

# A Hermeneutic Perspective on Translator's Subjectivity

-- Take Zhongze's Translation of *Walden* as an Example

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**Abstract:** Traditional translation studies emphasize that the translated text needs to remain "equivalent" to the source text and that the translator needs to be "faithful" to the author, thus the subjectivity and creativity of the translator have long been neglected. With the rise of the "Cultural Turn" in translation, this situation has been changed. The translator's subjectivity and creativity in the translation process has become a hot spot in translation research. Based on George Steiner's Hermeneutic Motion, this paper analyzes the translator's subjectivity in the Chinese translation of *Walden* by Zhong Ze, trying to explore how the translator's subjectivity affects the translation, in order to provide new thoughts on the practical application of Hermeneutic Motion.

**Keywords:** George Steiner; Hermeneutic Motion; Translated Text of *Walden* by Zhong Ze; Translator's Subjectivity.

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## 1. Introduction.

*Walden* is a record of Thoreau's life living alone on the shores of *Walden* Lake. The book was not widely read when it was published, but it has important ecological, literary, and philosophical values, in which Thoreau expresses his outlook on nature and life, which is an important guide for ecological conservation and spiritual cultivation. There are different Chinese translations, among which, Zhongze's translation is popular among readers because of its antiquity, elegance, natural spirituality, and research value. At present, there is no study that analyzes the subjectivity of the translator in this translation by using Hermeneutic Motion, so this paper takes George Steiner's Hermeneutic Motion as the theoretical basis, analyzes the translator's subjectivity embodied in the Chinese translation of *Walden* by Zhongze, and tries to analyze how the translator's subjectivity affects translation, in order to provide new thinking for the practical application of Hermeneutic Motion.

## 2. The Context of Steinerian Hermeneutics and the Hermeneutic Motion

Before the 1970s, traditional translation emphasized the author and regarded the translator as a tool for transmitting information, while neglecting the subjectivity and creativity of the translator. However, in the 1970s, represented by Susan Bassnett, translation researchers began to combine the translator's identity with the influencing factors of his or her social context, and viewed translation activities as part of human and social activities (Susan, 1980). Since then, the introduction of theories such as Polysystem Theory, the Skopos Theory, the Deconstructionist Theory and so on have further emphasized the translator's subjectivity and enlarged the space of translation research.

Among the many theories that emphasize the subjectivity of translation, Polysystem Theory has made great contributions. Proposed by Zohar, Polysystem Theory argues that non-textual factors should be taken into account in interpreting literary translation activities. The Skopos Theory

is another theory that liberates translation from the "text-centered" translation, and it is the core of Functional Translation theory. The word "skopos" is derived from the Greek word, meaning "purpose", and Vermeer (1978) points out that all texts have a definite purpose. Therefore, it is very important for translators to be clear about the purpose of translating the source text and to adjust their translation strategies accordingly. Deconstructionist Theory also embodies translator's subjectivity, and one of its representatives, Venuti (2008), used the term "invisibility" to describe the phenomenon that translators translate the original text so fluently and naturally that it looks like a source text. However, he saw this as a manifestation of ethnocentrism that forces a foreign language to be subservient to the target language culture. He advocates the strategy of alienation, which highlights the heterogeneous identity of the source text, thus allowing the identity and subjectivity of the translator to emerge.

As the area covered by all these theories above, the study of translator's subjectivity is a subject with philosophical implications and multiple elements, which needs to be explored concretely with the help of a well-established theory. Steiner's Hermeneutics is a mature and multidisciplinary theory, and Steiner (1975/1998) defines the hermeneutic approach as an examination of what it means to "understand" a piece of oral or written text and an attempt to explain this process. The Hermeneutic Motion is central to Steiner's description of translation, which consists of four steps: (initiative) trust, aggression, incorporation, and compensation.

"Trust" is the first step of translation, which means believing that there is something understandable in the original text, affirming the translatability of the source text, and believing that the translated text is valuable. Therefore, trust is the beginning of all translation activities. Without the translator's trust of the source text, there is no next step of translation.

The second step of translation is "aggression". According to Steiner (1998), aggression is an aggressive, grabbing, invasive action, the stage in which the translator understands the ideas, meanings, and emotional attitudes of the source text. In this process, because the translator's cultural background and thinking pattern are different from that of the author, to

seize the meaning of the original text with the translator's way of thinking is a violation of the original text. Although "aggression" may result in the loss of meaning of the source text, it is still an important step in translation.

"Incorporation" refers to the way in which the translator incorporates the meaning of the source text into the target text after "aggressing" the source text and seizing its meaning. In this process, the translator integrates his/her own language with the source language. The culture of the source language and the culture of the target language collide with each other, resulting in a translated text (Rao & Yu, 2023). However, the collision of cultures may lead to an imbalance in the text, which, according to Steiner (1998), is due to an "incomplete" hermeneutic movement, and this imbalance can only be restored through the fourth step of "compensation" to achieve equilibrium.

The purpose of "compensation" is to make up for the imbalance, i.e. the lack of meaning, between the culture of the source language and the culture of the target language due to linguistic structure and cultural differences. In Steiner's (1998) view, the imbalance caused by the flow of energy from the source text and the subsequent flow into the target text needs to be compensated. Chinese scholar Liu (2009) asserts that there are two main ways of "compensation", firstly, to make formal compensation for the style, syntax and idioms of the source text; secondly, to achieve the effect of enhancing the power of the source text through translation.

The four steps of trust, aggression, incorporation and compensation constitute the theory of Hermeneutic Motion, which supplements the shortcomings of previous translation theories, provides new theoretical references and perspectives for translation research, as well as a theoretical basis for the study of the translator's subjectivity in the translation process.

### 3. Presentation of Translator's Subjectivity in the Chinese Translation of *Walden* by ZhongZe

#### 3.1. Trust

*Walden* records the daily life and feelings of Thoreau's solitary life on the shores of *Walden* Lake. As mankind were paying more attention to environmental issues, the value of *Walden* is fully realized, so it had become one of the most influential books in the 21st century. The book has important ecological, literary and philosophical values, in which Thoreau expresses his view of nature and life, which has a profound impact on ecological protection and the spiritual redemption of mankind under industrialization. "In the process of selecting a text, the translator will make a choice based on his or her own subjective factors and the external conditions, a process in which the translator's subjectivity is revealed" (Xu Rongrong, 2021). Zhongze specially wrote a preface for the book, named "还原梭罗 (Restoring Thoreau)", which elaborates on the causes of Thoreau's views on nature and life, and analyzes in detail Thoreau's attitudes towards nature, life, and the relationship between man and nature as reflected in the book. This shows that Zhongze is quite interested in Thoreau and has studied the original text over and over again, reflecting the author's love for Thoreau and *Walden* and his trust in the source text.

#### 3.2. Aggression

Aggression is the stage of understanding meaning. The translator needs to give full play to the role as a reader,

explore the information, meaning, emotional attitude expressed by the author in the source text, and reflect the connotation and social significance of the literary work. Due to the different structures and cultural backgrounds of the two languages, it is inevitable that the translator will intrude into the source text with the thinking of the target language culture, so that the source text begins to be infected with the color of the target language culture. In Zhongze's translation of *Walden*, Zhongze used a large number of four-character Chinese idiom.

EXP1: Always promising to pay, promising to pay, tomorrow, and dying today, insolvent; seeking to curry favor, to get custom, by how many modes, only not state-prison offenses; lying, flattering, voting, contracting yourselves into a nutshell of civility or dilating into an atmosphere of thin and vaporous generosity, that you may persuade your neighbour to let you make his shoes, or his hat, or his coat, or his carriage, or import his groceries for him; making yourselves sick, that you may lay up something against a sick day, something to be tucked away in an old chest, or in a stocking behind the pleasing, or, more safely, in the brick bank; no matter where, no matter how much or how little.

Translation: 每每承诺还债, “很快的, 就明天”, 但今天人都死了还没有偿付; 曲意逢迎, 邀宠求赏, 只图不违法犯禁揽些生意; 扯谎, 阿谀, 投票, 无所不至, 或屈膝卑躬, 自轻自贱, 或张皇其词, 大言不惭, 无非为了让旁人允诺以替他制作鞋帽, 缝衣造车, 运送杂货; 防备不时之虞一心囤积, 却搞得心力交瘁。或存于古箱, 或藏于袜筒置于私处, 封以灰泥, 甚至为了更加放心而密藏于层砖叠瓦之中——总之, 不问手段, 不拘多寡。

ZhongZe used a large number of dense four-character Chinese idiom, such as "曲意逢迎(to flatter)," "邀宠求赏(to seek favor)," "卑躬屈膝(to grovel)," and so on, to translate phrases and word combinations of varying lengths and loose structure in the source text. The source text is Thoreau's description of the physical and psychological burden on the middle and lower classes of the society at that time for the pursuit of material things, revealing the people's lack of material source and their spiritual anxiety and barrenness. Four-character Chinese idioms are frequently used in Chinese literary works because they are rhythmic and concise. Here, Thoreau's use of rich and dense four-character idioms strengthens the effect of the source text and vividly shows to the Chinese readers the conditions, appearance, and psychology of the people Thoreau describes. In the process of "aggression", Zhongze's own knowledge of Chinese culture and language influences his understanding and interpretation of the source text, giving it a Chinese character, which is a manifestation of the translator's subjectivity in translation.

#### 3.3. Incorporation

Incorporation is an important step in translation. In this process, the translator input the meaning he has seized from the source text into the translation, which is inevitably affected by his own thinking, so the choice of translation strategy can emphasize his subjectivity.

EXP2: Whatever have been thy failures hitherto, “be not afflicted, my child, for who shall assign to thee what thou hast left undone?”

Translation: 不论迄今你经受过什么挫折, “莫苦恼, 吾儿, 谁人能指派未竟事业于汝?”

The quotation is from the Indian epic *Vishnu*. Because of

its time-honoured history, the wording is quite archaic. The English version of the source text is also historical. The use of "thy" and "thee" clearly emphasizes its archaic style. Zhongze used the strategy of domestication to translate the verses, with "吾" corresponding to "my", "谁人" corresponding to "who" and "汝" corresponding to "thee". It retains the ancient color of the source text in style and language, and is faithful to the source text in form and style.

### 3.4. Compensation

The outflow of energy from the source text and the injection of new energy into the target text results in an imbalance in the translation system. In the process of "compensation", the translator gives full play to his subjective initiative, creatively restores the proper features and styles of the source language, achieves the effect that it should have conveyed, and realizes the fidelity to the source text.

EXP3: How many a poor immortal soul have I met well-nigh crushed and smothered under its load, creeping down the road of life, pushing before it a barn seventy-five feet by forty, its Augean stables never cleaned, and one hundred acres of land, tillage, mowing, pasture, and woodlot!"

Translation: 我曾遇到多少可怜的非凡灵魂, 因重重负累行将窒息, 扭曲变形。他们在生活的道路上匍匐行进, 身前推着一个巨型谷仓, 长七十五英尺, 宽四十英尺, 那就是奥吉亚斯从未清扫过的牛棚, 此外, 还有百亩田地耕耘播种、种草放牧、栽树植林! (注: 奥吉亚斯, 古希腊神话中的厄利斯国王, 他养有三千头牛, 有一个三十年从未清扫的肮脏牛棚。赫拉克勒斯的十二宗艰巨任务之一, 就是在一天之内, 用阿尔普斯河水洗净这个牛棚。)

ZhongZe compensates for the original text by adding annotation. The source text aims to use the phrase "Augean stables never cleaned" as a metaphor for the heavy burdens placed on the people, reflecting their miserable condition. By annotating the culturally loaded word "Augean stables" which contains allusions, ZhongZe lets readers understand how dirty "Augean stables" is and how much effort it takes to clean it up. Through this compensation, the humor and erudition of Thoreau's use of allusion to depict heavy pressure is revealed, which achieves the purpose of the source text and realizes the loyalty to the source text.

## 4. Conclusion

Based on Hermeneutic Motion, this paper takes the Chinese translation of *Walden* by Zhongze as an example to

discuss the translator's subjectivity in the translation. When translating the work, Zhongze practiced the translation steps of "trust", "aggression", "incorporation" and "compensation", and his subjectivity was reflected under the Hermeneutic Motion, which was specifically manifested in his interest in and careful study of the author and the source text, and his choice of different translation strategies, as well as his creativity throughout the whole process of translation. This paper shows through the case study that the translator has subjectivity in the translation process, and it affects the whole translation process, including the choice of translation strategies. In addition, this case study also proves the feasibility of studying the translator's subjectivity in a Hermeneutic perspective. Translating a literary work into another language is not only a simple switch between two languages, but also a process includes the creative work of the translator. By analyzing the case, the author hopes that this paper can provide new thoughts on the practical application of Hermeneutic Motion, and at the same time provide a new perspective for readers in reading *Walden*.

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