

# Translation of Chinese Prose from the Perspective of Transitivity

-- Take Zhu Ziqing's *The Sight of Father's Back* as an Example

Jin Xu<sup>1</sup>, Donghan Li<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Foreign Languages, Southwest Petroleum University, Chengdu 610000, China

<sup>2</sup>School of Foreign Languages, Southwest Petroleum University, Chengdu 610000, China

**Abstract:** *The Sight of Father's Back* is a well-known prose work of Zhu Ziqing, a famous modern essayist and poet in China. The structure of the article is exquisite, simple and concise, and has high literary and aesthetic value. This paper is based on Halliday's systemic functional grammar theory and utilizes the core semantic system of conceptual function-the transitivity system, to analyze Mr. Zhang Peiji's translation of *The Sight of Father's Back*. The main focus is to compare and analyze the different expressions of small sentence processes in the original text and translation, so that readers can have a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the translated text, and provide some inspiration and thinking for translators.

**Keywords:** Transitivity system, Discourse analysis, Discourse *The Sight of Father's Back*.

## 1. Introduction

On the basis of Halliday's systemic functional grammar theory, this article uses the transitivity system to analyze the translation. M.A.K. Halliday believes that language has three main purely rational functions, namely conceptual function, interpersonal function, and discourse function. The conceptual function is mainly reflected by experiential function, which refers to the expression of various experiences of people in the real or inner world through language, that is, reflecting various events, people or objects involved in the objective and subjective perspectives through language And the environmental factors related to it. The transitivity system is the most important semantic system for experiential functions and the core system for conceptual functions. The transitivity system expresses people's various experiences of the real or inner world through different 'processes', and identifies the participants and environmental components involved in these 'processes'. Halliday also refers to conceptual function as experiential function, and the so-called "process" is the concentrated embodiment of experiential function. In his limited exposition of the concept of "process", Halliday mentioned that "language can enable people to establish a psychological reflection of the objective material world, and also enable things happening and happening in the objective world to be reflected in the form of language semantics. This article attempts to analyze and evaluate the sentences in the translation of "Back" that the translator has made process type modifications through the principle of transitivity system, in order to gain a more three-dimensional and multidimensional understanding of translation behavior.

## 2. Principle of Transitivity System

The transitivity system is a core semantic system in the function of language concepts. Different from the verb transitivity in traditional grammar, the transitivity proposed by Halliday takes clause as the research object, and clause is the basic and meaningful information structure unit in any

language. The transitive system is to divide what people see, hear, and do in the real world into several "processes", and to indicate the "participants" and "environmental components" related to each process. The term 'process' is a concept used by Halliday in his Systemic Functional Grammar to describe the transitive system, but when elaborating on the transitive system, Halliday did not provide a detailed explanation of this concept. He only uses transitivity to distinguish human activities from natural processes into six types of transitive processes - material, mental, relational, behavioral, verbal, and existential.

The material process is the process of 'action'. This 'process' is usually represented by dynamic verbs such as 'stop' or 'come', which mainly connect the 'participant' and 'target' in the sentence. Participants "are the logical subjects and agents of behavior, and material processes can be achieved in different types of sentences: (1) participants+processes+goals, (2) goals+processes+participants, (3) participants+processes.

Mental process is a process of perception, emotion, and cognition. The perception process mainly reflects people's inner world. The verbs used in the "perception" process include "seeing" or "hearing"; The verb for the 'emotional' process includes 'like' or 'dislike'; The verbs used in cognitive processes include "know", "believe", or "persuade". The participants in the mental process are "sensations" and "phenomena". The "perceiver" in a sentence is usually a biological entity, and the facts it experiences are called "phenomena". The types of mental processes typically include (1) sensory+process+phenomenon, and (2) sensory+process.

The relational process is the process of reflecting the relationship between things. It can be divided into two categories as a whole: "modification" and "identification". The modifier class refers to the attributes or certain belonging relationships that an entity possesses. The common form is "X is a type of Y", while the identity class identifies an entity from another entity. The common form is "X is Y", and these two categories can be further divided into "inclusive", "environmental", and "ownership". The inner wrap style is usually 'X is Y', the environment style is usually 'X is at Y',

and all styles are usually 'X has Y'. The difference between the process of modifying or identifying a relationship mainly depends on whether the positions of X and Y participants in the sentence can be exchanged.

The behavioral process is a reflection of physiological activities. For example, breathing, coughing, dreaming, laughing, crying, watching, listening, and so on. There is only one participant process: the behavior+process. Behavioral processes are sometimes difficult to distinguish from material processes with only one participant, but the way they are distinguished depends on whether the activity is related to physiology.

Verbal process refers to the process of exchanging information and ideas through speech. It usually consists of three important parts: "speaker", "receiver"/"target", and "Verbiage". The common verbs used in this process include say, tell, talk, reply, describe, etc.

The existential process reflects the process of existence of things. The verb used in this process is usually a conjunction verb, and the existential sentence is usually the "there be" sentence pattern.

### 3. English Translation of Chinese Prose

In the all-encompassing culture of our country, prose is a shining corner. Studying the English translation strategies of prose is not only an important part of Chinese culture going global, but also to open the door to Chinese culture and bring the world closer to China and understand it. Chinese prose originated in the pre Qin period, developed in the Wei and Jin dynasties, and shaped its literary character in the Ming and Qing dynasties. In modern times, it has evolved into various types such as narration, argumentation, and lyricism, which can be said to have a long history and rich content. In the current context of China going global, Chinese prose, as a literary form with great literary value and cultural connotations, its English translation is even more significant. However, the path of Chinese literature towards the world appears difficult and long. The awkward situation faced by the translation and introduction of Chinese literature is the imbalance between the input and output of literary works, poor communication channels, limited influence of Chinese literature abroad, and the need to improve translation quality. In addition, there is a common bias in the literary and translation circles that Chinese translators can only engage in literary translation from English to Chinese, and Western sinologists should be the main body of translation in literary translation from Chinese to English. Under the influence of this ideology, the translation and introduction of Chinese literature has long been deeply influenced by Western ethnocentrism. The Western translation community regards its mainstream values and culture as the main motivation for translation practice. Translators often prioritize responsibility for the original work over responsibility for the audience, and prioritize heterogeneity and literariness over fluency and readability, in order to better cater to the target audience. The result is that the translation is completely unrecognizable, although it lacks strangeness, it also lacks the unique charm and beauty of Chinese literary works. Therefore, it is particularly important to study the English translation of prose by Chinese translators.

### 4. The Discourse "The Sight of Father's Back" and Its Translator Zhang Peiji

In the autumn of 1925, Zhu Ziqing, a modern writer, wrote the well-known essay *The Sight of Father's Back*. The article mainly tells the scene where the author meets his father on his way back to Beijing, and the most unforgettable one is the figure of his father turning around and leaving. The author vividly and profoundly portrays the towering fatherly love through simple writing, brief length, and sincere emotions. This discourse belongs to the literary genre of prose, and the greatest feature of prose is its beautiful language. A good essay not only has beautiful language, but also is concise, free, flexible, rich in philosophy, poetry, and painting. The so-called conciseness refers to the concise and simple language of prose, which is natural and fluent. With just a few words, it can depict vivid images, outline moving images, and display profound artistic conception. In terms of narrative style, prose reflects things from the author's subjective feelings, using narrative methods such as lyricism, narration, and discussion. In most cases, it is mainly lyrical. Although narrative and discussion techniques are also used, they all integrate the author's true feelings. Therefore, it is often a fusion of lyricism, narration, and discussion, forming a narrative style that makes people feel like entering the author's open mind, Listen to their confidences and feel warm. Through the transitivity analysis of the prose, this paper attempts to analyze the language features of the prose from a linguistic perspective, so that readers can better understand how the translator considers and selects sentence structures and vocabulary in the process of prose translation.

This essay is short in length, with a total of 1321 words in the original text (including characters) and 1117 words in the translation (including characters). The translator is Mr. Zhang Peiji, and it is included in the book *Selected Chinese Modern Prose for English Translation*. As a source of material for translation exams in major universities, the works in the book are naturally worth studying. *The Sight of Father's Back* is Zhu Ziqing's early prose work, and is also one of the most influential lyric masterpieces of the author. The author's writing is beautiful, delicate and meticulous, and reads with a warm, gentle, and melodious feeling. But the great artistic charm of *The Sight of Father's Back* mainly comes from its sincere emotions. Zhu Ziqing attached great importance to the role of emotion in literary creation. He once wrote that the biggest reason why literary works are attractive is the strong emotions. Therefore, it is precisely this kind of article that contains the author's true feelings that makes its translation more valuable for research.

The author, Zhang Peiji (1921-2021), a native of Fuzhou, Fujian Province, graduated from St. John's University in Shanghai in 1945. In the same year, he was an English reporter of *Shanghai Free West News*, a special writer of *English China Review Weekly*, and the deputy editor in chief of *China Yearbook* (English). In 1946, he went to Tokyo International Military Tribunal for the Far East in Japan to work as an English translator. Later, he went to the United States to study at the Research Institute of British Literature Department of Indiana University in the United States, His name has been included in the *Dictionary of Chinese Translators* and holds an important position in the current Chinese translation community. Mr. Zhang Peiji has worked tirelessly in the translation industry for 50 years, and his

translations and monographs have had a wide influence in the academic community, being collected by domestic and foreign libraries. Research has shown that Mr. Zhang Peiji has pursued the translation principles of "faithfulness and smoothness" throughout his life. He pursues aesthetic effects that are equivalent to the original text, not only with accurate word selection, but also with flexible and diverse sentence structures, achieving the ultimate in conveying the original

style. This is also Mr. Zhang Peiji's most prominent translation style.

According to Halliday's principle of transitivity system, we conducted a statistical analysis of the types of clause processes in the original text and translation using UAM Corpus Tool. The specific number of each process is shown in the table below.

Process Category	clause type					
	material process	mental process	relational process	behavioral process	verbal process	existential process
Number of original texts	93	12	8	9	8	0
Number of translations	82	4	18	7	12	1

From the above table, it can be seen that both the original text and the translation have the highest number of material processes and the lowest number of existing processes. It is not difficult to see that the difference between the number of various processes in the translation and the number of processes in the original text is not significant. This indicates that the translator has made every effort to maintain the same type of process in the original text during the translation process, making the translation more faithful to the original text and meeting Nida's principle of functional equivalence. The recipient of the target language is able to achieve the same understanding as the source language recipient as much as possible. This is actually Mr. Zhang Peiji's translation style, as Liu Shicong said: "Mr. Zhang strives to choose words

appropriately, placing discourse charm first, and pursuing the perfect expression of the original information and function, as well as the ability to translate the style and charm of the original text (Liu Shicong, 2002)". However, upon careful study and comparison of the original text and translation, it can be found that in some details, the translator has adopted a certain technique of modifying the transitivity process of sentences, changing the process of small sentences in the original text to achieve a certain translation effect. The following example mainly categorizes the places where different processes of addition or translation in the translated text are based on the translation:

#### 4.1. Translated as a material process

Original text transitive processes	mental process (6)	relational process (3)	behavioral process (3)
Translation Transitivity Process	material process		

According to the statistics in the table above, the translation process is mainly from the mental process, relational process, and behavioral process in the original text to the material process in the translation. Below, we will analyze the translation process of each process type one by one.

##### 4.1.1. Translating mental process into material process

The original: 但最近两年不见, 他终于忘却我的不好, 只是惦记着我, 惦记着我的儿子。

Translated text: However, the separation of the last two years has made him more forgiving towards me. He keeps thinking about me and my son.

Analysis: The original text includes four clauses, one material clause, and three mental process clauses. In the translation, the translator translates the first two clauses of the original text into a material process clause, and the last two clauses are also treated as material process clauses. The translator translated the verb "惦记" that expresses the mental process into "keep thinking", directly amplifying the longing in the father's heart from the linguistic and lexical level, and strengthening the theme of "father".

##### 4.1.2. Translating relational process into material process

The original: .....正是祸不单行的日子。

Translated text: Misfortunes never come singly.....

Analysis: The original text is a relational process clause, which can be reflected by "正是.....的日子" and belongs to

the modification category in the relational process and has a belonging relationship. In the translation, the translator treats it as a material process clause, reflected by the verb "come", transforming the static process of the original sentence into a dynamic process, and translating "日子" into "unfortunes" and placing it at the beginning of the sentence, personifying and highlighting the author's difficulties in life at that time.

##### 4.1.3. Translating behavioral process into material process

The original: 到徐州见着父亲, 看见满院狼藉的东西, 又想起祖母, 不禁簌簌地流下眼泪。

Translated text: When I met father in Xuzhou, the sight of the disorderly mess in his courtyard and the thought of grandma started tears trickling down my cheeks.

Analysis: The original text consists of four clauses, with the types of clauses from left to right being behavioral process, behavioral process, mental process, and behavioral process. However, the translation only retains the first behavioral process and combines the following three process clauses into one material process clause. The original sentence does not have a subject throughout the sentence, making it a typical "non subject sentence" in Chinese. However, in English, sentences cannot have a subject, so the translator added the subject "I" when translating, And the short sentence "到徐州见着父亲" is treated as a adverbial clause of time, which translates the logical relationship in the original sentence, making it easier for target language readers to

understand. Although the last three clauses have a hidden subject "I", the translator chose to translate the subject "I" and used "the sight" and "the thought" as subjects, which is in line with the principle of "using objects as subjects more often" in English.

## 4.2. Translated as a mental process

Original text transitive processes	relational process (1)
Translation transitive processes	mental process

### 4.2.1. Translating relational process into mental process

The original: 我现在想想, 我那时真是太聪明了。

Translated text: when I come to think of it, I can see how smart I was in those days!

Analysis: The second clause in the original text is a relational process, which can be reflected by the word "是", while the translator treats it as a mental process through the word "see". The author believes that my father is not familiar with worldly affairs and entrusted someone to take care of me as an adult; I also believe that my father cannot speak, and it seems that only as a knowledgeable youth, 'I' can understand the manner of speaking. Now think about it, it was really smart at that time. Just a few lines and a few words. He vividly portrayed his self perceived intelligence and contempt for his father. The translation did not directly translate it as "I was so smart back then", but cleverly added the verb "see", which gave readers more room to think about this sentence. "I can now realize how smart I was then," it goes without saying whether I am truly smart.

## 4.3. Translated as a relational process

Original text transitive processes	material process (12)
Translation transitive processes	relational process

### 4.3.1. Translating material process into relational process

The original: 他们只认得钱, 托他们只是白托!

Translated text: it was utterly useless to entrust me to those attendants, who cared for nothing but money.

Analysis: The original text consists of two material clauses, while in the translation, the translator advances the second material clause and translates it into a relational process clause. This is because when there are sentences related to facts and comments, in Chinese, facts are first commented on, while in English, comments are first commented on, and facts are later translated. So when translating comments in the original text in advance, it is easy to associate "it" as the subject due to the lack of a subject.

## 4.4. Translated as a behavioral process

Original text transitive processes	material process (3)	mental process (1)
Translation transitive processes	behavioral process	

### 4.4.1. Translating material process into behavioral process

The

original: 我看见他戴着黑布小帽, 穿着黑布大马褂, 深青布棉袍, 蹒跚地走到铁道边, 慢慢探身下去, 尚不大难。

Translated text: I watched him hobble towards the railway track in his black skullcap, black cloth mandarin jacket and

dark blue cotton-padded cloth long gown. He had little trouble climbing down the railway track.....

Analysis: There are four small sentences in the original text, which are behavioral process, material process, material process, and material process, respectively reflected by the verbs "看见", "穿着", "走到", and "探身". The translator treats it as a long sentence of a behavioral process. In the original text, the verbs "戴着", "穿着", "走到", and "探身" have parallel grammatical functions. However, in the translation, it can be clearly seen that the translator has made a primary and secondary distinction between these verbs. He has advanced "走到 (hobble)", treated "戴着" and "穿着" as prepositional structures "in...", and translated the word "探身" into a separate sentence. In the translator's opinion, the reader's attention should focus on the image of the father working hard for his son, rather than his clothing, which highlights the gentle and delicate love of the father and also makes the reader feel heartbroken.

### 4.4.2. Translating mental process into behavioral process

The

original: .....总觉他说话不大漂亮, 非自己插嘴不可, 但他终于讲定了价钱。

Translated text: .....I frowned upon the way father was haggling and was on the verge of chipping in a few words when the bargain was finally clinched.

Analysis: Among the three clauses in the original text, the first one is a mental process clause, which can be reflected from the word "总觉". However, the translator treated it as an attributive clause, transforming the original mental process clause into a behavioral process and adding a material process, which are respectively reflected by the two verbs "frown upon" and "haggle". From the perspective of sentence process transformation alone, this is a significant modification, but based on the context of the text in the previous text, we can know that, The term "说话" here does not refer to the father's usual way of speaking, but rather to the aforementioned "father is busy bargaining with the porter". Therefore, this material process has been added to the translation, providing a better semantic and logical connection to the text. In addition, the mental process of "总觉" in the original text has been translated as the behavioral process of "frown upon", achieving a transformation from internal thoughts to external expressions, allowing target language readers to better directly feel the author's dissatisfaction, reflecting the author's lack of understanding and immaturity towards this deep fatherly love back then. The more the author expresses that lack of understanding and immaturity, the more obvious it becomes, On the contrary, it reflects the author's current regret, sadness, and longing.

## 5. Conclusion

Applying the principle of Halliday's transitivity system to analyze the process of discourse "the Sight of Father's Back" is beneficial for readers to think more deeply through the language itself. Through the combination of the above transitivity system theory with the prose and the statistical analysis of the translation process, we can find that the material relationships in the original discourse are often interchanged with the relationship processes in the translation, which is caused by the gap between the Chinese and English languages, Chinese likes to use verbs, so there are more material process clauses, while English noun structures are in

the majority, so there are more corresponding relationship processes in the translation, but this is not absolute. Sometimes, in order to achieve a certain translation effect, the relationship process in Chinese will also be translated with the material process in English, such as the original relationship clause ".....正是祸不单行的日子". In order to emphasize the "祸" described by the author, the translator, Treat it as the material process of 'Misfortunes never come singly...'; In addition, the material and behavioral processes in the two languages are often interchanged. In prose, there are many verbs that express behavior, such as "看见", "流泪", etc. Sometimes, after comprehensive consideration, translators will treat them as nouns "the sight", "tear", and the predicate will choose other related weak verbs, which naturally become material process clauses; The mental processes in prose are often interchanged with the material and behavioral processes in the translated text. Prose often consists of mental process sentences, which refer to inner thoughts. Translators often convert this static inner thoughts into dynamic external expressions, such as the mental process".....总觉他说话不大漂亮....."in the original text, which is translated as "... I frowned upon the way father was haggling...", which makes the intuitive feeling of the translated text readers stronger, and also reflect the translator's translation skills and thorough understanding of the original text. However, it is worth noticing that prose is a highly emotional article for the author, so in the translation of sentences, it is necessary to consider the translation of emotionally charged words and learn to feel from the author's perspective. The emotional level of the selected words should not be too heavy or too light, and should be consistent with the emotional level of the original text. In a discourse, clauses are inevitably constrained by context, and only by relying on context can the original text be better understood. Firstly, it is necessary to determine the process types of each clause in order to correctly express meaning and translate. So in the process of prose translation, the process type of the translation should be as consistent as possible with the process type of the original text, because following the transitivity process mode of the original text as much as possible is an effective way to fully convey the meaning of the original text, reproduce the language power and expression effect of the original text. However, considering the inherent differences between the Chinese and English languages, the emotions of the characters in the article, and the feelings of the target audience, sometimes changing the sentence process in the original text would be a better choice.

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