

Research on Translator Subjectivity from the Perspective of Hermeneutics: A Case Study of English Translations of the Analects

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Abstract: This paper explores the manifestation of translator subjectivity in translating the Analects from the perspective of hermeneutics. Modern hermeneutics suggests that translators and readers are influenced by time, space, and cultural backgrounds, calling for the demonstration of subjectivity in the translation process. Steiner's hermeneutic translation theory introduces the four steps of "trust," "aggression," "incorporation," and "compensation," emphasizing the active role of translators in translation. Through a comparative analysis of the English translations of the Analects by James Legge and Gu Hongming, this paper discusses the translator subjectivity within these four steps.

Keywords: Hermeneutics; Translator Subjectivity; Analects; Translation Strategies.

1. Introduction

Hermeneutics refers to the theory or philosophy of understanding and interpreting textual meanings. Traditional hermeneutics pursued the "one correct" original meaning of texts, believing that the original author's interpretation of their work held absolute authority. However, modern hermeneutics advocates breaking away from this "one correct" notion, recognizing that translators and readers are inevitably influenced by their inherent thought patterns and historical cultural backgrounds when interpreting another culture (Luo, 2024). Modern hermeneutics allows and welcomes readers to subjectively interpret the original text within a certain temporal and personal understanding. This perspective liberates interpreters from the authority of the original author and text, shifting the focus to the "interpreters" of the source text, namely the translators, allowing them a greater degree of subjectivity. From a translation perspective, the liberation brought by modern hermeneutics means freeing translators from the absolute authority of the original text, enabling them to actively interpret based on their cultural background and translation purposes (Li, 2024).

Translator subjectivity, a product of the influence of modern hermeneutics on the translation field, refers to the subjective agency displayed by translators in translation activities under the constraints of external environments and their own perspectives (Huang et al., 2023). The primary way in which translators participate in translation activities is through the use of translation strategies and methods, thus translator subjectivity can be manifested in "creatively exercising their subjective consciousness" and demonstrated through the use of translation strategies and methods. Steiner (2001), in his work "After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation," applies hermeneutic principles to translation theory, asserting that "understanding is translation" and proposing the operational theory of hermeneutics, dividing the translation process into four steps: trust, aggression, incorporation, and compensation. These four steps are interconnected and inseparable, covering the entire translation process, effectively showcasing the translator's subjectivity.

The *Analects* record the words and actions of Confucius and his disciples, characterized by concise language and profound philosophical thoughts, making it a classic work of Confucianism. However, unlike typical literary works, since its inception, the original author of the *Analects* has been disconnected from the original text, making it impossible for translators to directly engage in dialogue with the source text. Interpretations of the Analects have abounded throughout history, with over 40 translators from different countries publishing their English translations since the 20th century. From a hermeneutic perspective, translation is not just a linguistic conversion but also an interpretive process of culture and thought. In these numerous translation texts, translator subjectivity is manifested and expressed on multiple levels. On one hand, the translation work of the Analects is a complex system involving collisions, frictions, coordination, and filtration of multiple heterogeneous cultures, all of which are acts of subjectivity. Interpreters from different national cultural backgrounds and value standards interpret the Analects differently. On the other hand, for such an ancient and profound text, the translation of the Analects must first undergo historical interpretations by interpreters of past ages, endowing the text with contemporary value. The influence of the "pre-understanding" based on different translation versions on new interpreters cannot be underestimated. Through the expression of translator subjectivity, classic texts like the Analects can transcend temporal and cultural boundaries, being understood and appreciated by readers from different cultural backgrounds.

This paper will use Steiner's hermeneutic translation perspective as a guide, conducting a comparative analysis of the manifestation of translator subjectivity in the translation of the Analects by James Legge and Gu Hongming through the four translation steps of "trust," "aggression," "incorporation," and "compensation." It will argue for the significant role of translator subjectivity in classical Confucian works, exploring the translation methods and techniques used to enhance the comprehensibility and acceptability of translations.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Hermeneutics and Research on Translator Subjectivity

Prominent figures in modern hermeneutics such as Schleiermacher, Heidegger, Gadamer, and George Steiner argue that translators need to understand the text and the author's thoughts during the translation process. This process relies on the translator's subjective choices to reconstruct an objective text, challenging the notion of "text supremacy" and guiding new directions in translation theory research. In 1813, Schleiermacher proposed the "binary translation theory," suggesting that either the reader approaches the author or the author approaches the reader, emphasizing the necessity of translator subjectivity for achieving understanding between readers and authors (Liu, 2023). Heidegger equated "interpretation" with translation, positing that every translation is an interpretation and vice versa. In his 1975 work "Truth and Method," Gadamer emphasized human historical existence, suggesting that understanding also has historicity, with interpreters being constrained by social historical backgrounds, cultural literacy, value orientations, and ideologies (Harries, 2023). Interpreters from different eras and regions possess unique ways of understanding, showcasing heterogeneity in their interpretations. This indicates that the meaning of a text is not solely determined by the original author but is influenced by the historical and cultural backgrounds of interpreters, resulting in diverse interpretations and understandings. Translator subjectivity is inevitable in the translation process and is inherently creative. Steiner (2001) stated that in the translation process, we decode, reveal the core, extract information, and ultimately leave behind an empty shell.

2.2. Diversity and Development of Analects Translations

The earliest translations of the Analects can be traced back to the late 16th century, when Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci translated the "Four Books" into Latin in 1594. Subsequently, missionaries from various European and American countries translated the Analects into French, German, Italian, Spanish, and other languages. In 1691, an English translation of the Analects based on "The Chinese Philosopher Confucius" in Latin marked the formal beginning of English translations of the Analects. The peak of English translations of the Analects did not occur until the 20th century. Due to differences in historical eras, cultural backgrounds, values, archaeological discoveries, and deepening studies of texts, authors, and annotations, interpretations of the Analects have shown a trend towards diversification. Interpretations of the Analects have evolved into different types based on historical evolution and philosophical orientations, including Christian interpretations (from the 16th to the 19th centuries by missionaries), Western philosophical interpretations (from the 19th to the 20th centuries by Western philosophers and sinologists), and a return to original interpretations (since the late 20th century by Chinese scholars at home and abroad and some sinologists). In terms of perspectives, methods, schools, and strategies of interpretation, there are various interpretations from different fields such as theology, philosophy, linguistics, history, and literature. Different interpretation schools and strategies include cultural utilization, cultural comparison, historical verification, annotation verification, as well as literal translation, free

translation, compilation, retranslation, and other interpretation methods.

3. Analysis of Translator Subjectivity in English Translations of the Analects

This chapter will conduct a study of translator subjectivity through a comparative analysis of English translations of the Analects. Translators make many interpretive choices during the process of text conversion, incorporating their voices into the translation, resulting in a comprehensive work that absorbs the translators' characteristics, including their emotions and preconceptions. For instance, the interpretations of Confucius' speeches by different translators vary, each adding their own voice through interpretation. Steiner emphasizes the agency of translators and their leading role in the interpretive process, presenting the four steps of translation: "trust," "aggression," "incorporation," and "compensation." These steps involve balancing twice in the translation process: first after establishing "trust" between the translator and the original text, and second after the stages of "aggression" and "incorporation." Therefore, the fourth step of "compensation" is necessary to restore balance between the original and translated works through linguistic and stylistic adjustments. The following section will select two representative translation versions by James Legge and Gu Hongming, and conduct a comparative analysis of translator subjectivity within these four steps.

3.1. Trust

Steiner posits that all translation activities stem from the translator's "trust" in the original text, acknowledging the translatability and meaningfulness of the work to be translated. Factors influencing "trust" primarily include language proficiency, cultural competency, evaluation of the original text, and translation purposes.

As a British missionary and sinologist who lived and worked in China for many years, James Legge possessed excellent Chinese language skills, understanding ancient Chinese and its literary styles, accurately grasping the meaning of the Analects' original text. His proficiency in English also enabled him to convey the thoughts and spirits of the Analects accurately in a language understandable to Western readers. Furthermore, James Legge had a profound understanding of Chinese culture, familiar with Chinese history, philosophy, and traditions, conducting in-depth research and interpretation of the Analects' original text, demonstrating a thorough understanding of its classical language and Confucian thought. Thus, with the aim of promoting cultural exchange between China and the West, he trusted in the value and translatability of the Analects, serving as a bridge between Chinese traditional culture and philosophy for communication between the two cultures.

Gu Hongming, who studied at Tsinghua College (later renamed Peking University) and Cornell University in the United States, acquiring knowledge in philosophy, political science, and law, possessed extensive knowledge and a cross-cultural perspective due to his educational backgrounds in both Western and Chinese traditions. As an outstanding sinologist, Gu Hongming was not only proficient in Chinese and English but also had a deep understanding of Confucian thought and Chinese traditional culture. His acute perception of language and profound understanding of culture allowed

him to accurately grasp the Analects' original meaning and convey its wisdom and spirit to readers. While these two translators hailed from different countries, backgrounds, and eras, they both trusted in the value and translatability of the Analects.

3.2. Aggression

Steiner explains the concept of "aggression," often seen as the conflict between two languages and cultures when understanding the original text. To transcend the limitations of the source language, translators seem to intrude into the original text, capturing its meaning and reconstructing the source text. Thus, translators exhibit subjectivity in this process, creating different translations. This subjectivity is manifested in the translation process, wherein text interpretation considers how to interpret the source text through the translator's subjective perspective, with the understanding and translation of the text influenced by the translator's personal background, cultural identity, and values. Additionally, translators need to consider how to incorporate historical backgrounds, cultural characteristics, and philosophical concepts from the Analects into the translation, constructing a context suitable for contemporary readers' comprehension. This contextual construction also reflects the translator's subjectivity.

For example, in James Legge's translation: "Meng Wu asked what filial piety was. The Master said, 'Parents are anxious lest their children should be sick.'" Gu Hongming translated the same passage as: "A son of the noble mentioned above put the same question to Confucius as his father did. Confucius answered, 'Think how anxious your parents are when you are sick, and you will know your duty towards them.'" When translating the term "Ren", James Legge and Gu Hongming chose different contrasting terms. James Legge viewed "Ren" solely as a virtue from a Western religious perspective, translating it as "virtue," which did not accurately convey the deeper meaning intended by Confucius. Gu Hongming, on the other hand, regarded "Ren" as an ethical and moral concept in accordance with Chinese traditional culture, recognizing its close connection with other virtues expressed throughout the Analects. Gu Hongming translated "Ren" as "moral," reflecting his comprehensive understanding of classical Confucian culture. This difference indirectly reflects the distinct cultural perceptions of the two translators.

3.3. Incorporation

After "trust" and "aggression," the third step involves "incorporation," where the mental meanings acquired in the previous two stages are transformed into actual words. This is reflected in the choice of translation strategies, such as deciding between literal and free translation and adjusting language conventions.

For instance, in James Legge's translation: "Meng Wu asked what filial piety was. The Master said, 'Parents are anxious lest their children should be sick.'" Gu Hongming translated the same passage as: "A son of the noble mentioned above put the same question to Confucius as his father did. Confucius answered, 'Think how anxious your parents are when you are sick, and you will know your duty towards them.'" James Legge's approach was to translate word for word, answering that parents are afraid when children get sick, leaving the relationship with filial piety to the reader's interpretation, without explicitly stating what filial piety is.

Gu Hongming, being multilingual and having a native language foundation, adopted a free translation approach, supplementing and extending the original meaning with flexible language to make it more understandable for Western readers.

3.4. Compensation

Steiner believes that the existence of the "compensation" step is necessary because after "trust" and "aggression" and "incorporation," the translation tends to lean towards either the original or translated work, resulting in an imbalance and potential loss of original text information, requiring "compensation" to restore balance. In this stage, translators adjust the content and form of the source text to fit the expression suitable for the target language's culture, enabling readers of the target language to better understand, showcasing the translator's subjectivity in cross-cultural communication. James Legge, as one of the missionaries who came to China, used many Christian terms such as "God," "heaven," "saint," "sinner," etc., to express concepts from Chinese traditional beliefs like gods, heaven, saints, sinners, etc., bridging the gap between Chinese classics and Western readers. Gu Hongming also mostly chose vocabulary familiar to Western readers and used concise and authentic English expressions in his translations. His aim was to make the wisdom and spiritual qualities of the Chinese people understandable to ordinary English readers; therefore, his translation is fluent, concise, and easy for readers to comprehend. Additionally, in Gu Hongming's translation, there are references to Western figures such as Goethe, Wordsworth, Carlyle, Emerson, whom Western readers are more familiar with. For example, in the footnote of the translation of Chapter Ten of "Xue Er," he metaphorically compares Yan Hui to "The St. John of the Confucian gospel," meaning "the Saint John of the Confucian gospel," essentially likening Confucius's most beloved disciple to Jesus's most beloved saint.

4. Conclusion

Translating literary works is a process of understanding and interpreting them. The hermeneutic perspective allows us to have a more comprehensive understanding of the translation process, especially how translators engage with texts through subjectivity in understanding and re-creation. Recognizing the importance of translator subjectivity in translation quality is crucial for cultivating and enhancing translators' professional skills and cultural sensitivity, thereby improving the overall quality of translation works.

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