

The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis and Multicultural Effects on Translators: A Case Study from Chinese Ethnic Minority Literature

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Abstract : The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (SWH) emphasizes the effect produced by language on people's minds. According to linguistic relativity, language has evolved over the course of human life on earth, and, in turn, the acquisition of language shapes learners' thoughts. Despite much attention drawn by SWH, few scholars have attempted to analyse people's thoughts via their literary works. And yet, the linguistic choices that create a narrative can enable us to examine its writer's thoughts. Still, less work has been done on the impact of language on the minds of bilingual people. Internationalization has resulted in an increasing number of bilingual and multilingual individuals. In China, where more than one hundred languages are used for communication, most people are bilingual in Mandarin Chinese (the official language of China) and their own dialect. Taking as its corpus the ethnic minority myth of Ge Sa-er Wang by Alai and its English translation by Goldblatt and Lin, this paper aims to analyse the effects of culture on bilingual people's minds. It will first analyse Alai's thoughts on using the original version of Ge Sa-er Wang; next, it will examine the thoughts of the two translators by looking at translation choices made in the English version; finally, it will compare the cultural influences evident in the thoughts of Alai, and Goldblatt and Lin. Whereas Alai can speak two Sino-Tibetan languages - Mandarin Chinese and Tibetan - Goldblatt and Lin can speak two languages from different families - Mandarin Chinese (a Sino-Tibetan language) and English (an Indo-European language). The results reveal two systems of thought existing in the translators' minds; Alai's text, on the other hand, does not reveal a significant influence from North China, where Mandarin Chinese originated. The findings reveal the inconsistency of a second language's influence on people's minds. Notably, they suggest that the more different the two languages are, the greater the influence produced by the second language culture on people's thoughts. It is hoped that this research will expand the scope of SWH as well as shed light on future translation studies on ethnic minority literature.

Keywords : Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, cultural translation, cultural-specific items, Ge Sa-er Wang, ethnic minority literature, Tibet

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