# Collaborative Translation in Online Communities of Practice:
# An Ethnographic Study of Yeeyan

Chuan Yu

Hong Kong Baptist University, HONG KONG

chuanyu(a)hkbu.edu.hk

ABSTRACT

This thesis presents a qualitative study on the processes of user-generated collaborative translation in Yeeyan, China's largest online translation community. Collaborative translation is still a relatively emergent area of scholarship and research so far has focused mainly on audiovisual translation practice. Studies that focus on the co-production of written texts mostly provide only a fragmented picture and treat collaborative translation as a linear process.

In this thesis, I examine the translation initiated and undertaken by two or more volunteer translators who collaboratively produce a translated text, focusing on how they interact with each other, who they are, why they participate, and how they negotiate meanings during translation processes. Adopting an ethnographic methodology, I have conducted longitudinal in-depth fieldwork in Yeeyan, using the methods of participant observation and interactive interview. Three types of data are collected: 1) fieldnotes; 2) the material resources archived on the Yeeyan website and the translation manuscripts; and 3) elicited interview data. After my preliminary thematic analysis, I undertook a micro-level discourse analysis, examining the participants' behaviours, decision-making processes, emerging identity roles and perceptions on competence as they unfolded during the collaboration process.

Primarily informed by Wenger's "communities of practice" theory (CoP theory), the analysis reveals that Yeeyan is first and foremost a participatory media platform that provides Chinese readers with access to knowledge and information not available in their mother language, as well as allowing its users to play an active role in the production and circulation of media content. On a deeper level, Yeeyan is an online CoP within which a crowd of translators from different professional and disciplinary backgrounds interact with each other regularly for the shared practices they are passionate about and for the shared enterprises they care for.

The findings suggest that the process of collaborative translation in Yeeyan is *de facto* an experience of meaning negotiation. Firstly, competence in a CoP is obtained through mutual recognition from other members as a result of their active and continuous participation. Secondly, meanings in Yeeyan are not static, but are dynamically negotiated between the participants, depending on the genre of the text being translated; which specialized expertise the translators possess; how competent they are in the Yeeyan community; and how they negotiate meanings individually and collectively. Thirdly, a CoP such as Yeeyan is also a complex social learning system consisting of multiple interrelated sub-communities. The Yeeyan members' endeavour to solve translation problems and thereby increase their competence also contributes to forming a shared history of learning.

Beyond these findings, this thesis also makes broader methodological and theoretical contributions. It demonstrates how the use of an immersive ethnographic methodology, hitherto

seldom applied in the TS field, can provide more holistic insights into translators' interactions, translation manuscripts and the entire collaboration process. The use of CoP theory offers us a new perspective that explains collaborative translation as a social practice through which – and to which – the participants ascribe meanings in the process of translating and interacting.

KEYWORDS: collaborative translation, communities of practice, ethnography, Yeeyan

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