

# Thick Translation through Word-Clouds; or, An Educated Form of Tasseography

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## **Abstract**

A word-cloud is a visual representation of text data in which the importance of each word is shown with different point size or color. Word-cloud generators rearrange the content of a given text in free form, emphasizing its most recurring lexical elements, thus promoting an immediate understanding of the text's main focal points. This tool proves particularly useful when applied to the study of translations: when building upon relatively large numbers of short texts (such as the different renditions of a single piece of poetry), word-clouds can highlight translation idiosyncrasies, reveal convergences and divergences in interpretation, and point back at potentially problematic junctures in the source text. Furthermore, word-clouds can also be considered as texts in themselves, or “meta-translations”: by disrupting the syntactic construction of a text and rearranging its content according to criteria of identity and repetition, word-clouds promote complementary ways of reading that break away from the linearity of writing. Overall, word-clouds provide a useful tool for the reverse-engineering of a source text's problematics from the raw material given in the translated text. Using Li Shangyin's poem “Luohua” 落花 (Falling Flowers) and its different English translations as case study, this paper discusses the utility of word-clouds for implementing what Theo Hermans, building upon Appiah's reflections, advocated as the critical practice of “thick translation.”

## **Keywords**

Word-cloud, Thick translation, Translation criticism, lexicon visualization, Linearity (disruption of)