



Translator's Subjectivity from the Perspective of Steiner's Hermeneutics: Taking the Chinese Translation of Moby Dick as an Example

Jiamei Ye^{1#}  & Jiaqi Zhang²

^{1,2} Shanghai University of International Business and Economics, China

#corresponding author

Type of Work: Peer Reviewed.

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.21013/jems.v20.n3.p1>

Review history: Submitted: May 14, 2024; Revised: July 23, 2024; Accepted: August 06, 2024

How to cite this paper:

Ye, J., & Zhang, J. (2024). Translator's Subjectivity from the Perspective of Steiner's Hermeneutics: Taking the Chinese Translation of Moby Dick as an Example. *IRA-International Journal of Education & Multidisciplinary Studies* (ISSN 2455-2526), 20(3), 169-177. <https://dx.doi.org/10.21013/jems.v20.n3.p1>

© IRA Academico Research.

 This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/) subject to a proper citation to the publication source of the work.

Disclaimer: The scholarly papers as reviewed and published by IRA Academico Research are the views and opinions of their respective authors and are not the views or opinions of IRA Academico Research. IRA Academico Research disclaims any harm or loss caused due to the published content to any party.

IRA Academico Research is an institutional publisher member of *Publishers International Linking Association Inc. (PILA-CrossRef)*, USA. Being an institutional signatory to the *Budapest Open Access Initiative, Hungary*, the content published by IRA Academico Research is available under Open Access. IRA Academico Research is also a registered content provider under *Open Access Initiative Protocol for Metadata Harvesting (OAI-PMH)*.

This paper is peer-reviewed following IRA Academico Research's [Peer Review Program](#) .

Jiamei Ye  [/0009-0009-4956-0352](https://orcid.org/0009-0009-4956-0352)

ABSTRACT

Literary translation plays an indispensable role in modern cross-cultural communication. With the "cultural turn" of translation research the position of the translator and the subjective initiative in the process of translation have become more and more prominent. Steiner applies hermeneutics to translation and divides the process of translation into four processes, namely, initiative trust, aggression, incorporation and compensation. This paper will analyze the embodiment of translator's subjectivity in the Chinese translation of Moby Dick from the four steps of translation.

Keywords: Hermeneutics; Translation process; Translator's Subjectivity; Literary Translation

1. Introduction

Moby Dick, the pinnacle work of American writer Herman Melville, is a wonder in the history of nineteenth-century American literature, whose varied narrative perspectives, unusual narrative structure, and narrative content covering an extremely wide range of disciplines make its linguistic style present a kind of beautiful and pontifical characteristics, and at the same time, it also embodies the author's profound writing skills and superb artistic ability, and it has been hailed as the greatest American novel ever written. As one of the classic works of world literature, has been translated into many languages. Traditional translation theory considers the translator as a "servant", but the emergence of the "cultural turn" has emphasized the translator. Steiner put forward the idea of "interpretation is translation" and discussed the four steps of translation in detail. With the help of Steiner's four steps of translation, this paper explores how the translator gives full play to his subjective initiative on the basis of faithfulness to the original text in translating Moby Dick, and compares and analyze Yang Shanlu's translation and Ji Xusheng's translation.

2. Hermeneutics and Translator Subjectivity

2.1 Steiner's Hermeneutic Theory of Translation

George Steiner, a famous American scholar, published his masterpiece *After the Tower of Heaven: A View of Language and Translation* in 1975. In the book, Steiner believes that "interpretation is translation", language is always in constant change, and the production and understanding of language is the process of translation. The most central point of his hermeneutic translation theory is that the translation process is sequentially divided into four steps, namely, trust, aggression, incorporation and compensation. They represent the four essential steps in the whole translation process, from the translator's selection of the translation object, understanding of the translated text, output of the translated information to the perfection of the translation result, and the translator's subjective initiative is fully embodied in these four steps (Xu Rongrong, 2021).

George Steiner's insightful views on translation are undoubtedly thought-provoking, and *After the Tower of Heaven* is regarded as "the first systematic exploration of translation theory and

the translation process since the 18th century”, which enables translation studies to escape from the traditional sense of understanding and debate, and implant translation into the context of hermeneutics. In his view, natural language has a role to play in poetry. In his view, the study of natural language in poetics, literary criticism, cultural history and many other aspects will ultimately serve the interpretation of the act of translation.

In Chapter 5 of *After the Tower*, “The Workings of Hermeneutics”, he proposes a four-step process based on hermeneutical analysis: trust, aggression, incorporation and compensation. First of all, the translator believes that the original text has meaning, which is “trust”, and in understanding and expressing this meaning, the translator inevitably suffers from the hostility and resistance from the original text, making it difficult to approach the meaning of the original text easily (Lai, 2008). The subjective factor of the translator also inevitably “intrudes” into the original text, and the purpose of “aggression” is “absorption”, as George Steiner said “There is no language or translation symbol that is set up or culture as a whole that is not at risk of being transformed”. Translation brings about the transformation of a culture or tradition. George Steiner also argues that “we may be controlled or harmed by the texts we translate into and absorb - the translator's personality and originality may also dry up”. In other words, in the process of absorption, the original color of the translated language is inevitably lost. Therefore, “compensation” is also very necessary. As a matter of fact, the loss of the original color of the translated language will be manifested in the above-mentioned stages, therefore, “compensation” must be carried out throughout the whole process of translation. Only in this way can the connotation of the original language be expressed, the ideal state of translation be achieved, and the translation play the role of communication (Lai, 2008).

2.2 Translator's Subjectivity in Steiner's Interpretive View of Translation

Translator's subjectivity refers to the subjective initiative of the translator in the translation process, which includes the translator's conscious cultural awareness, humanistic character and cultural and aesthetic creation (Cha and Tian, 2003). The translator's subjectivity is usually manifested in the whole translation process. The translator acts as the first reader and second author of the literary work. The translator is the reader who needs to choose the translated text as well as understand the real meaning of the original text. The translator is also the rewriter, choosing the appropriate translation strategy to translate while carrying his or her own translation style. In addition, the translator will make corrections to the translation to achieve accuracy. Fang Mengzhi (2004) points out that “translator subjectivity, also known as translation subjectivity, refers to the translator's essential characteristics manifested in translation activities, i.e., the characteristics of the translation subject to dynamically manipulate the original (object), transform the original, and externalize its essential power in the act of translation.”

It is not difficult to see that the four steps of the translation process emphasized by Steiner's interpretive view of translation are not emphasizing the subjectivity of the translator. First of all,

the translator chooses the translated text through aesthetic judgment, trusting that the original language text is meaningful; then the translator enters the translation stage, when the translator may have to face hostility and resistance from the original text. Therefore, the translator, who has both literary identities of reader and interpreter, gives full play to his subjective initiative in the second stage, “invades” the original text, and carries out almost “violent” interpretation and translation, which, semiotically speaking, means breaking the shell of linguistic symbols and exposing the content. Exposing the content. In the process of language transformation, faced with the question of how to reproduce the original's ideological information, aesthetic information and language style, and how to convey the meaning of foreign cultures, the translator needs to give full play to his subjective initiative to digest and accept the culture of the translated language. Finally, the translator has to try his best to restore the balance between the translated work and the original work, and compensation is essential (Lai, 2008).

3. The Embodiment of the Translator's Subjectivity in the Chinese Translation of Moby-Dick

3.1 The Chinese Translation of Moby-Dick

Moby Dick is the pinnacle of American writer Herman Melville's work. After the release of Moby Dick, the American critics gave mixed reviews to Melville's “difficult to understand” masterpiece, but the criticisms greatly overshadowed the praises and even the industry stopped studying the novel for a while until the author's death, when people began to pay attention to this “strange book”. The author's death, people began to pay attention to this “strange book”. In China, readers are less exposed to whaling-related novels, so the first Chinese translation of Moby-Dick came out in 2007, probably because the subject matter was newer, and the translation was more difficult to understand, and it was only after two decades of silence that subsequent translations appeared, and since then, the translation community has recognized the value of research on Moby-Dick. The enthusiasm for Moby Dick has been everlasting in the Chinese translation community.

3.2 The Play of Translator's Subjectivity

Xu Jun and Murray (2009) argue that hermeneutics has been inextricably linked with translation since its emergence. Steiner applies hermeneutics to the study of translation, believes that the translation process is a dynamic process that lasts for a long time, and puts forward the four steps of translation: trust, aggression, incorporation and compensation.

3.2.1 Trust

“Trust” means choice, and the translator will choose a meaningful text. Trust is the first step in the translation activity, which requires the translator to fully believe that the translated text is translatable and that the translator can adequately reproduce the style, meaning and spirit of the original text through his own understanding and efforts. Trust is thus constructed. The process of

the translator in selecting the translation is also a manifestation of the translator's subjectivity in the translation process. Xu Rongrong (2021) argues that this trust is also risky, as the translator may be affected by cultural differences, ideology and other factors in the translation process, which may hinder or bias the translation.

As a complex form of literary expression, novels can reflect the cultural phenomena and social status quo of a particular historical period, bringing readers a more specific and rich reading experience. When a literary work is imported into another language system and cultural environment, the translator plays a pivotal role in it. The translator's mission is to make the multidimensional value of the original work reconstructed in the translated language, and to stimulate the mental schema in the mind of the translated readers in line with that of the readers of the original text. *Moby Dick* is a detailed depiction of the life of whalers in the early and mid-nineteenth century, but it is not a mere collection of stories; the author, Herman Melville, quotes from the past and discusses the present, making it a history of whaling. Moreover, the text of the book is so unrestrained that some of the characters' speeches are poetic, while others are like monologues of a play, adding a lot of literary value to the work. Therefore, how to reproduce the literary value of the original text in the translation is a topic worth exploring in depth by translators.

3.2.2 Aggression

To “invade”, the translator must overcome the obstacles of language and cultural differences and go deep into the original text to dig out the real meaning and essence of the original text. The analogy of the ancient Roman theorist Jerome is like an open-pit coal mine, which leaves an empty imprint on the ground after the ore has been extracted (Tan Zaixi, 1991). Comprehension is an unavoidable form of attack (Steiner, 2001). In the translation of literary works, their word formation and the use of translation strategies have an impact on the understanding of the original work and the readers.

Take the translation of titles as an example, titles are often nouns or phrases, and translating titles well is very closely related to the translation methods adopted by translators. The title of Mr. Ji's translation is one of the highlights of the whole translation. Mr. Ji has redrafted the titles for most of the chapters according to his own understanding, and it can be said that he has pursued a re-creation on the basis of the original. In contrast, Mr. Yang pursues equivalence in his translation, translating word by word or phrase by phrase.

Ishmael (the story's protagonist and narrator) sees the gravestones of whalers in a whaler's church and, as a result, has thoughts and feelings about life and death. The title of the original story is the place, and Yang's translation is “The Chapel”, while Ji's translation is “The Thoughts of Life and Death”. The author thinks that both translations have their own merits, Yang's translation is naturally closer to the original, but Ji's translation also summarizes the content and connotation of the chapter. Another example is Chapter 6, which is about Ishmael's experience of boarding the

ship “Pechod” for the first time, so “The Ship” should refer to the ship “Pechod”. The original reference is completed by the definite article “the”, but there is no corresponding expression in Chinese, so Yang's translation only translates “ship” as “boat”, but not “the”. In contrast, Ji translation seems to be a little better, simply point out that the ‘Pei Kou De’, clean and concise. For example, chapter 19, “The Prophet” and chapter 16, the same here, “the” also refers to Elijah, but due to differences in cultural background, it is likely that many readers do not know the Bible prophet Elijah, it would be better to translate directly as “the prophet”. However, due to cultural differences, it is likely that many readers do not know about Elijah, the prophet in the Bible, so it would be clearer to translate “the” as “the prophet”. In chapter 119, “The Candles”, the word “candles” refers to burning masts, which is a strong symbolic image in the novel, while “saving the day” is only a reflection of the plot. is only a reflection of the plot, and it is the plot as Mr. Ji understands it.

3.2.3 Incorporation

“Absorption” means that the translator applies the opinions or forms transplanted from the original language into the translated language. The components introduced from the original language will be assimilated to varying degrees in the translated text, and the translated language will be enriched, but it may also be over-absorbed into the original language and lose the original color of the translated text.

The Chinese language has a unique literary aesthetic value, such as the Chinese four-character grid, which is often concise and full of connotations.

In translation, the translated text is often assimilated in this way to varying degrees.

Example 1: ... the muffled rollings of a milky sea, the bleak rustlings of the festooned frosts of mountains, the desolate shiftings of the windrowed snows of prairies.

Yang translated: the faint rollings of a milky sea, the bleak rustlings of the festooned frosts of mountains, the desolate shiftings of the windrowed snows of prairies;

Ji Translation: the sullen tossing sound of the milky sea, the bleak souging sound of the frosty flowers on the mountains, the desolate moving sound of the haystack-like snow on the prairie;

Analysis: This sentence describes Ishmael's fear of the “whiteness of the great whale”, as if all whiteness is horrible to him. Firstly, from the point of view of sentence form, the sentence pattern of the original text has the effect of prose, and the structure is identical. Although Yang's translation is consistent with the overall center word, there is a loss of unity in the pronouns at the beginning of the clauses, “that kind of”, “that”, and the third place has no related words, which reduces the sense of coherence in the sentence arrangement. Meanwhile, Ji's translation has two “的” in each clause, which is a bit cumbersome and not as concise as Yang's translation. Although Yang's translation is not guided by the demonstrative pronoun, it is unified and harmonized in three places, and the momentum of the prose has not been weakened.

Example 2: It's the Black Sea in a midnight gale, it's the unnatural combat of the four primal elements, it's a blasted heath. It's a blasted heath.

Yang: It's the Black Sea in a midnight storm. It's the four rows of Eris. It's a withered heather shrub.

Ji Translation: It's the black sea of the midnight gale. It was the perverse strife of the four elements. It was a withered heather bush.

Analysis: This passage uses concrete things to concretize the feelings that a painting brings to the viewer, using a cascade of similar sentences and a choice of specific imagery. Yang's translation is simple and concise, and the lines are tight and compact. Although the overall beauty of the painting is well portrayed, there are still some inappropriate aspects in terms of specific wording. For example, can “unnatural combat” be translated as “阅墙之争”? According to the sixth edition of the Dictionary, “阅墙” refers to “brothers fighting each other internally, and by extension, internal rivalry”. From this, we can see that “阅墙之争” cannot fully correspond to “unnatural combat”. The word “unnatural” has the meaning of “unusual, strange”, and it also serves to emphasize the mysteriousness of the painting. Therefore, Yang's “rivalry” cannot accurately restore the meaning of the original text, but Ji's translation is more “faithful”, and the semantic aspect of the word “rivalry” is more “faithful” than the original. On the contrary, Ji's translation is more “faithful” and retains the semantic information.

Creation in translation is mainly manifested in the process of expression, which is in terms of the language of destination. Since every language has its own structure, characteristics and laws, the language of the translation must follow these structures, characteristics and laws. Lin Yutang once said, “A language has a language of understanding, grammar and syntax, all must follow a certain habit, usually called ‘through’ and ‘do not pass’ that is, whether its syntax follows its habit. No matter what kind of language is not 'nationalized' before, it is all unintelligible, and no exception can be made on the ground that it is a translation.” The “nationalization” referred to here is naturalization. Therefore, in recreating translation, we should adopt the translation method which is mainly naturalization and supplemented by alienation, only in this way can the translation be in harmony with the readers.

3.2.4 Compensation

According to George Steiner, it is inevitable to lose the original color of the translated language in the process of absorption. Therefore, to maintain the original balance in the translation process, compensation is indispensable, and “to restore the balance is the translator's morality”. In the first three steps, the translator tends to favor the original text in the trust stage and draws the essence of the original text in the aggression stage. In the incorporation stage, the translator introduces the components of the original text into the translated text, to balance the original text and the translated text. In China, since readers are less exposed to whaling-related novels, the first Chinese translation of *Moby-Dick* was released, and it was only after two decades of silence that subsequent

translations appeared, probably due to the newer subject matter and the more difficult translation. The translators have compensated for the maritime background knowledge and religious culture as well as the colloquial style and black linguistic features of the book to enhance readability. The book has a refractive religious connection with the Bible, for example, "Satan's hoof" is translated as "the devil's hoof", considering that some Chinese readers who are not familiar with Western culture may not know the Bible's. Considering that some Chinese readers who are not familiar with Western culture may not understand the devil "Satan", which represents evil in the Bible, the translation directly takes its interpretative meaning, but "devil" and "Satan" are not exactly equal in meaning and the two are not the same in terms of imagery. The two are not exactly equal in meaning and the associations they bring to people in terms of imagery are not the same either. Therefore, when it comes to the translation of cultural words, the translator should play the role of a transmitter of Chinese and Western cultures and try to faithfully reflect the characteristics of Western culture, supplemented by comments when necessary, so that the target language readers can better understand the meaning of the original text.

4. Conclusion

The translator is the center of translation activities, and translator's subjectivity runs through the translation process. The study of translator's subjectivity is a topic with rich connotations, which is reflected in the translation process, the translator's consciousness of the culture of the translated language and the reader's consciousness, the intertextual relationship between the translated work and the original work as well as the literature of the translated language, and the intersubjective relationship between the translator and the original author and the readers and so on (Ching-chieng and Tien-yu, 2003). This paper only discusses the translator's subjectivity in the context of hermeneutics, from the four steps of the translation process described by Steiner's hermeneutic view of translation, in which the translator's subjectivity is given full play at each stage. In the process of translation, only when the translator gives full play to his subjectivity and goes through an arduous process can he present a different world to the readers.

References

- Moby, D., & Herman, M. (1996). Tom Doherty Associates, LLC.
- Munday, J. (2001). *Introducing Translation Studies: Theories and Application* [M]. London: Routledge.
- Steiner, G. (2004). *After Babel: aspects of language and translation*[M]. Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- Fang, M. (2004). *Dictionary of Translation* [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- Ji, X. (1999). *Moby Dick (in Chinese)* [M]. Beijing: Beijing Yanshan Publishing House.
- Li, Q. (2008). *Translator's Subjectivity from Steiner's Interpretive Translation--The Chinese Translation of Chen Yinan's The Old Man and the Sea as an Example*. *Journal of Tongren*

College, (04),62-65.

Shao, F. (2005). Mistranslation and omission in the translation of Moby Dick by Ji Xusheng. *Journal of Hunan Institute of Science and Technology* (02), 115-119.

Tan, Z. (2004). A brief history of western translation [M]. Shanghai: The Commercial Press.

Xu, R. (2021). A Study on Translator Subjectivity under Steiner's Hermeneutic Translation Theory--Taking the Chinese Translation of Love in the Bazaar as an Example. *Journal of Harbin College* (05),108-113.

Yang, S. (1997). Moby Dick (in Chinese translation) [M]. Hefei: Anhui Literature and Art Publishing House.

Zhang, J. (2023). The Origin of Philosophical Hermeneutics and Traditional Translation Theory--And the Manifestation of Translator's Subjectivity. *Western Journal* (01), 108-111. DOI:10.16721/j.cnki.cn61-1487/c.2023.01.012.

Ching, C., & Tian, Y. (2003). On Translator Subjectivity - From the Marginalization of Translators' Cultural Status. *Chinese Translation* (01), 21-26.

Zhou, W. G., Liu, P. (2009). Lexical, figurative and affective choices in the Chinese translation of Moby Dick. *Journal of Hunan University of Science and Technology (Social Science Edition)* (03),104-106.

Zhou, W.G. (2007). Translation of Moby-Dick Extract from Word and Sentence Translation. *Journal of Sichuan Institute of Foreign Languages* (06), 125-128.
