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Constructing a Translator Competence System in China from the Perspective of Intersubjectivity

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Abstract

Existing research on translator competence has predominantly focused on the bilingual transfer, extra-linguistic knowledge, and instrumental competence of individual translators, treating the translator as the sole agentive subject of the translating act, while paying insufficient attention to multiple social actors such as authors, patrons, publishers, critics, and readers. Adopting intersubjectivity as its theoretical perspective, this study examines the interactions between local translators and various parties within the translational subject network in the "outward translation" of Chinese literature. It argues that translation is a polyphonic dialogue jointly enacted by multiple subjects: situated at the centre of a relational network, the translator should not have his or her competence defined merely at the technical level of whether and how well one can translate; rather, it should shift towards a communicative competence that mediates, negotiates, integrates, and reconciles the diverse, heterogeneous, and sometimes conflicting demands of multiple subjects. On this basis, the study identifies four groups of competences: the competence for in-depth understanding of and strategic negotiation with authors; project management and negotiation competence with patrons and publishers; academic dialogue and reflective competence with critics; and audience awareness and empathetic competence with readers. It further argues that critical thinking and strategic integration, as a metacognitive capacity, permeate all the above communicative processes and constitute the core of the local translator's competence system from an intersubjective perspective. This study offers an analytical framework that foregrounds the communicative dimension for translator competence research in the Chinese context, and provides a reference for the cultivation and assessment of local translators. A limitation remains: grounded primarily in theoretical reasoning, the study lacks translational case studies and empirical data, and the relative weight and interaction mechanisms of the various competence components await fur-

ther verification.

Keywords

Intersubjectivity, Local Translators, Translator Competence, Communicative Competence, Outward Translation of Chinese Literature

1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of the ongoing "going global" strategy for Chinese literature and the increasing diversification of agents involved in translation practice, local translators now occupy an increasingly important role. (The term "local translators" refers throughout this study to translators whose professional formation and primary practice are grounded in the Chinese context; it is not used to denote a particular nationality, first language, or institutional affiliation, and it therefore includes both Chinese and non-Chinese translators working within that context.) Existing research on local translator competence, however, has focused predominantly on the knowledge, skills, and cognitive resources of the translator as an individual. The PACTE group's recognised translation competence framework divides translator competence into multiple linked sub-competences, namely bilingual proficiency, extralinguistic awareness, translation-specific knowledge, instrumental skills, strategic competence and psycho-physiological factors. At its core, this model investigates whether individual translators can carry out linguistic transfer efficiently and accurately. In Chinese scholarship, Zhong (2003) developed a parallel "translator knowledge structure" model, which revolves around linguistic resources, encyclopaedic knowledge and professional interpreting expertise while stressing the significance of a translator's personal knowledge reserve. Broadly speaking, this body of research treats the translator as the key actor in translation practice. It gives limited consideration to other stakeholders that the translator engages with, and grounds competence assessment largely on a translator's basic capacity to translate and the overall quality of their translated work. This emphasis on the individual should not be confused with an outright rejection of collaboration: PACTE's model, for example, is principally concerned with the cognitive resources of a single translating mind, and remains silent on the question of collaborative translation rather than excluding it. Yet a conspicuous limitation persists: these studies attend almost exclusively to the translator's own abilities while neglecting the multiple subjects also present in the translation event—authors, patrons, publishers, critics, professional readers, and general readers—and overlook the fact that the translator's work is in fact accomplished through sustained interaction with these subjects. With the theoretical shift in translation studies from subjectivity to intersubjectivity, Xu (2003) argues that translation should coordinate the relationships among such subjects as the author, the translator, and the reader, and promote the fusion of horizons through actively inter-

active intersubjectivity; Chen (2005) further contends that translation studies should move from a single translator-subject to intersubjective communication and understanding among multiple subjects. This suggests that examining competence solely from the perspective of the individual translator is insufficient, and that due attention must also be paid to the translator's communicative competence with other subjects within the translational subject network. Building on this, the present study adopts intersubjectivity as its theoretical perspective and focuses on local translators engaged in "outward translation", addressing the central question of "with whom they communicate, what they communicate about, and what communicative competences are required" in their dealings with the various parties of the translational subject network. It maps in detail the relational competences involved in negotiating meaning and strategy with authors, communicating project requirements and norms with patrons, dialoguing over evaluation and reflection with critics, and calibrating reception with readers, with a view to providing a supplementary framework that foregrounds the communicative dimension for translator competence research in the Chinese context.

A preliminary distinction is in order. The communicative processes examined below are of three different kinds, and they call for different abilities. First, there is direct interpersonal negotiation, in which the translator speaks or writes to a patron, publisher, or critic and receives an actual reply. Second, there is text-mediated interpretation, in which the translator engages with an author who is absent or no longer living, and the exchange takes place entirely through the text. Third, there is anticipated response, in which the translator addresses an imagined or implied readership whose reaction is projected rather than observed. The four competences set out in Sections 4 cover all three kinds; the "silent dialogue" with an author and the communicative relation to an imagined readership are therefore to be understood as mediated and projected forms of communication, not as substitutes for direct negotiation.

2. From Subjectivity to Intersubjectivity: The Theoretical Turn in Translator Competence Research

Conceptualisations of the subject-object relationship in Western philosophy follow a distinct developmental path. Within medieval theological frameworks, God functioned as the exclusive subject, with humans placed in the position of objects. Modern philosophy, originating from Descartes's cogito, affirmed the subjective standing of humans and classified all that exists outside the "I" as object. Husserlian phenomenology disrupted this binary setup and introduced the idea of "intersubjectivity" [Intersubjektivität], highlighting that the other, no less than the ego, is a subject equipped with intentional consciousness. This transition represents a shift in philosophical reasoning from a "subject-object dichotomy" to intersubjective dialogue. Subsequently, Heidegger, in his ontology, further argued that one of the essential characteristics of Dasein is "Being-with-others" [Mitsein], and that

no isolated subject exists independently of others. Habermas's theory of communicative action redefines reason as a product of the communicative process, holding that genuine understanding can be achieved only through intersubjective linguistic communication. From a sociological standpoint, Schutz introduced the notion of "reciprocity of perspectives", contending that individuals come to understand one another's worlds of experience by exchanging their respective observational standpoints. Situated in the field of literature, Bakhtin's theory of polyphony underscores the equal coexistence of multiple independent voices and opposes any form of monologic discursive hegemony. Although these theories emerge from disparate academic traditions, they converge on a central message: subjectivity can be truly realised only in relation to the other.

In contrast, within the field of translation studies, the long-dominant author-centred paradigm, text-centred paradigm, and the subsequently emerged translator-centred paradigm have all, in essence, perpetuated an individualist mode of thinking. The author-centred paradigm enshrines the original author as the supreme authority of meaning, confining the translator's task to one of faithful reproduction. The text-centred paradigm fixes its gaze exclusively on the text itself, severing its connections with the external world. Although the translator-centred paradigm accords the translator greater initiative, it readily slides into an overstatement of translator power. The shared problem of these three paradigms lies in their placing a particular subject at the absolute centre, thereby obscuring the existential value of other subjects in the translation event. In fact, the translation event is inherently intersubjective: it is a "polyphonic" dialogue jointly enacted by multiple subjects. Once a particular subject is magnified without limit, the voices of other subjects are suppressed or even obliterated. As Ge (2006: p. 219) points out, "the relationship between subject and subject is not a simple subject-object binary, but rather an intersubjective relationship".

Intersubjectivity theory opens a new window for translation studies, enabling researchers to move beyond the constraints of individualism. It relocates translation from a monologic act of a single subject to an act of communication and dialogue among multiple subjects. Within this new framework of understanding, the translator no longer plays the role of the author's servant, a linguistic conveyor, or a textual manipulator; rather, he or she becomes a node within an intersubjective relational network, coexisting with other subjects as equally legitimate sources of meaning, mutually constructing meaning, and jointly advancing the completion of the translation task through sustained dialogue and negotiation. This equality, it should be stressed, is epistemic and moral rather than institutional: it concerns the recognition due to each subject's perspective, not the distribution of power. This shift in theoretical perspective also opens up a new direction for rethinking translator competence: the translator's competence manifests itself not only at the technical level of linguistic transfer, but also, and more importantly, in whether he or she can establish effective communicative and collaborative relationships among multiple subjects.

3. Analysis of the Translational Subject Network

Intersubjectivity theory provides translation studies with an entirely new framework of understanding, relocating translation from a monologic act of a single subject to an act of communication and dialogue among multiple subjects. Seen from this theoretical perspective, the translation event is no longer regarded as a closed process accomplished by the translator alone; rather, it constitutes an open network of communicative acts in which multiple subjects—authors, translators, patrons, critics, and readers—participate and intertwine.

The stakeholder categories chosen for this analysis are not picked at random. This selection draws on a three-part breakdown of the translation event. The author provides the original communicative intent; sponsors and publishers create the conditions for production and distribution; critics and readers shape how the translation is received and assessed. Such roles rest on an intersubjective foundation: meaning emerges through dialogue instead of being imposed by one individual agent. All these participants connect within one relational framework, as every party relates to the same translated text and may either facilitate or hinder its final delivery. Sponsors and publishers appear as one combined group not because their duties match exactly. Unlike sponsors, publishers take charge of editing and quality checks. They are grouped together analytically because both control financial and institutional resources; without these resources, a translated manuscript cannot reach formal publication. This grouping is therefore a conceptual distinction, not an administrative one.

Xu (2003) claims that no subject exists in isolation. Instead, each self exists alongside others, and its very being depends on the presence of other subjects. Put simply, translation meaning cannot be fixed by one participant alone. It develops dynamically through ongoing dialogue and negotiation across multiple subjects. Bakhtin's theory of polyphony provides solid theoretical backing for this perspective. He maintains that real lived experience and human thinking are inherently dialogic, and that no single monologue can capture truth in full. When applied to translation studies, this framework suggests translated texts emerge where many different voices overlap, rather than as a one-way outcome shaped by the will of just one subject.

This makes it essential for translation research to move its focus away from how translators finish tasks independently. New attention should centre on how translators negotiate and communicate with a range of other subjects. A translator's primary duty is not merely to follow instructions from one side passively. Instead, they must find a balanced position amid competing requirements from different stakeholders. Through continuous discussion and bargaining, the translator combines separate, sometimes conflicting demands into a combined resultant force that serves the shared objective of translation. The subsequent discussion will examine the translator's engagements with various subjects, offering a detailed analysis of how this relational network is structured and functions.

First, the translator and the author.

The author constitutes the starting point of the translational subject network, supplying the source intention with which the translator must come to terms. From an intersubjective perspective, however, the translator and the author are equal subjects in dialogue. Their interaction encompasses an understanding of the author's intent, communication regarding cultural stances, and negotiation over translation strategies. This is particularly the case when dealing with texts containing culture-specific images or historical allusions: the translator must decide whether to preserve the distinctive features of the source text or to accommodate the reading habits of the target-language reader, a process that is, in essence, a silent dialogue with the author. Xu (2003) characterises this process as the "fusion of horizons", namely the mutual collision and interpenetration of the translator's horizon and the author's horizon in the course of their dialogue, which ultimately generates a new semantic space. It is therefore necessary for the translator to possess the ability to understand the author's intent in depth, and to negotiate with the author when necessary, striking a balance between respect for the spirit of the original and consideration of the target text's acceptability.

Second, the translator and the patron.

Patrons serve as crucial agents in enabling the translation event, controlling economic capital, publishing channels, and market access. In his manipulation theory, Lefevere (1992) argues that patrons—whether individuals, groups, or institutions—exert influence on the translation event through factors such as ideology, economy, and social status, determining, to a certain degree, the selection, production, and dissemination of the translated text. In the practice of Chinese literature's "going global" campaign, government agencies, cultural foundations, and large publishing houses play the role of key patrons. Translators need to communicate and negotiate with them on concrete issues such as the feasibility of translation projects, financial support, publication schedules, remuneration standards, and copyright ownership. This requires the translator to possess project management competence and negotiation competence, so as to reach consensus with patrons and publishers while upholding his or her own cultural stance and professional judgment, and to ensure the smooth progress of the translation project.

Third, the translator and the critic.

Critics serve as significant observers of and commentators on the translation event; their reviews directly affect both the reputation of the translated work and its subsequent market reception. The interaction between the translator and the critic is manifested primarily at the level of academic dialogue. Habermas's theory of communicative action emphasises that rational consensus can be reached only through free intersubjective dialogue. Likewise, sound interaction between the translator and the critic also helps to deepen the understanding of translational issues. On the one hand, the translator needs to attend to scholarly evaluations of his or her work, drawing on beneficial suggestions so as to enhance his or her own translating competence. On the other hand, the translator may also respond to

criticism by writing articles, expounding his or her own translation philosophy, and participating in the construction of translation theory. Such two-way academic dialogue not only helps to enhance the translator's professional status, but also contributes to the overall development of the discipline of translation studies.

Fourth, the translator and the reader.

Readers constitute the ultimate constituency of the translation event and serve as the crucial measure for assessing its efficacy. From an intersubjective perspective, however, the reader is not a passive recipient, but an active participant in the generation of meaning. In his reception theory, Iser (1978) argues that numerous "blanks" and "indeterminacies" exist within the text, and that these must be filled in and concretised in the course of reading; meaning is therefore generated in the interaction between the reader and the text. This entails that the translator must possess a clear audience awareness in the process of translation, adjusting translation strategies in light of the knowledge backgrounds, reading expectations, and aesthetic habits of different reader groups. For professional readers, the translator may incline towards preserving the flavour of the original and providing annotations so as to meet their academic needs; for general readers, it may be necessary to adopt a more flexible approach of sense-for-sense translation or compensation strategies, so as to ensure the readability and acceptability of the target text. This ability to anticipate and regulate reader response constitutes an important component of the translator's communicative competence.

To sum up, within the translational subject network, the dialogues between the translator and the various parties with whom he or she communicates differ in their respective emphases, yet converge on a shared core objective: through effective communication, negotiation, and coordination, to integrate the diverse, heterogeneous, and even conflicting demands of multiple subjects into a "resultant force" directed towards the shared translational goal. This understanding also lays the analytical foundation for a further exploration of the specific components of the local translator's competence.

4. The Core Components of the Local Translator's Translation Competence from an Intersubjective Perspective: Communicative Competence

As the foregoing theoretical overview illustrates, the translation event is best understood not as the action of an isolated subject, but as a network of communicative activities co-produced by a range of agents: authors, translators, readers, translation initiators, publishers and critics. Bakhtin's theory of polyphony underlines that authentic life and thought are inherently dialogic, such that no single monologue can fully contain truth. Adopting this perspective within translation studies means regarding the translated text as a meeting point of competing voices, rather than a unidirectional product shaped by the will of just one subject. Habermas's theory of communicative action advances this argument further. He contends that rational consensus cannot stem from the coercive demands of

any individual actor, and can only develop through unrestricted intersubjective exchange. Read through this theoretical lens, translator competence is no longer limited to the discrete skill of linguistic transfer. Its centre is the ability to communicate effectively within tangled intersubjective relationships. At its heart, this communicative competence functions as practical wisdom: it supports translators to communicate, negotiate, reconcile and mediate the diverse, disparate and occasionally conflicting requirements put forward by multiple subjects.

4.1. Communicative Competence with the Author: Understanding and Negotiation

The interaction between the translator and the author constitutes the starting point of the translation event. The competence required in this relationship comprises, first, a capacity for in-depth understanding of the author's intent, creative background, and cultural stance, and second, a capacity for negotiation over translation strategy—an undertaking that extends beyond grasping the semantics of the source text to encompass an investigation of the author's creative intent, cultural stance, personal style, and the "pre-understanding" structure of the era in which the author lived. As Xu (2003: p. 293) observes, the process of translation is "a collision and fusion of two horizons". Understanding, however, is not unidirectional reception. When a vast difference obtains between the source culture and the target culture, the translator must possess the capacity for negotiation. In dealing, for example, with a text containing culture-specific images or historical allusions, the translator must judge whether to adopt a foreignising strategy to preserve the distinctive features of the source text, or a domesticating strategy to render it intelligible to the target-language reader. This choice is by no means a simple technical operation; rather, it is a silent dialogue and negotiation conducted between the translator and the author through the medium of the text, one that calls for a solid bilingual and bicultural foundation as well as a keen sense of stylistic perception.

4.2. Communicative Competence with Patrons and Publishers: Project Management and Negotiation

The translator's interaction with patrons and publishers is equally crucial. Patrons and publishers serve as vital agents in making the translation event possible, controlling economic capital, publishing channels, and market access. Lefevere (1992) argues that patrons—whether individuals, groups, or institutions—manipulate the translation event through factors such as ideology, economy, and social status. In the practice of the "going global" campaign for Chinese literature, government agencies, cultural foundations, and large publishing houses play the role of key patrons. Engaging with patrons and publishers requires the translator to possess project management competence and negotiation competence. The translator must be able to articulate the cultural value, market potential, and feasibility of a translation project with clarity, so as to secure its approval and the necessary fi-

nancial support. At the same time, in the course of project execution, the translator must communicate and negotiate with the publisher on such concrete matters as the translation schedule, remuneration standards, copyright ownership, cover design, and marketing and promotion. When confronted with a publisher's demands for "excessive domestication" or "the deletion of sensitive content" made on market grounds, the translator must be capable of negotiating with the publishing side in a well-reasoned and well-evidenced manner while upholding both professional integrity in translation and his or her cultural stance, so as to arrive at a solution acceptable to both parties. What is put to the test here is not merely the translator's communicative skill, but his or her profound understanding of industry norms and market logic.

It must be acknowledged, however, that the equality invoked above is epistemic rather than institutional. The framework accords equal recognition to each participant as a subject whose perspective carries legitimate claims; it does not presume equality of power. In practice, patrons and publishers control the funding, the schedule, and the gatekeeping decisions that determine whether a project reaches print at all. When negotiation fails—when a publisher's demand for excision or excessive domestication cannot be reconciled with the translator's professional and ethical stance—the translator may be left with withdrawal, public justification, or compromise, none of which can be subsumed under the rubric of successful communication. The framework therefore treats negotiation as a constrained practice: it can clarify what is at stake and articulate a reasoned position, but it cannot guarantee a favourable outcome where institutional power is asymmetrically distributed.

4.3. Communicative Competence with the Critic: Academic Dialogue and Reflection

The translator's interaction with the critic embodies the academic dimension of the translation event. Translation critics serve as significant observers of and commentators on the translation event; their reviews directly affect both the reputation of the translated work and its subsequent market reception. At its core, the interaction between the translator and the critic is a form of academic dialogue. An accomplished translator does not passively await criticism, but takes the initiative to follow scholarly feedback on his or her work, treating it as an important means of self-improvement. This form of interaction calls for reflective competence on the part of the translator. When a critic calls into question a particular solution adopted in the translated work, the translator must analyse the grounds of the criticism with composure: has the critic failed to appreciate the translator's painstaking intentions, or does the translator's own treatment indeed deviate from what is warranted? A case in point is the long-standing debate in scholarly circles over the divergent strategies adopted in David Hawkes's translation of Honglou meng and the translation by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang. A translator possessed of reflective competence can draw nourishment from such a debate, thereby deep-

ening his or her understanding of the nature of translation. Going further, the translator may also write articles in response to criticism, setting out his or her own translation philosophy and taking part in the construction of translation theory. This proactive academic dialogue serves to enhance the translator's professional standing and influence.

4.4. Communicative Competence with the Reader: Audience Awareness and Empathy

The translator's interaction with the reader constitutes the ultimate destination of the translation event. Readers are the ultimate constituency served by the translation event and the touchstone against which its efficacy is tested. The translator's interaction with the reader is realised through the concept of the "implied reader". An image of a target readership is present to the translator at all times, and it is in the light of this image that the translator adjusts his or her translation strategies. At the heart of this interaction lie audience awareness and empathetic capacity. The translator must imaginatively put himself or herself in the position of the target-language reader, envisaging the reader's knowledge background, reading expectations, and aesthetic habits. Iser's (1978) theory of the "receptive structure" holds that numerous "blanks" and "indeterminacies" inhere in the text, and that these must be filled in and concretised in the course of reading. The translator's task, then, is to create for his or her ideal reader a "receptive structure" that is at once challenging and not so obscure as to be incomprehensible.

4.5. Integrative Competence: Critical Thinking and Strategic Integration

The four forms of communicative competence outlined above do not exist in isolation. They act jointly upon one and the same translation project, and at times they may even come into conflict.

It should be emphasised that the present notion of strategic integration is not coextensive with the strategic competence identified by PACTE. In PACTE's model, strategic competence operates at the level of the translation process itself: it is the procedural capacity that monitors, evaluates, and re-routes the bilingual transfer when difficulties arise, with the translator as the sole problem-solver. The strategic integration proposed here, by contrast, arbitrates among the demands of multiple stakeholders—the author's intent, the patron's schedule, the critic's standards, and the reader's horizons—and decides which claim prevails under given institutional constraints. The former optimises how a text is rendered; the latter determines for whom and at whose cost it is rendered. In this sense, strategic integration is a relational and ethical meta-competence that presupposes, rather than replaces, PACTE's strategic competence.

A patron's demand for efficiency, for example, may conflict with a translator's pursuit of quality; pandering to the reading habits of the general reader may run counter to fidelity to the author's original intent. It is at such moments that the

translator requires a higher-order integrative competence—namely, critical thinking and strategic integration. This is a metacognitive capacity. It requires the translator to identify with clarity the various contradictions and tensions that arise across different communicative scenarios, and to rank the competing demands in order of priority and to make value judgments concerning them, on the basis of a comprehensive consideration of the macro-level cultural strategy, the specific translation situation, the translator's own professional ethics, and the interests of all parties involved. In translating a serious work of literature, for instance, the translator may need to adopt a predominantly foreignising strategy in the main body of the text out of respect for the author, while adding extensive annotations at the end of the book to meet the needs of professional readers, and explaining his or her translation philosophy to the general reader by means of a translator's preface so as to orient the act of reading. This process of decision-making is the very process in which the translator exercises critical thinking and makes an optimal choice within the intersubjective network. In other words, the translator must be capable of integrating different translation strategies creatively within a complex and even conflictual situation, so as to form a coherent and self-consistent overall solution, thereby ensuring the smooth progress of the translation project amid the multiple negotiations among the parties. This integrative competence runs through the entire course of the translator's interaction with every subject, and it is the very core of the local translator's competence system from an intersubjective perspective.

5. Conclusion and Implications

Drawing on intersubjectivity as its theoretical perspective, the present study undertakes a preliminary analysis of the translation competence of local Chinese translators in the practice of outward translation. By tracing the theoretical turn from subjectivity to intersubjectivity, this study establishes that the translation event is a communicative act in which multiple subjects participate jointly, and that the translator occupies the centre of a relational network composed of authors, patrons, publishers, critics, professional readers, and general readers. On this basis, the study identifies the key competences required for the translator's interaction with each communicative counterpart: the capacity for understanding and negotiation in the translator's engagement with the author; project management competence and negotiation competence in the engagement with patrons; the capacity for academic dialogue and reflective competence in the engagement with critics; and audience awareness and empathetic capacity in the engagement with readers. It further argues that critical thinking and strategic integration run through all of the above communicative processes.

Admittedly, the present study is not without its evident limitations. Constrained by the scope of the paper and the author's own capacity, the analysis offered here rests chiefly on theoretical deduction, and lacks the support of actual translation cases or empirical data; the relative weighting of the various compe-

tence components and the mechanisms of their interaction likewise await further investigation. Future research may draw on methods such as case analysis, interviews, or questionnaire surveys to test and refine the competence framework proposed in this study.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, Liang H. T. and Zhang C. Y.; methodology, Liang H.T.; writing—original draft preparation, Zhang C. Y.; writing—review and editing, Liang H. T. and Zhang C. Y.; visualization, Zhang C. Y.; supervision, Liang H. T.; project administration, Liang H. T.; funding acquisition, Liang H. T. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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