

Original Paper

The Manifestation of the Translator's Subjectivity in George Steiner's Four Steps in Translation—Taking Zhang Peiji's

English Translation of Li Dazhao's *National Crisis vs Heroic*

Nation as an Example

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Abstract

*The four-step theory of translation proposed by British translation theorist George Steiner provides a systematic approach and thinking for translation practice, mainly consisting of the four steps “trust”, “intrusion”, “absorption” and “compensation”. In Li Dazhao's essay *National Crisis vs Heroic Nation*, the author uses the flowing river as a metaphor for the progress of a nation's life and the rough and perilous road as a metaphor for the historical path that the Chinese nation has encountered. The most famous English translation of *National Crisis vs Heroic Nation* is by Mr. Zhang Peiji, which is of high quality, more faithful to the original text and similar in style. Guided by George Steiner's interpretation of the four steps of translation theory, this paper takes Mr. Zhang Peiji's English translation as the research object, and intervenes the translator's subjectivity into the four steps to analyze its manifestation in the translation.*

Keywords

*four steps of translation, translator subjectivity, *National Crisis vs Heroic Nation**

1. Introduction

In 1970, the translation theory of the “cultural turn” was put forward by western translation scholars, and since then scholars have begun to study the original text and the translation from a broader viewpoint without comparing the original text and the translation isolated. Regarding the translator’s subjectivity study, there are many opinions and in hermeneutic translation theory, the focus is more on the importance of translator stepping out of the background of the original work and interact face-to-face to the readers, and exercising its subjectivity. Divided into five segments, the *National Crisis vs Heroic Nation* is an expository prose originally issued in Vol. 1, No. 2, December 20, 1923, *New Republic*. It is brief, yet bursting with poetry. Generally Mr. Li made good use of the rhetorical device of metaphor in his writing, not only improves the persuasiveness of writing but also the visualization of the languages and vividness of emotions, his revolutionary optimism and patriotic sentiments touched and inspired a large number of readers. This article adopts George Steiner’s four-step translation procedure to dissect the difficult embodiment of translator’s subjectivity in Zhang Peiji’s rendition of *National Crisis vs Heroic Nation* to further get an insight of the translator’s subjectivity.

2. George Steiner’s Four Steps of Translation

George Steiner is the author of *After the Tower of Babel: A Comprehensive View of Language and Translation*, which is esteemed as a pivotal document, distinguished by its specific attributes and profound theoretical significance within the realm of contemporary Western translation studies. The four steps of translation proposed by Steiner, namely “trust” the aesthetic value of the original text, “invade” the cultural elements of the original text, “absorb” the pragmatic meaning of the original text, and “compensate” the cultural image of the original text, as important guiding principles in the translation process, have had a profound impact on translation practice.

George Steiner’s hermeneutic translation theory is unique in the Western language and translation theory circles. It not only plays an immeasurable role in the study of the essence of translation, but also has guiding significance for the translation practice process. First of all, the translator should believe that the original text is understandable and that the work being translated is a meaningful and enlightening one. Analysis of the original text is the first step in the translation process. In this step, the translator needs to have a deep understanding of the original text and analyze its meaning, context and cultural background. This helps the translator to understand the original text better, and thus convey the meaning of the original text more accurately in the translation process; Secondly, after understanding the original text, the translator will bring out something meaningful; Next, the translator needs to absorb the original text to varying degrees, infuse new vitality into the translation, and transfer the meaning and form of the original text into the translation. In this step, the translator needs to choose the appropriate translation strategy based on the characteristics of the original text and the characteristics of the target language. This may involve a variety of strategies such as literal translation, free translation, domestication, and

foreignization, with the aim of making the translation more fluent and natural while maintaining the meaning of the original text; Finally, provide the necessary compensatory measures for the translation. In his book *After the Tower of Babel*, Steiner points out, “Interpreting the operation is dangerous and incomplete, dangerous because it is incomplete. Without the fourth stage, like a piston stroke, the entire cycle is complete with the fourth stage” After the first three steps, the original work loses its linguistic elements and sense of balance to some extent. Compensation can restore this balance in form and content between the original text and the translation, and only through compensation can the translation approach the standard of a high-quality translation. It is evident that Steiner’s four steps of translation always emphasize the translator’s important role throughout the translation process.

In summary, Steiner’s four-step theory of translation has an obvious guiding role in translation practice, and it has deep guidance significance for translators. Translators can guide translation practice through following four steps to better understand and express the meaning of the original text, and make translation higher quality.

3. Translator Subjectivity

Translator subjectivity does not mean that the translator makes random subjective assumptions. Instead, it means that the translator can fully honour the original text and meanwhile make full use of her own proficiency to make the translation fit more suitably to the taste and cultural background of the target audiences. The subjectivity lies in a thorough insight about the translation job and a strong sense of responsibility possessed by the translator. On one side, this subjectivity can enrich the connotation of translation, making translation more lively and interesting. On the other side, it can promote cultural exchange and help to break away cultural barrier.

In literary works, the translator’s subjectivity can be fully exerted. Translator subjectivity refers to the subjective initiative that the translator shows in the translation process to achieve the translation purpose while respecting the original work. Its basic characteristics include conscious cultural consciousness, humanistic character and aesthetic creativity. Especially in the field of literary translation, the translator, based on their understanding of the original work and bilingual mastery, transforms the work into the target language and artistically processes it, endowing it with a unique personal translation style and language style, thereby highlighting the translator’s own subjectivity.

The chief expressions of the subjectivity of the translator are as follows: First, in word choice and grammatical constructions, in consideration of the difference between nuances in target language context and under the consideration of reading preferences of the audience, a watchful eye is paid to the judicious selections of words and sentence constructions that fill both of these requirements. Secondly, the cultural adaptation, where the translator revises various cultural aspects across translation so that it better resonates with target readers. The third one is the style transformation; the translator beautifully changes various stylistic styles of the original text according to current aesthetic tendency of target readers. Of

course, the usage of this subjectivity is accompanied by the challenge caused by culture gap. Translators cannot overlook the fact that people from different nations and cultures hold different aesthetic tastes and paradigms, and also need to ponder these differences for realizing their “transliterating sensibility” when translating with a strong subjectivity to avoid generating conflicts and confusions.

4. Steiner’s Four Steps of Translation in the Manifestation of the Translator’s Subjectivity in the *National Crisis vs Heroic Nation*

4.1 The Aesthetic Value of the Original Text “Trust”

According to the interpretation process proposed by Steiner, the first step is “trust”. George Steiner points out that since the translator is convinced that the original text has substance, the translator's translation will surely not be empty. *National Crisis vs Heroic Nation* is a famous piece in the history of Chinese prose, and it is a work that aligns with Zhang Peiji’s interests. *National Crisis vs Heroic Nation* is a well-known prose piece by Li Dazhao. Literary history has only identified him as an early literary activity, and there are only a few comments on his essays (Ma, 2006, p. 115). In fact, Li Dazhao’s prose not only has unique ideological value, but also has a strong artistic quality. The author uses rhetorical devices such as symbolism and metaphor to reveal the inevitable laws of historical development and the difficulties and obstacles faced by the Chinese revolution, demonstrating a strong sense of patriotism. Zhang Peiji was able to have a relatively accurate understanding of Li Dazhao’s optimistic revolutionary spirit when translating his prose, and thus his “trust” in the text was established.

4.2 “Intrude” the Cultural Elements of the Source Text

In the step of “intrusion”, the translator is aggressive and predatory (Xie, 2008, p. 103). When the translator is hindered in interpreting the original text and their “trust” is frustrated, they need to mobilize their literary ability to penetrate from the surface words of the text into the text. Intrusion refers to the stage of the translator’s understanding of the original work. In Steiner’s view, in the process of translation, the translator “invades, extracts, appropriates for himself” “understanding means not only the cognitive meaning but also encircling and absorbing. In interlingual translation, the exercise of understanding behavior is clearly aggressive and destructive.” Steiner once compared translation to “an open-pit mine that leaves scars in the landscape after being mined”; Heidegger points out that “understanding, cognition and interpretation are a closely integrated and inevitable pattern of invasion”.

Example 1: 艰难的国运与雄健的国民

Zhang translated *National Crisis vs Heroic Nation*

The title of Mr. Li Dazhao’s essay is highly inspiring and full of optimism. Likewise, the title reflects Li Dazhao, a fighter of the new culture, who is not pessimistic or depressed and hesitant, and gives a bright prediction about the fate of the Chinese nation that is moving forward in hardship. The title of the original text is a positive phrase, but Mr. Zhang translated the central word of the original text as an attributive, effectively highlighting the peril of the nation and the author’s confidence in the revolution. Not only

does it sound forceful, but it also accurately conveys the essence of the original text. The translator's "intrusion" into the original text can be seen at the level of personal language ability. The selection of similar linguistic and cultural elements reflects the translator's subjective initiative and the ingenious use of English phrases to express the source language, which retains the characteristics of the source language while ensuring the fluency of the translation.

4.3 "Absorb" the Pragmatic Meaning of the Source Text

The core of this step lies in how the translator incorporates his understanding of the original text into the translation. When faced with a conflict between two languages and cultures, the translator needs to be flexible in choosing translation strategies to avoid absolute foreignization or localization. It is a challenge for the translator to use a language that emphasizes form to allow foreigners to appreciate the charm of Chinese prose, which is highly characteristic of the Chinese revolution, such as *National Crisis vs Heroic Nation*. However, Mr. Zhang has set an example for scholars, and the subtleties of his translation can be analyzed through the following examples.

Example 2: 一条浩浩荡荡的长江大河，有时流到很宽阔的境界，平原无际，一泻万里。有时流到很逼狭的境界，两岸丛山迭岭，绝壁断崖，江河流于其间，回环曲折，极其险峻。

Zhang translated this paragraph as "A mighty long river sometimes flows through a broad section with plains lying boundless on either side, its waters roll on non-stop for thousands upon thousands of miles. Sometimes it comes up against a narrow section flanked by high mountains steep cliffs, winding through a course with many a perilous twist and turn".

The phrase and the short sentence in the source text have basically the same number of words and rhythm, so the text has a powerful momentum. The translator strives to make the language precise, delicate, natural and fluent at the sentence level. This shows that the translator, by exerting subjectivity and focusing on the recreation of the spirit in the text, not only retains the information and function of the original text but also interprets the style of the original text.

4.4 "Compensate" for the Cultural Image of the Original Text

In order to achieve a balance between the original text and the translation, the translator needs to "compensate", that is, fill in the missing information of the original text in various ways. This ensures that the translation is more complete and accurate. The words in Li Dazhao's prose are rich in meaning and flexible in usage. How to translate these words effectively is the key to translating this essay. In order to strike a balance between the original text and the translation, the translator needs to implement "compensatory" measures, that is, to complete the missing information in the original text in various ways. With regard to the Chinese words that appear in the text, in order to ensure the smoothness of reading for the target language readers, Zhang Peiji has carried out supplementary explanations or added relevant information for such words to reproduce the cultural image of the original text and achieve a balance between the source text and the translation.

Example 3: 中华民族现在所逢的史路，是一段崎岖险阻的道路。在这一段道路上，实在亦有一种奇绝壮绝的景致，使我们经过此段道路的人，感得一种壮美的趣味。

Zhang translated this paragraph as “The Chinese nation is now confronted with a rugged and dangerous section of its historical course. Nevertheless, there is also in this section a spectacle of enormous magnificence that inspires in us passers-by a delightful sensation of splendor”.

In this sentence, Mr. Zhang Peiji pays more attention to “resemblance in spirit”, combining the two parallel words “historical path” and “road” into one for translation. In addition, in the sentence “Nevertheless, there is also in this section a spectacle of enormous magnificence that inspires in us passers-by a delightful sensation of splendor”, the translator also combined the words “extraordinary” and “magnificent” in the translation. Apparently, the translator did not adhere to the literal meaning of the original text, but rather made a deep understanding of the original text and accurately reproduced the meaning of the original text in context. The phrase “奇趣横生” in the context should mean “extremely attractive”, so Mr. Zhang translated it as “fascinating”.

5. Conclusion

In the process of translation, the exertion of the translator’s subjectivity builds a bridge for communication between the author and the reader, and establishes a bond between one’s own culture and that of other countries. Based on George Steiner’s hermeneutical translation theory, the text analyzes Zhang Peiji’s translation of *National Crisis vs Heroic Nation* from four steps— trust, intrusion, absorption, and compensation—and concludes that the translator’s subjectivity is manifested to varying degrees in each step. Taking Mr. Zhang’s English translation as an example, this article explores how the translator’s subjectivity is specifically exerted in these four steps, and through the detailed handling of the language and emotion of the original text, it can be known that the translator’s subjectivity has a considerable influence on translation. At the same time, the author believes that the exertion of the translator’s subjectivity has limitations and is constrained by multiple factors, so more practice is needed for the study of the translator’s subjectivity.

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