

Research on Prose Translation from the Perspective of Constructivism - a Comparative Analysis of Zhang Peiji's Translation and Machine Translation of *Back*

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Abstract:

This study delves into Chinese prose translation from the perspective of constructivism, comparing Zhang Peiji's translation of *Back* with machine translation. By applying Piaget's constructivism, this study summarizes three techniques about Chinese prose translation: cultural recognition, cognitive reconstruction and balanced feedback. The findings show that Zhang's translation outperforms machine translation in emotional expression, lexical precision and stylistic coherence. This emphasizes the irreplaceability of human translators in handling cultural and stylistic elements. In addition, these three techniques based on constructivism aim to enhance the understanding and accuracy of Chinese prose translation.

Keywords:

Constructivism, Chinese Prose Translation, Cultural Recognition, Cognitive Reconstruction, Balanced Feedback

1. Introduction

In the ever-evolving landscape of translation studies, the exploration of diverse theoretical frameworks has become crucial for deepening our understanding of translation practices. Among these, constructivism has emerged as a significant and influential theory, offering valuable perspectives for analyzing Chinese prose translation, a field that has increasingly caught academic attention in recent years.

Constructivism, rooted in Jean Piaget's groundbreaking research on children's cognitive development, has a rich theoretical foundation. According to constructivism, Piaget's theory includes key concepts such as assimilation, accommodation, and equilibration, which are central to understanding how children construct knowledge through interaction with their environment. Constructivism emphasizes the active role of learners in constructing knowledge based on their experiences and interactions with

the environment, highlighting the importance of integrating prior knowledge and new information. While Piaget's theory provides valuable insights into cognitive development, it has been criticized for its limited consideration of social and cultural influences on learning.

Constructivism, with its emphasis on individual subjectivity, poses a risk of fostering cross-cultural misunderstandings. For instance, when translating King Gesar, Howard Goldblatt and Sylvia Li-chun Lin must flexibly apply their intricate regional cultural expressions. [1] An analysis of constructivism research reveals that most domestic and international studies predominantly apply this theory within the educational domain. Notably, some scholars contend that constructivism, primarily categorized as a learning theory rather than an instructional-design theory, may encounter limitations in practical implementation. [2] Moreover, there are some theoretical conflicts, as exemplified by scholars such as Mohammad Rob and Farhana Rob, who have found themselves facing the complex dilemma between constructivism and constructionism. [3] Constructivism (Piaget) focuses on internal cognitive restructuring through assimilation and accommodation, while constructionism (Papert) emphasizes knowledge creation through external, hands-on projects. This distinction is critical for avoiding misapplication in translation theory.

Translation serves as an indispensable bridge between different cultures. As illustrated in Figure 1, for a successful translation, translators must first gain a profound understanding of the structure of the source text. Subsequently, during the translation process, they reconstruct the structure of the target text based on their cross-cultural knowledge and experiences. In this study, we adopt a comparative analysis approach, making a comparison between Zhang Peiji's translation with machine translation. By systematically examining and contrasting these two types of translations, we aim to explore how constructivism contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the application of constructivism in Chinese prose translation.

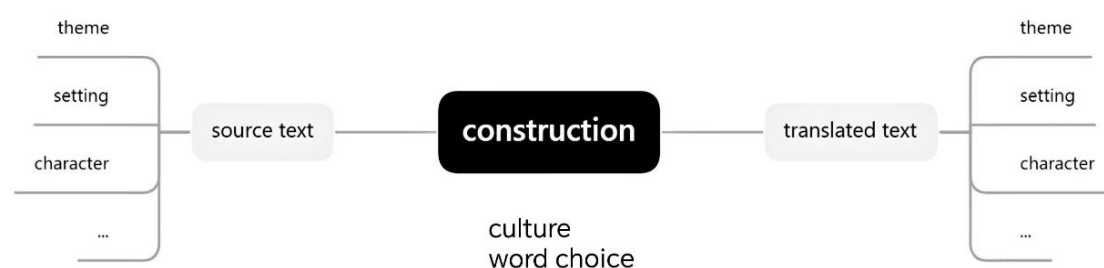


Figure 1. Construction during Translation.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Materials

This study employs a tripartite textual corpus for comparative analysis:

Source Text: Zhu Ziqing's iconic prose *The Back*, comprising 1,485 Chinese characters. The text exemplifies early 20th-century Chinese autobiographical literature with its minimalist narration and profound emotional subtext.

Human Translation: Zhang Peiji's English version from *Selected Modern Chinese Essays*, a good example for literary translation studies.

Machine Translation: Outputs from Doubao AI (May 2024 version), representing current neural machine translation (NMT) capabilities.

2.2. Constructivism-Based Analytical Mechanism for Chinese Prose Translation

Some scholars conceptualize translation as a process of multi-modal meaning-construction through material text distribution. [4] In addition to these texts that need to be studied, to enhance the efficiency and precision of translation, it's necessary to propose a structured mechanism to improve accuracy and efficiency. Based on the theory of constructivism, the study divides the translation process into three core modules. They can also be considered as translation techniques.

Cultural Recognition (Assimilation Module): Cultural Recognition serves as the foundation for assimilation in the translation process. This step focuses on identifying cultural elements in the source text, from obvious references to subtle language details. It compares these elements with the translator's existing knowledge to measure how well cultural meaning is preserved. The module evaluates both surface-level markers and deeper historical and cultural context, using metrics like recognition accuracy to assess cultural transfer.

Cognitive Reconstruction (Accommodation Module): Translation takes into account the comprehension and acceptance of the target audience. The translator adjusts language and concepts to fit the target language. This involves reworking sentence structures, rhetorical choices, and finding creative solutions when direct translation isn't possible. The module tracks changes at both the sentence and word levels, measuring flexibility through indicators like restructuring frequency and cultural adaptation density.

Balanced Feedback (Equilibration Module): This final step ensures the translation strikes the right balance between staying true to the original and adapting for the target audience. It combines data from the previous steps to evaluate overall quality, weighing factors like meaning accuracy, cultural fit, and emotional impact. The feedback loop helps refine the translation, avoiding over-adaptation or excessive literalness, to achieve the best possible balance.

2.3. Case Analysis

2.3.1. Cultural Recognition

Example 1

Source Text: 黑布大马褂、深青布棉袍

Machine Translation: black cloth long coat and dark green cotton-padded cloth robe

Zhang's Translation: black cloth mandarin jacket and dark blue cotton-padded cloth long gown

"Magua" (马褂) is a traditional Chinese jacket with a front opening, historically worn by men during the Qing Dynasty and Republic of China eras. Zhang Peiji's use of "mandarin jacket" preserves this cultural specificity, whereas machine translation ignores its historical significance. Similarly, the color "qing" (青) refers to a kind of blue, instead of green. [5] These examples highlight Zhang's superior handling of cultural assimilation and lexical accuracy, ensuring the translation remains faithful to

the original's emotional and historical context, while machine translation though functional, leans toward generalization and reduced veracity.

Example 2

Source Text: 天无绝人之路。

Machine Translation: Thankfully, there is always a way out in life.

Zhang's Translation: Fortunately, Heaven always leaves one a way out.

Zhang Peiji keeps the image of "Heaven", which embodies China's unique cultural beliefs. Meanwhile, Zhang Peiji's translation is in line with the source text, with "Heaven" as the subject, emphasizing the power of this image in Chinese culture.

2.3.1. Cognitive Reconstruction

Example 1

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

Machine Translation: Arriving in Xuzhou to see my father, I saw the messy courtyard and thought of my grandmother, couldn't help but shed tears.

Zhang's Translation: 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

The source text is a typical sentence without a subject. Zhang adopted the structure "When I met... the sight of... and the thought of..." to construct causal relationships, which are in line with the characteristics of English conformity. Although machine translation retains the sequence of actions, the logical cohesion is weaker than that of Zhang's version.

Example 2

Source Text: 家中的光景是一日不如一日

Machine Translation: the situation at home is getting worse day by day

Zhang's Translation: the circumstances of our family going from bad to worse

"Guangjing" (光景) is a vague abstract concept in Chinese, and Zhang Yi uses "circumstances" to concretize, which is in line with the cognitive habit of emphasizing concrete images in English; While the machine translation "situation" is correct, "circumstances" emphasizes the long-term accumulation of situational changes.

Example 3

Source Text: 东奔西走

Machine Translation: be constantly on the move

Zhang's Translation: live an unsettled life

When it comes to the Chinese idiom "东奔西走", which means rushing around and wearing different hats. Zhang Peiji chooses to summary the lifestyle. The word "unsettled" clearly shows the ups and downs of the life. Machine translation focuses on the dynamic act of running around itself, following the literal meaning of the source text.

2.3.3. *Balanced Feedback*

Example 1

Source Text: 大约大去之期不远矣。

Machine Translation: Probably the time of great departure is not far off.

Zhang's Translation: Perhaps it won't be long now before I depart this life.

“Daqu”(大去) is a literary language meaning “to pass away”, and Zhang chose the phrase “depart this life”, which is a kind of euphemism, not only retains a sense of solemnity, but also conforms to English expression habits. Machine translation of “greatest departure” is literal, which can lead to ambiguity.

Example 2

Source Text: 我的泪很快地流下来了。

Machine Translation: My tears gushed out.

Zhang's Translation: Tears welled up in my eyes and streamed down my face very quickly.

In the sentence expressing the rapid fall of tears, Zhang Peiji is concise in the meaning with the simple expression, “My tears gushed out”, He adopts the phrase “gushed out” to vividly show the dynamics of tears suddenly falling out. Machine translation uses “welled up” to depict the process of tears gathering in the eyes, and “streamed down” and “very quickly” to depict the complete action and speed of tears in detail, making the picture vivid. However, machine translation is too long to present the concise style of source text.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. *Comparison between Zhang Peiji's Translation and Machine Translation*

The comparative analysis reveals distinct differences between Zhang Peiji's and machine translations in terms of emotional expression, lexical precision, and stylistic coherence. Zhang's translation excels in conveying the source text's emotional depth through concise and vivid phrases and verbs, while machine translation sacrifices true meanings and simplicity. In lexical choice, Zhang's culturally references (e.g., “dark blue cotton-padded cloth” for “深青布棉袍”) outperform machine translation inaccurate equivalents (“dark green cotton-padded robe”). Stylistically, Zhang mirrors the prose's succinct and concise style, whereas machine translation adherence to surface structure of the source text. Chinese and English are different in terms of grammatical structures, idiomatic expressions and culture. Translators should not just put eyes on the surface text, or the translated text will lose the meaning and beauty of the original text.

Zhang's approach reveals the human translator's irreplaceability in navigating subjective understandings during the process of Chinese prose translation. Although AI has some limitations, people can't ignore their ability in gathering abundant information. Translators can make AI tools to do some preparations before translating, making AI to absorb both the local and global contextual information. [6] Collecting relevant information before the AI tool translates can improve the accuracy of translation, which is also in line with the translation techniques, Cultural Recognition mentioned before. What's more, English translation proofreading by adding semantic

ontology and fuzzy mapping can improve the efficiency and accuracy of translation. [7] AI is just a tool after all, and translators need to apply their own knowledge and experience in the process of cognitive reconstruction and balanced feedback.

3.2. Universal Techniques for Chinese Prose Translation

After a deep analysis of the meaning of constructivism, the study suggests three universal techniques for Chinese prose translation: Cultural Recognition, Cognitive Reconstruction and Balanced Feedback. These techniques complement each other. These three techniques can be used independently or together. In addition to being applied to Zhang Peiji's translation of *The Back*, these techniques can also be widely applied to other Chinese prose translations. Let's check it at the following examples.

Example 1

Source Text: 世界上气力最大的，是植物的种子。一粒种子所可以显现出来的力，简直是超越一切，这儿又是一个故事。（夏衍《野草》）[8]

Zhang's Translation: The strongest thing on the planet is the seeds of plants. In fact, they surpass all others in strength, and this fact is illustrated by another story.

This translation is structurally and stylistically similar to the source text. When the translator constructs his translation, he adds a new word "fact" to refer a sentence, and the phrase "in fact" echoes "this fact". These process can regarded as cognitive reconstruction. The style of the translation is similar to the original text, reflecting the Balanced Feedback technique.

Example 2

Source Text: 借来的书，在我好像过不来瘾似的，必要是自己买的才满足。这也可谓是一种占有的欲望。（夏丏尊《我之于书》）[9]

Zhang's Translation: It seems that books bought can better satisfy my bibliomania than books borrowed. You may also attribute this to some sort of desire for personal possessions.

This translation follows the process of Cultural Recognition. The word "bibliomania" clearly and exactly presents the author's preference for books. Instead of using the word like "possessive" or "possessiveness", the translator adapts "some sort of desire for personal possessions". Words like "possessive" and "possessiveness" carry an invidious meaning. These words aren't suitable for the text. When constructing a translation, one should be familiar with the cultural connotation of the source text.

4. Conclusions

From the perspective of constructivism, this study conducts a comparative analysis of Zhang Peiji's translation of *Back* and machine translation, and draws several significant conclusions.

Firstly, it has demonstrated that human translators possess irreplaceable advantages in handling cultural and stylistic elements in Chinese prose translation. Zhang's translation outperforms machine translation in emotional expression, lexical precision, and stylistic coherence, effectively recreating the art of language of the source text and enriching cross - cultural communication.

Secondly, based on constructivism, the study proposes three universal techniques for Chinese prose translation: cultural recognition, cognitive reconstruction, and balanced feedback. These techniques not only help enhance the understanding and accuracy of Chinese prose translation but also provide a structured approach for translators. They can be applied independently or in combination, and are not limited to the translation of *Back*, but have broad applicability in other works.

In the context of existing translation studies, these conclusions further clarify the role of constructivism in Chinese prose translation, filling a gap in exploring how this theory can be applied to improve translation quality. They also offer practical guidance for translators, helping them better understand the translation process and make more informed decisions.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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