0. Introduction

Sociolinguistics reveals the relationship between language and society through case studies. Hudson (1996: 11-12, 36) attempts to use individual “bits of language” as research objects to examine how linguistic variation affects the identity construction of individuals / tribes / nations, demonstrates differences in people’s social status within a community, and influences specific linguistic forms and content during social activities. Researchers place greater emphasis on developing quantitative methodologies guided by a scientism framework for cognitive sociolinguistic research.

For instance, the systematic investigation of phonological variation reveals the shifting patterns of linguistic variation among different groups within specific contemporary spatio-temporal contexts, ultimately enabling the exploration of universal language-use patterns in human communities (Labov, 2014); alternatively, data provided by historical disciplines can be integrated into the sociolinguistic framework to study the historical regularities of linguistic variation (Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg, 2017).

As a classic object of linguistic inquiry, code-switching has been utilized in sociolinguistic research to uncover the relationship between linguistic structures and social factors (Yu, 2000: 23), a goal achieved through qualitative methods of discourse analysis. However, current discourse analysis methods in sociolinguistics suffer from a degree of arbitrariness: they either merely outline broad analytical perspectives (Johnstone, 2000: 123-127) or focus exclusively on a single language (Van Leeuwen, 2008), while analytical tools for language contact types and variation features across different languages remain rare.

The theory of “variation translation” (bianyi lilun) in translation studies can provide a comprehensive set of bilingual comparative analytical tools. This framework can assist sociolinguistic research by improving the quality of textual analysis regarding linguistic variation, thereby allowing for a more efficient exploration of the underlying mechanisms of language evolution.

1. Applicability of the Variational Translation Theoretical Framework to Variation Studies

Variation(s) [变异 (*biànyì*)] and variational [变译 (*biànyì*)]—embody far more than mere differences in Chinese characters (or English suffixes) or disciplinary divides between their respective terminologies. In fact, variation (the linguistic concept) focuses on the textual and structural nuances of actual speech production and processing (or writing): it begins with variations in linguistic forms, examines the interactions between language, culture, and society, and ultimately ascends to theoretical reflections on the very nature of language. The target objects, deductive logic, and analytical paths manifested through this process share profound commonalities with the study of variational translation. This shared underpinning constitutes the core logic for applying the theory of variational translation from translation studies to the study of linguistic variation within sociolinguistics.

1.1 Conceptual Similarities

In sociolinguistics, “variation” refers to the different concrete linguistic forms generated to express the same semantic meaning or pragmatic function. Variation occurs both within or across natural (verbal) languages and in broader intersemiotic domains, such as between sign languages and spoken languages. Arising within specific linguistic units, variation can be observed and described, generally encompassing four categories: phonological and sociophonetic variation, morphosyntactic variation, pragmatic variation, and sign language variation (Bayley, 2013: 26-27; Baranowski, 2013; Nagy, 2013; Cameron & Schwenner, 2013; King, 2013; D’Arcy, 2013; Schembri & Johnston, 2013).

The study of linguistic variation is typically conducted through a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods: qualitative analysis is first employed to demarcate the specific linguistic units where variation occurs, followed by quantitative analysis based on survey data. Although the collection and statistical analysis of data seem to be the most central pillars for reaching research conclusions, the complex internal structural features of discourse cannot be fully captured by statistical figures alone. Therefore, a descriptive toolkit whose discourse parameters are mutually incommensurable yet capable of substantially covering various variations across phonology, morphology, semantics, and pragmatics is particularly critical in the early stages of research for identifying specific types of variation and the linguistic levels at which they occur.

In comparison, “variational translation” can be understood from nominal and verbal perspectives as. 1) In the nominal sense, it refers to the theory of variational translation initiated by Huang (2001), which posits that translators must extract the source text content based on readers’ needs (Huang & Zhang, 2020) and present it through adaptive forms to achieve optimal information dissemination. 2) In the verbal sense, it refers

to twelve distinct linguistic adaptation methods: selected translation, edited translation, narrated translation, condensed translation, summarized translation, summarized transcomment, transcomment, altered translation, annotated translation, transwriting and cited translation. These methods correspond respectively to the addition, reduction, selection, summarization, abbreviation, consolidation, adaptation, and imitation of linguistic forms, occurring at the levels of phonology (Liu, 2018), words, sentences, paragraph/sentence groups, and text/book levels (Huang & Li, 2004: 60+62).

From this, three key conceptual similarities can be derived. 1) Both “variation” and “variational translation” are characterized by changes in linguistic forms, and both target or feature a state where the semantic meaning or pragmatic function remains fundamentally unchanged after such surface modifications. 2) Whether taking variation or variational translation as the concrete vehicle and object of study, both correspond to observable and clearly describable changes in surface forms, and both operate across the phonological, morphological, and pragmatic levels of discourse. 3) Both variation and variational translation can occur intralingually within the same natural language or interlingually between two languages, as well as intersemiotically between two broadly defined semiotic systems (Jakobson, 1959). This implies that utilizing the theoretical framework of variational translation to describe linguistic variation phenomena is conceptually feasible.

1.2 A Comparison of Language Phenomena Relevant to both Theories

In a linguistic sense, “variation” refers to shifts in linguistic forms within human communicative behavior. For example, it encompasses how French emerged from Latin under the influence of Gaulish and Germanic languages, and how it completed variations in its morphological, syntactic, and stylistic forms over a long historical evolution to ultimately become modern French (Perret, 2016). Similarly, it addresses how “Cosmopolitan Mandarin” emerged in major Chinese cities at the turn of the century, and how, in the process of developing into a supra-regional spoken Mandarin variant, it has posed a potential challenge to what is conventionally recognized as Standard Mandarin (Zhang, 2018).

In a translation studies sense, “variational translation” is a cognitive and linguistic activity in which the translator converts source-culture information into target-culture information to satisfy the specific needs of readers (Huang, 2000: 223). Distinct from translation practices guided by classic linguistic translation theories such as equivalence theory (Nida, 1964), the theory of variational translation emphasizes extracting the gist of the source text through so as to introduce the original work to a target audience with maximum efficiency in the shortest possible time.

Take Yan Fu’s translation of *Evolution and Ethics* as an example: in pursuit of “subtle principles and profound words,” he (Yan, 1984: 136) utilized “lexical and syntactic rules from the pre-Han period...” rather than the vernacular Chinese (baihua) that was gradually gaining popularity at the time. Yan Fu’s translational reflections and his dictum of “faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance” [信达雅] subsequently became objects of study that Chinese translation scholars could scarcely circumvent. Certain critiques of his work also merit the attention of sociolinguists.

For instance, Qu(1984: 287) criticized Yan Fu’s translation style as that of “*shidafu* (士大夫, literati) at the sunset of the Qing dynasty who, while forced by new social forces to depart from the medieval orthodox, still clung desperately to its remnants.” Writing in vernacular Chinese would ultimately become the definitive trend of the era. Yan Fu’s stylistic choice, which ran counter to this course of linguistic evolution, can actually be viewed as a form of linguistic variation occurring within the group of Chinese language users he represented. This reflects the reality of a specific social stratum actively adjusting linguistic forms during a transitional period—just before a monumental shift in overall language usage—to meet the need for expressing new signified concepts. By comparison, the relationship between variation and variational translation can be illustrated through an intersection diagram:

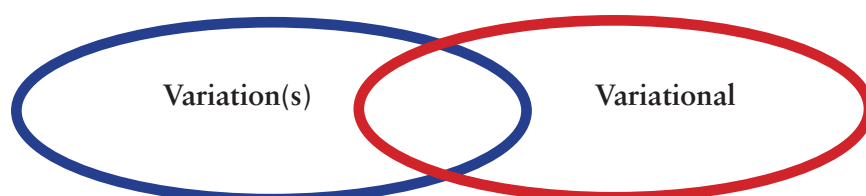


Fig 1. The Conceptual Relationship of Variation(s) and Variational
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It could be seen that the impacts of variation and variational translation on linguistic forms—such as phonology, morphology, and syntax—overlap significantly. This intersection dictates that spontaneous or conscious translational behaviors arising from language contact, while extracting information from source signs and expressing it via target signs, are entirely capable of generating corresponding modifications within the individual formal units of the target language. These modifications include addition, reduction, selection, summarization, abbreviation, consolidation, adaptation, and/or the imitation of source language expressions.

For instance, the linguistic style of Yan Fu manifested in his translations is precisely a unique linguistic variation born out of the interstitial space inhabited by the literati class during the late Qing Dynasty and early Republic of China period: a stratum that resisted vernacular Chinese to assert their own status and identity, while simultaneously attempting to embrace newly imported Western concepts through translation.

Based on this, it can also be argued that variational translation and variation stand in a reciprocal relationship as means and phenomenon, abstraction and concreteness, macro-perspective and micro-perspective. Consequently, adopting the Theory of Variational Translation as a toolkit theoretically provides a means for the “thick description” of linguistic variation phenomena. This approach facilitates variation studies in deducing abstract mechanisms from concrete textual facts, and in inducing macro-level regularities from micro-level communicative behaviors.

1.3 A Comparison of the Origins of both Theories

Linguistic phenomena are invariably shaped by multifaceted factors; they never occur in a vacuum. From a historical perspective, the transformation of the vernacular language spoken by the Gauls within the Roman Empire into modern French was molded by a confluence of factors: the collapse of the Roman Empire, the rise and development of the Gallic national regimes, the linguistic preferences of rulers, the widespread dissemination of printing, and the idiosyncratic language styles of literary figures.

Similarly, the variation of the spoken form of Standard Chinese (Mandarin) into Cosmopolitan Mandarin is heavily influenced by the accelerated urbanization of Chinese society, economic development driven by foreign investment, and the rapid expansion of mass media, particularly television.

Furthermore, Yan Fu’s distinct linguistic variation in his choice of words and sentence structures when translating Western social science works which set his work apart from both vernacular Chinese and pure Classical Chinese, was also significantly shaped by two historical factors of his era:

(1) During the late Qing Dynasty and early Republic of China period, foreign invaders bringing with them a vast influx of previously unknown entities, such as geographical terms, natural sciences, technology, and social science ideologies, all physically carried by various foreign-language newspapers, magazines, and books. This meant that using Chinese to express these newly introduced phenomena was unlikely from the outset to align seamlessly with the dominant linguistic norms of the receiving environment.

Consequently, the formal linguistic adjustments made during the translation process were necessary to integrate these foreign elements into contemporary Chinese without causing massive friction within existing linguistic norms. This inevitably meant that the target language could not maintain complete formal uniformity with traditional Classical Chinese, thereby giving rise to linguistic variation. Occurring within the domains of natural and social science translation, this variation introduced a wealth of intellectual assets for Chinese intellectuals striving for national salvation; when such variation permeated the literary realm, it ultimately catalyzed the holistic transformation of Chinese literature (Yan, 2025: 39-40).

(2) The expression of an idea involves a subject (the speaker and/or translator), an object (the spoken or written language), and a recipient (the audience); cases where language exists purely for its own sake, divorced from its recipients, are virtually non-existent in reality. Returning to the Chinese society of Yan Fu’s time, the literati class was the sole group possessing reading literacy, academic insight, and social influence—yet they rejected the vernacular Chinese that was gaining ground among other social strata. In other words, to make the literati accept foreign ideologies, or at least to “guide” them into engaging with these new concepts (Wang, 1982: 27), classical modes of expression could not be abandoned. However, since the signifiers of any given language can rarely express signifiers that did not previously exist in its cultural environment without undergoing alteration, the relevant signifiers across individual units of Classical Chinese had to undergo variation to fulfill these expressive needs.

In conclusion, both variational translation (bianyi) and linguistic variation (bianyi) are formal alterations in specific linguistic units dictated by complex factors. To dig in deeper, variational translation serves as a concrete mechanism for achieving variation, and is itself a variation phenomenon realized through cross-linguistic contact (and conversion). Behind both variational translation and linguistic variation, alongside the subjective agency of language users, lies the evolution of the underlying cultures and their contact with other cultures. This cross-cultural contact provides incentives and objective conditions spanning history, economics, politics, recipient attitudes, and the internal dynamics of language itself. Therefore, utilizing the theoretical tool-kits designed for analyzing variational translation behavior is not only theoretically feasible but also holds broad application prospects for both theoretical and empirical research.

2. Potentials of Implementing Variational Translation Theory in Variation Studies: Through Examples

The theoretical framework of variational translation provides a comprehensive textual analysis tool-kit. It is capable of both vertically describing variation phenomena across different linguistic levels from macro-textual structures down to micro-local units, and horizontally distinguishing specific types of variation with high precision. Integrating this textual analysis system with quantitative data allows researchers to more accurately map out the mechanisms of variation induced by cross-linguistic contact, whether driven by translation, language cohabitation, or other socio-historical factors.

Researchers can either “start from scratch” by targeting unexamined concrete cases or “build upon existing work” by re-evaluating established research objects within sociolinguistics or translation studies. To further demonstrate this approach, the following sections will illustrate it through three categories of relevant studies frequently conducted by Chinese scholars. With adequate adaptations, linguistic researchers in the fields of other languages can also produce fruitful achievements with this theory, too.

2.1 Expanding Research Levels to Adapt to Real-World Linguistic Environments: The Top-Down Research Mode

Top-down research on variations induced by bilingual contact primarily refers to the use of fieldwork methods to record and describe concrete variations in linguistic forms—predominantly phonological variation—occurring within specific spatio-temporal contexts (particularly in multi-ethnic and multilingual cohabitation zones). These studies operate under simple causal assumptions such as “inheritance from a certain archaic pronunciation,” “increasing contact with (and thus influence from) other languages,” and/or “individual user style.” Such research can comprehensively and profoundly document the historical evolutionary regularities of one or several phonological features of a language, playing an irreplaceable role in language preservation.

For instance, in minority language studies, researchers typically select a designated number of words and recruit a cohort of native speakers (e.g., of Kazakh or Dai) based on specific criteria to read these words aloud. The collected word pronunciations are then compared with Standard Mandarin phonetics to determine whether they are converging toward their Mandarin counterparts. However, human social life is rich and multifaceted; the phonological features of a small number of high-frequency words represent merely the tip of the iceberg in language contact (Cao & Liu, 2013; Yu, 2023).

It is easy to encounter cases outside the selected vocabulary that contradict the summarized regularities. Furthermore, once a scenario of “pronunciation without a corresponding written character” arises, tracing its archaic pronunciation becomes impossible, and broad generalizations like “interlinguistic contact” and/or “personal style” offer little help in predicting how phonological and linguistic variation will shape the future evolutionary trends of that language. Nonetheless, by leveraging variational translation tools, researchers can attempt to expand from merely summarizing the variational characteristics of the variables themselves to observing the complete picture of a language through these variational features, thereby effectively enhancing the objectivity of the description.

For example, rather than relying solely on a small number of high-frequency words as comparative materials, researchers can establish macro-themes such as politics, military, culture, and agriculture, with each theme comprising subtopics based on actual conditions. Taking culture as an example, subtopics such as campus life, academic examinations, and interpersonal communication can be framed around the cultural theme, with each subtopic containing several sentences carrying core ideas related to that topic.

Screened participants are then asked to read a deliberately designed paragraph of four to five sentences (accompanied by a corresponding Chinese paragraph) centered on a given core idea, which ideally includes key vocabulary relevant to the topic. This approach allows for the collection of sentence groups that carry real-world communicative significance, uttered by appropriate subjects whose identities align with the discourse context.

By gathering a sufficient sample size for a single topic, a phonological corpus for that topic can be established; following this logic, phonological corpora spanning various themes of social life can gradually be constructed for the language. By utilizing the tools provided by the variational translation textual analysis framework to compare the phonetics of the designed paragraphs with their corresponding Chinese counterparts, researchers can precisely pinpoint the linguistic units where variation occurs, the specific linguistic forms involved, the grammatical rules, and even the pragmatic contexts. Synchronically, this approach transcends the limitations of “core vocabulary” and simplistic causal assumptions, revealing the specific scope and underlying causes of linguistic variation with greater precision.

Diachronically, once a certain volume of research samples has been accumulated, this method can more comprehensively unveil the regularities governing how Chinese forms gradually influence minority languages—in terms of which aspects, in what order, and through which forms. It can precisely induce the specific roles played by different social groups regarding this influence, ultimately enabling the further prediction of future evolutionary trends while simultaneously documenting the language and its ongoing variations.

2.2 Profoundly Revealing the Mechanisms of Variation Across Linguistic Units: The Bottom-Up Research Mode

The bottom-up research on variations induced by bilingual contact primarily refers to the use of fieldwork methods to exhaustively record and describe variations in linguistic forms occurring within specific spatio-temporal contexts, following a structured framework (such as phonology, grammar, morphology, and pragmatics). While these studies refrain from making preconceived assumptions regarding the causes of linguistic phenomena, they tend to provide only broad classifications and descriptions of the formal linguistic variations, without conducting an in-depth analysis of their underlying causes. By building upon the existing foundations of this type of variation research, variational translation analytical tools can effectively enhance both the granularity and depth of the investigation.

For example, the survey conducted by Zhao & Hu (2011) on the linguistic variation of Han Chinese residents who have lived in Turpan for generations. Although the fieldwork underpinning this article was exceptionally laborious, the classification of Chinese variation it provides remains relatively superficial. By integrating variational translation analytical tools to “build upon the existing work” of these established findings, fresh insights may be uncovered. Consider one example cited in their study:

[Example 1]

Mandarin Transcription: 帮个忙萨, 排挡子有。

Back Translation (Mandarin): 给我帮忙, 有 (你的) 好处。

Word-for-word Translation (Madarin): maŋa jaɾdɛm brsɨŋiz, pajdisi bolidu.

Uyghur (Latin-letter Transcription): 给我 帮助 好处 有

Back Translation (English): Give me a hand, and you'll be offered a treat.

The case is taken from page 120 of the article and is utilized to argue for the existence of the variation phenomenon characterized by “the inversion of predicate and object forms.” From the perspective of variational translation, one can take this phenomenon as a starting point. Based on the classification of the compiled corpus, researchers can observe which sentence types among the subject-verb-object structures used by hereditary Han residents in Turpan experience this specific type of variation most frequently, as well as any exceptional sentence types that may violate the rule. Furthermore, two other types of variation appear in this sentence, from which numerous research topics can be excavated:

- (1) The addition of the modal particle *sa*(萨): Under what specific circumstances is *sa* applied? Aside from *sa*, what other modal particles are involved in the additive variations of hereditary Han residents in Turpan? What are the specific sentence and contextual types associated with the use of these modal particles?

(2) The substitution of *haochu* (好处, benefit/advantage) with its Uyghur counterpart *paidangzi* (排挡子) : If a sufficient sample size of such loanwords is accumulated through long-term observation, can these loanwords be further classified based on the specific conditions of their variation? For instance, is the loanword an indigenous Uyghur term, or was it introduced into the local Chinese dialect via secondary borrowing after Uyghur had borrowed it from a foreign language [e.g., *kade'er* (卡德尔) on page 119 is actually a Uyghur borrowing of the English word *cadre*]? For loanwords that have existing counterparts in Chinese, which application scenarios trigger the variation terms, and which utilize the pre-existing Chinese words? What are the underlying cultural, social, and historical reasons driving this behavior? The focus of this type of research can descend even further to the variations manifested by individuals in oral speech and written discourse (Zhao & Tian, 2017: 140-141).

Taking Yan Fu as an example once more: to pique the interest of the literati class, he had to adopt the stylistic mannerisms of the *Tongcheng School* [桐城派] as the vehicle for Western social science works. Under these circumstances, what unique personal style did Yan Fu forge in his classical lexical choices to introduce various concepts of Western social science theory?

To leverage his translations to captivate the literati and disseminate Western ideologies while simultaneously weaving in his personal critiques of the bleak contemporary political climate (Wong, 2021), what unique formal variations did Yan Fu construct through his translated works? Positioned on the eve of classical Chinese being completely superseded by vernacular Chinese, did this translated oeuvre exert a greater catalytic or antagonistic effect on the "handover" between the two stylistic registers from the perspective of linguistic variation?

Evidently, utilizing variational translation toolkits for textual analysis allows researchers to further deconstruct specific cases previously deemed simplistic. This process unearths concrete variation phenomena that were hitherto overlooked by scholars, or unpacks the significance of unexamined variation phenomena within linguistic structures and social applications, thereby generating an array of novel research topics. Investigating these topics will profoundly deepen our understanding of the mechanisms underlying specific linguistic variation phenomena.

2.3 Linguistic Variation as an Observational Metric in Applied Research: The Inside-Out Research Mode

As a core component of sociolinguistic inquiry, the applied value of variation studies lies in utilizing variation phenomena as an observational metric to guide concrete language-related practices. Currently, researchers in this domain focus heavily on language education, particularly issues concerning language acquisition. Research in this area typically takes syntactic variation as its primary object of study. For instance, taking the syntactic knowledge taught in class as the independent variable, researchers observe the syntactic variations demonstrated by learners in writing tasks, and combine this with learners' diverse linguistic backgrounds to induce patterns that influence learning outcomes (Feng et al., 2022).

Similarly, based on the same object of study, researchers can infer whether third language acquisition (L3) hinders the development of a learner's second language (L2) (Huang & Zheng, 2022). Here L1 is seen as the learner's first language, or mother tongue. Such studies are usually conducted in conjunction with case analyses; once a sufficient or highly representative volume of cases has been accumulated, researchers can form a comprehensive understanding of the internal and external factors driving second language variation (Guo, 2018: 60).

By utilizing variational translation analytical tools, researchers can use sentence groups as the pivot when analyzing samples to quantify the variations manifested by participants across individual units such as words, phrases, clauses, sentences, and sentence groups. If the scope of research is extended to spoken language, comprehensive and standardized quantitative descriptions of participants' phonetics can also be achieved based on units such as syllables, rhyme, tones, and sound groups (Catford, 1965).

In short, while the previous two sections focused on grasping simple linguistic phenomena through variational translation tools and elevating them to theoretical and regularized understandings of linguistic variation via quantitative data, this section utilizes variational translation tools to provide a thick description of the variation phenomena generated during language learning. This approach allows researchers to induce the causes that influence learning outcomes, thereby serving a guiding role in language acquisition.

3. Conclusion

Variational translation is a term native to translation studies, whereas variation belongs to sociolinguistics. The two concepts appear similar because they share profound commonalities in their conceptual foundations, formal linguistic manifestations, and underlying causal mechanisms. Consequently, utilizing the analytical tools of the Theory of Variational Translation to assist research on linguistic variation is theoretically feasible. From the perspective of empirical cases, researchers can leverage variational translation tool-kits to systematically and comprehensively exhaust the variation phenomena within concrete cases.

Grounded in these phenomena, scholars can effectively map out the underlying mechanisms of variation occurring across individual units in both oral and written forms of a language. Conversely, such systematic descriptions can also validate hypotheses proposed by researchers, thereby positioning variation as a crucial observational metric in applied research and allowing research findings to directly serve concrete applications in language pedagogy.

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