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A Study on Construal of *Mencius'* English Translations from Cognitive Translation Studies Perspective

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Abstract:
Based on the perspective of cognitive translatology, this study conducts an in-depth exploration of the construal mechanism in the translation process. By taking James Legge's translation of *Mencius* as the corpus, this paper analyzes how the translator performs cognitive construal of the source text and converts it into the target language text. This study first outlines the theoretical foundations of cognitive translatology, including the definition, dimensions and processes of cognitive construal. Subsequently, by adopting the qualitative analysis method, this study focuses on the five dimensions of construal—scope, background, specificity, perspective and salience—and reveals how translators reorganize and re-express information by means of translation strategies such as literal translation, amplification and conversion, based on the cognitive categories of the source text.

Keywords:
Cognitive Interpretation, Cognitive Translatology, *Mencius*

1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of globalization, translation is crucial to international cooperation and knowledge sharing, serving as an important bridge connecting different cultures. Professor Sun Yi (2023) argues that translatology is a technology rather than a science. Therefore, translation is inherently interdisciplinary and can draw on insights from other disciplines to advance its own development [1]. As an emerging interdisciplinary subject, cognitive translatology organically integrates cognitive science, linguistics, neuroscience and translatology, and was first proposed by the Spanish translation scholar Muñoz Martín [2]. And through the years of development by subsequent scholars in this discipline, its disciplinary system has become relatively mature and is instructive for translation practice. From the perspective of cognitive translatology, this paper will adopt the five construal elements proposed by Langacker in 1991, namely scope, background, perspective, salience and specificity [3]. This paper analyzes the translated excerpts of the four virtues benevolence, righteousness, propriety and wisdom in James Legge's

translation of Mencius. As a tool for studying the translation of Confucian culture, cognitive translatology provides a new cognitive approach to exploring and understanding translated versions. By revealing the cognitive mechanisms in the translation process, it helps us realize that language is not only a medium of communication, but also a reflection of culture and thinking. Muñoz Martín (2010) stated that cognitive translatology is inherently functionalist, holding that mental states are dynamically created tools that people use to solve problems encountered in their interaction with the environment [2]. Therefore, cognitive translatology is not merely an academic discipline, but also a guiding theory that can improve the quality of translation.

2. The Significance of Research on English Translations of *Mencius*

As an important component of Confucianism, research on the English translations of *Mencius* helps promote the exchange and dissemination of Eastern and Western cultures. Through the analysis of these translations, we can understand how translators comprehend and interpret Mencius' thoughts against different cultural backgrounds. In terms of the rational governance addressed in modern philosophical discussions, Chen Lai (2014) pointed out that Confucian practical wisdom is more comprehensive than that of Aristotle and has its own merits: Confucianism emphasizes "cultivating moral character and achieving self-perfection", while Aristotle focuses on "accomplishing practical things and creating material objects" [4]. In recent years, although research on the English translations of *Mencius* has shown a diversified trend, cognitive translatology, as an emerging interdisciplinary field, integrates the research methods and theories of cognitive science and translatology to explore the cognitive activities in the translation process. Even though current studies on the English translations of *Mencius* have begun to adopt multiple perspectives such as reception aesthetics, linguistics and cross-culture[5]. However, the application of cognitive translatology to the study of English translations of *Mencius* remains relatively scarce. Applying cognitive translatology to this research area can fill this gap, provide a new perspective for understanding how translators construct and convey meanings against different cultural and cognitive backgrounds, reveal the strategies and decision-making processes adopted by translators when translating *Mencius*, analyze how translators express the profound implications and cultural connotations of the source text through language selection and organization, and thus contribute to promoting cross-cultural understanding and communication.

3. Construal Theory and *Mencius*

Mencius is one of the Confucian classics. Compiled by Mencius and his disciples during the Warring States Period, it records Mencius' words, deeds and thoughts. Mencius (c. 372–289 BCE), courtesy name Ke, was a native of Zou. As a second-generation disciple of Zisi, the grandson of Confucius, he was honored as the "Second Sage", and his ideology exerted a profound influence on later generations. From the perspective of cognitive translatology, the author argues that the research on the English translations of *Mencius* is essentially a process of cross-cultural cognitive construal of Mencius' ideology.

Within the framework of Cognitive Grammar, a core branch of cognitive linguistics, Langacker proposed the key concept of "construal", defined it as a basic form of human cognition, and further refined construal into five core elements: specificity, scope, background, perspective and prominence. Wen Xu (2007) argued that

"construal" is the process by which language users construct the meaning of expressions at the psychological level, indicating the relationship between speakers or listeners and the scenarios they conceptualize and describe [6]. Langacker (2008) stated that when observing a scene, what we perceive depends on our way of observation, including how closely we examine it, which objects we choose to focus on, the elements we pay the most attention to, and our point of observation [7]. However, due to the overlapping meanings of the concepts of scope and background, they are often discussed together [8]. In the following text, the author will conduct a separate analysis of the Four Beginnings proposed by Mencius, namely "benevolence", "righteousness", "propriety" and "wisdom", from the perspectives of scope/background, specificity, perspective and prominence.

3.1. Scope/Background and "Benevolence"

Within the framework of Cognitive Grammar, "scope" and "background" constitute core concepts, which play a fundamental role in revealing the deep structure of linguistic meaning. According to Langacker's theory, "scope" refers to the cognitive range covered by linguistic expressions and their activation state. "Background", on the other hand, serves as a provider of knowledge and information, which is crucial for understanding and interpreting linguistic expressions[7]. Although "background" overlaps with "cognitive domain" (scope) in certain aspects, it places greater emphasis on the specific information relied on within the context.

"仁" is one of the most important virtues in Confucianism, which holds that "仁" is an innate nature of human beings. In *Mencius·Gongsun Chou*, Mencius expounded on the concept of "仁" , noting that "恻隐之心，仁之端也" - which in modern Chinese means that compassion is the starting point of benevolence. James Legge translated it as "The feeling of commiseration is the principle of benevolence". In this version, "commiseration" corresponds to "恻隐", "principle" to "端", and "benevolence" to "仁". From a contemporary perspective, while this translation largely captures the original meaning, it also omits certain informational elements inherent in the source text.

According to the Oxford Dictionary, "commiseration" means "an expression of sympathy for sb who has had sth unpleasant happen to them, especially not winning a competition". It usually refers to sympathy for others' misfortunes, and may sometimes carry a hint of condescension. In contrast, the Chinese term "恻隐" denotes a deeper and more proactive form of compassion - an immediate response to others' suffering and an impulse to offer help.

In addition, the Oxford Dictionary defines "principle" as "a moral rule or a strong belief; a law, a rule or a theory; a belief", covering multiple meanings such as moral norms, firm beliefs, laws, rules, theories and convictions. However, in Mencius' philosophy, the term "端" specifically refers to the starting point and foundation of moral character, embodying an inherent potential and a direction for development. Although "principle" can denote a doctrine or tenet, it may fail to fully convey the complex connotations of "端", which include the implications of a germinal state and developmental potential.

Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines "benevolence" as "an act of kindness", which is essentially similar to the interpretation of "仁" (benevolence) in *Shuowen Jiezi* - "仁，亲也" . This indicates that both the Western concept of "benevolence" and the Eastern

notion of "仁" emphasize the intimate and affectionate bond between people. Such cultural similarity not only demonstrates the translator's profound understanding of Chinese culture, but also reflects their careful consideration of the cultural contextual meaning during the translation process. All linguistic units depend on context to a certain extent, and this context is what we refer to as the "domain". Background knowledge is crucial for understanding specific linguistic expressions, as it helps listeners or readers activate the conceptual domain categories related to the expressions [7]. In different contexts, translators need to master the corresponding cultural background knowledge to adapt the translated text to the linguistic habits of the target language group.

When it comes to conceptual domains, we cannot avoid referring to metaphors. Professor Sun Yi (2015) claimed that "metaphor is a unidirectional projection system from the source domain to the target domain, by means of which humans understand and insight into all things in the world from one to another, from the surface to the essence, from the abstract to the complex, and from the familiar to the unfamiliar - there is no other way.[9]" In *Mencius·Gongsun Chou*, the line "夫仁，天之尊爵也，人之安宅也" is translated as "Now, benevolence is the most honorable dignity conferred by Heaven, and the quiet home in which man should dwell well". In this sentence, Mencius employs a metaphor, whose operation mode lies in projecting the attributes of one concept (the source domain) onto another concept (the target domain). In this process, Mencius draws a parallel between "benevolence" and "noble title" as well as "dwelling". Mencius emphasized the nobility and tranquility of "仁", enabling people to comprehend the connotation of "仁" through these concrete and familiar concepts (Figure 1). Since the metaphor employed in the original sentence does not refer to any specific objects, readers from other linguistic and cultural backgrounds can also understand the intended meaning that Mencius tried to convey. Meanwhile, the translated version adopts a literal translation approach skillfully, which largely restores the artistic conception that the original text intends to embody.

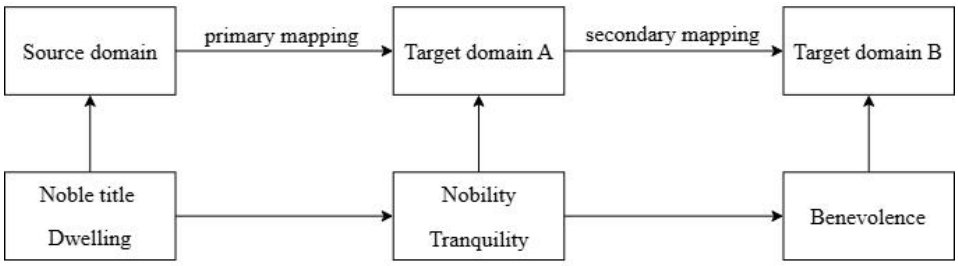

Figure 1. *Mapping Process*

3.2. Specificity and "Righteousness"

In Cognitive Grammar, specificity is a core concept in cognitive construal. It refers to the ability to construe a situation or entity in different ways, and specificity itself constitutes one concrete manifestation of such construal capacity, which determines the amount of information and precision in linguistic expressions [7]. Mao Qi (2021) stated that by adjusting specificity, speakers can consciously emphasize certain information points while omitting or simplifying others, thereby ensuring the effectiveness of communication. Such adjustments render linguistic expressions more precise and better able to meet specific communicative needs. [10] Therefore, the

adjustment of specificity is an important consideration in the translation process, which is related to the way information is presented and the readers' receptivity.

From the perspective of specificity, Chinese is a logographic language in which each character carries a certain meaning, whereas English is a phonographic language where words formed by letter combinations are used to convey meaning. This allows Chinese to express the same or even more information with fewer characters in some cases. However, it also means that to better preserve the information inherent in the Chinese language, translators need to adopt a strategy of amplification to ensure the maximum restoration of the original information.

Here is an example from *Mencius·Li Lou*. When Mencius talked about the essence of "righteousness", he mentioned, "义之实，从兄是也" . Its English translation is "The richest fruit of righteousness is this: the obeying one's elder brothers." In this example, the translator used the phrase "The richest fruit of righteousness" to render "义之实", which undoubtedly adopted the strategy of amplification. However, there is a mistake in the meaning conveyed. The character "实" here refers to the core or essence of a thing, but the translator incorrectly translated it as "fruit". This is obviously inappropriate. Therefore, a more accurate translation of this sentence could be: "The essence of righteousness lies in obeying one's elder brothers."

In another example, the translation strategy of amplification stands out even more prominently. In *Mencius·Li Lou*, when Mencius further emphasized the importance of moral education and legal systems for governing a state, he stated, "君子犯义，小人犯刑，国之所存者幸也". Its English translation reads: "Superiors violate the laws of righteousness, and inferiors violate the penal laws. It is only by a fortunate chance that a State in such a case is preserved." The translation has added the phrases" the laws of" and "penal laws", which have no direct equivalents in the original text, but they help English readers gain a clearer understanding of the meanings of "义" and "刑". However, it should be noted that while amplification facilitates comprehension for English readers, it may also alter certain subtle nuances of the original text to a certain extent. For instance, in the original text, "君子" and "小人" refer to people who differ in social status or moral standing. Yet according to the Oxford Dictionary, the definitions of "superiors" and "inferiors" are respectively "higher in rank, importance or position" and "of lower rank; lower"—these two words convey a stronger connotation of social hierarchy.

3.3. Perspective and "Ritual Propriety"

Perspective determines the angle and method through which we observe things, and it consists of the viewpoint and dynamicity. Choosing a different perspective means selecting a distinct frame of reference for cognition. Since every cognitive subject comprehends things based on their own frame of reference, different cognitive subjects will follow their unique cognitive paths and thus form varied linguistic expressions. Professor Wang Yin (2013) argues that "perspective shifting" is a common technique in translation practice, which encompasses multiple transformation methods such as part-of-speech conversion, syntactic constituent conversion, sentence structure conversion, and person conversion [11]. These transformation techniques are all based on the reinterpretation and expression of the perspective of the source text, designed to adapt to the linguistic habits and cultural background of the target language. Through such transformations, translators can

more accurately convey the meaning of the source text while ensuring the natural fluency of the target text.

"礼" in Confucianism is a multi-dimensional concept. It is not only a set of norms governing social behaviors, but also an important tool for maintaining social order and hierarchical structure. In *Mencius·Gongsun* Chou, Mencius defined "辞让之心" as "礼之端", meaning that having a modest and yielding attitude is the starting point for abiding by ritual propriety. In Mencius·Li Lou, Mencius supplemented, "礼之实，节文斯二者是也." He argued that the essence of "礼" requires it to be not merely external etiquette and rituals, but the embodiment of internal moral virtue, achieved through appropriate moderation and cultural refinement. In summary, Mencius held that "礼" is both the manifestation of internal virtue and the proper conduct that ought to be observed in social interactions.

In *Mencius·Li Lou*, "王曰：'礼，为旧君有服，何如斯可为服矣?'" is translated into "The king said, 'According to the rules of propriety, a minister wears mourning when he has left the service of a prince. How must a prince behave that his old ministers may thus go into mourning?'" In the above example, the subject of the original Chinese text is "礼"; that is, from Mencius' perspective, the emphasis is on etiquette and responsibility. However, the translator shifts the perspective of the translated text to superiors such as "a minister" and "a prince", using them as the subjects in the sentence components to emphasize the characters' actions, making the sentence more in line with the subject-verb-object structure in English. In addition, the translator adds the content "According to the rules of propriety" to explain "礼", providing cultural background for English readers to make it easier for them to understand the concept of "礼" and completing the sentence structure.

Mencius·Gongsun Chou states: "不仁、不智、无礼、无义，人役也". Its English translation is: "From the want of benevolence and the want of wisdom will ensue the entire absence of propriety and righteousness;-- he who is in such a case must be the servant of other men." In the process of translating this example, the translator adopted the translation strategies of converting verbs into nouns and transforming sentence structures. In the original Chinese text, "不仁", "不智", "无礼", and "无义" combine negative adverbs such as "不" and "无" with verbs (仁、义、礼、智) to express the meaning of lacking certain qualities. In English, the translator converts these verbal expressions into noun forms, namely "benevolence", "wisdom", "propriety", and "righteousness". Compared with the original structure of "不..." in Chinese, it is converted into the structure of "the want of" in English. This structure not only conveys the meaning of lack but also implies the need and expectation for these qualities. In addition, Han Dian (a Chinese dictionary) defines "人役" (human servant) as "犹役户" (similar to a service household), that is, a person who is subject to servitude. On the basis of these two translation strategies, the translator has made a semantic supplement to the translation of "人役也" (must be the servant of other men), emphasizing the causal relationship that a person who lacks the "四端"(four beginnings) will be reduced to a servant of others.

3.4. Highlighting and "Wisdom"

"Salience" refers to a specific concept or information becoming more prominent and crucial due to receiving additional attention in a certain context. This concept is a

core approach in the process of linguistic construal, relating to the degree of prominence of information, its importance in communication, and how it captures the focus of listeners or readers. Professor Wang Yin (2013) stated that to achieve the goals of thinking and expression, as well as to meet different needs for understanding scenarios, people can selectively emphasize specific objects in objective situations, and this selective emphasis gives rise to the diversity of linguistic forms and expression methods [11]. In the process of translation, this salience mechanism also plays a crucial role.

"智" (Wisdom) is described in Huainanzi·Chuzhen as: "智者，心之府也"; Han Feizi·Xianxue defines it as "智，性也"; and *Mencius·Gongsun Chou* states: "是非之心，智之端也". From this perspective, "智" is an inherent virtue of human beings. It is not only an innate cognitive ability but also a source of wisdom deep in the mind, guiding people to distinguish right from wrong and make wise choices.

In *Mencius·Li Lou*, Mencius raises a question here about whether those in power are wise: "为政不因先王之道，可谓智乎？" Through an ingenious rhetorical question posed by himself, the original text highlights the view that "governing not in accordance with the ways of the former kings cannot be regarded as wisdom." The translator renders it into English as: "Can he be pronounced wise, who, in the exercise of government, does not proceed according to the ways of the former kings?" The translated text adopts the same rhetorical question structure, with "Can he be pronounced wise" echoing "可谓智乎？" and preserving the sarcastic tone in the original text.

Furthermore, on this basis, the translator employed the amplification strategy to supplement the omitted subject in the original text. The phrase "who, in the exercise of government" allows English readers to more clearly grasp the sentence's reference—specifically, that the target of the questioning is "the current rulers in office." In the next example regarding salience, although the original text still takes the form of a self-posed rhetorical question, the translator adopted a completely different approach in handling it. In *Mencius·Gongsun Chou*, to comfort King Qi so that he would not feel ashamed because of the Yan people's rebellion, Chen Jia put forward the following in his conversation with King Qi: "王无患焉。王自以为与周公，孰仁且智？" The translator rendered it into English as: "Let not your Majesty be grieved. Whether does your Majesty consider yourself or Zhou Gong the more benevolent and wise?" In the original text, the emphasis is on the virtue of "benevolence and wisdom". In this context, Chen Jia was not truly asking King Qi who he thought was more benevolent and wise between himself and the Duke of Zhou; instead, through this rhetorical question, he implied that even a sage like the Duke of Zhou had flaws. However, the translator used the structure "whether...or..." in the English version to emphasize the two parties being compared, namely "King Qi" and "the Duke of Zhou". This handling is somewhat inappropriate compared to the original text. Because in Chinese, a rhetorical question is a figure of speech that does not expect an answer from the listener; instead, it essentially expresses the speaker's own views or emphasizes a certain point by posing a question. Nevertheless, such an English translation complies with English expression habits—it must have an agent that receives or performs an action, making it easier for target language readers to understand and accept.

4. Conclusions

Based on the perspective of cognitive translatology, this study conducts an in-depth analysis of the cognitive construal mechanism in the translation process. The study selects James Legge's English translation of *Mencius* as the research object, explores how the translator achieves in-depth understanding and expressive transformation of the original text in translation, and focuses on examining four key dimensions of cognitive construal in the translation process: scope/background, specificity, perspective, and salience. It analyzes Legge's translation through the concepts of "仁" (benevolence), "义" (righteousness), "礼" (propriety), and "智" (wisdom) in Mencius' thought. The author finds that in the dimension of scope/background, Mencius illustrates the relationship between "仁" and the monarch-minister relationship through examples, and Legge adopted a literal translation strategy in this process, which fully conveys the original meaning. The study reveals how translators apply different translation strategies according to the cognitive content of the source language text, demonstrates the application of cognitive construal in translation practice, emphasizes the positive role of translators in cross-linguistic and cross-cultural information transmission, and provides valuable references for translation practice from the perspective of cognitive translatology.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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