

## On the Translator's Subjectivity -- From the Perspective of Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics

LI Yan<sup>[a],\*</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup> School of Applied English Studies, Shandong University of Finance and Economy, Jinan, China.

\* Corresponding author.

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### Abstract

For a long period in history, translation approach is prescriptive and source-text oriented. Much of the emphasis is put on the nature, criteria and techniques of translation, highlighting the decisive status of the source text and putting the translator in a neglected position. With the uprising of the descriptive translation approach accompanying the "Cultural Turn" in translation studies in the west after the 1970s, the complex role that the translator plays in the whole process of translation has gained increasing attention among translation theorists. The subjectivity of the translator, one branch of the study on the translator, has become a necessary and important research subject. This paper applies the basic notions of Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics-historical interpretation, prejudice and fusion of horizons-to justify the translator's subjective creativity in the act of translation. It probes into the connotation of the translator's subjectivity, its manifestations and restrictions.

**Key words:** Translator's subjectivity; Philosophical hermeneutics; Interpretation; Fusion of horizons

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### INTRODUCTION

Translation, as an act of great complexity, involves many factors. It demonstrates fully the complexity, diversity

and indeterminacy of humanities. In terms of research levels of translation, we have philological approach, the linguistic approach, the cultural approach and the philosophical approach with different schools and approaches holding different viewpoints on the nature of translation. Philological approach regards translation as a process of recreation. Linguistic approach generally defines translation as the replacement of one linguistic form of another or the transference of one linguistic form into another. Cultural approach of early stage holds that translation is a decision-making activity and later on, people advocating this approach argue that translation is rewriting and manipulation. Also there are expressions of the nature of translation in post-colonial theory and deconstruction theory. Here, this paper does not mean to put forward an ultimate answer, but rather, it attempts to approach the general issues of translation studies by exploring one basic issue from one specific perspective, that is the translator's subjectivity from the perspective of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics.

The translator is the subject of translation and subjectivity refers to his characteristics in the process of translation. In this paper, we define translator's subjectivity as the translator's intention, initiative and creativity, in short, subjective creativity. Meanwhile, we have to bear in mind that considering the complexity of translation, the translator's subjective creativity should presuppose the restrictions it suffers from the objects and other subjects, namely, the author and the readers. The translator's subjectivity does not refer to his blindness and arbitrariness in manipulating the original text; he has to take restrictions into account.

Hermeneutics, as a discipline concerning understanding and interpretation, has evolved gradually and formed close relationship with translation studies. Philosophical hermeneutics, as a descriptive and dialectic branch of hermeneutic philosophy, is exactly what is needed for the examination of the complicated phenomena of translating

and translation. Gadamer's thoughts upon translation, such as translation being interpretation, translation being highlighting and translation involving compromises, have given rise to wide application to translation studies and highly inspired people's study on the translator's subjectivity.

This paper contains 5 sections. In the first section, the author explores the establishment of the translator's status as translation subject. Then comes the author's tentative probe into the connotation of subject and subjectivity in the second section. In the third section, the basic principles of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutic are exemplified. These principles include "the history of understanding", "the historically-effected consciousness" and "the fusion of horizons" which demonstrate the openness and plurality in the textual interpretation and justify the translator's subjectivity in the translation process. In the last two sections, the author examines the manifestations of the translator's subjectivity in the light of Gadamer's hermeneutics and its restrictions.

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## 1. THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE TRANSLATOR'S STATUS AS TRANSLATION SUBJECT

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As the most important participant in the translation process, the translator deserves the status of great importance. Whereas, for a long time, traditional translation theory, China and abroad, do not adequately justify the translator's status. They were neglected and marginalized. Such images as "a servant", "a fettered dancer", "a piece of transparent glass" or "an invisible person" (Venuti, 2004) demean the translator as the faithful servant of his two masters, namely the original author and the target reader. He must be loyally characterized and completely objective by hiding all his personalities, thus be a totally invisible person. His task is to faithfully and objectively reproduce the source text.

Modern translation theory has elevated the study of the translator's subjective status to a heated topic. In the last several decades, translation studies has undergone gradually the changes through studies on language, culture to translator, symbolizing a great progress of the study from object to subject, from monism to pluralism.

Walter Benjamin pioneered the research on the translator in the western world. French scholar Berman put forward the slogan of "turning to the translator" (1995), which made a great revolution in this field of study. Deconstructionist pointed out the great necessity of the translator's subjective illustration to meet the indefinite meaning of the original. Susan Bassnett and Andre Lefevere turned to the more broad perspective of culture and brought forward such theories as "translation and rewriting", "translation and gender" and post-colonial translation theory (Bassnett & Lefevere, 1990). They emphasize that the translation process is a decision-

making process and the translator is to occupy and manipulate the original text.

The emphasis on the translator's subjectivity is inspiring and enlightening. On the one hand translator's labor can be evaluated more objectively, and on the other, translator may feel more obliged to accomplish his mission responsibly. The above arguments on the translator's subjectivity are more or less limited. Benjamin's study is more inclining to the function of translation as approaching the "pure language". Deconstruction approach does not take into considerations of the translators' characteristics as translation subject and also neglects the macro contextual elements. Cultural study approach overemphasizes the translator's manipulation status by neglecting that the uncompromising linguistic and cultural differences can also lead to great difficulties in translation. So we need a more objective and persuasive approach to base our argumentation on. Hermeneutics as a mature and fully constructed theoretical system has provided a fair angle for the study of the translator's subjectivity. Its implications are of highly instructive value in literary translation.

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## 2. A TENTATIVE PROBE INTO THE CONNOTATIONS OF SUBJECT AND SUBJECTIVITY

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The main concern of this paper is to explore the issue of the translator's subjectivity by adopting the basic theories and principles of Gadamer's hermeneutics. The first thing to be tackled in this study is to define what we mean by saying "subject" and "subjectivity". Before we come to the principles of philosophical hermeneutics and its enlightenment on the study of translator's subjectivity, it is necessary for us to make clear some of the basic terms.

### 2.1 Subject and Subjectivity in Philosophy

The issues of subject and subjectivity remain to be the core issues in philosophical studies. There is a popular viewpoint in contemporary philosophy that subject refers to man himself and object refers to what man acts on and cognizes. In fact, man is not born to be subject and people's views on subject have undergone a long historical development. Substantialists hold that any substance exists as subject and subject does not necessarily refer to man. This neglects man's initiated and self-motivated action upon the universe. Latter, history witnesses man's ability to alter nature during the course of which man's awareness of free inbeing is promoted. Thus, for the first time in history, man as individual is considered to be the subject and such category as subjective creativity is used henceforth in modern philosophy. But, underlying this perspective is man's subjectivity in the sphere of man's consciousness. The philosophical ideas in this period are confined to epistemological level. Contemporary

philosophy tends to explore man's value and significance as being, which deepens people's cognition on subjectivity. Contemporary western philosophy turns to linguistics to explore man's subjectivity, holding that language is man's way of being. They enlarge the domain of "subjectivity" and discuss the relationship between subject and inter-subject. To them, man can be both the subject and the object depending on whether they are carrying out an action or being acted upon.

Some experts in China also present their understanding of "subjectivity" based on their study. It is commonly acknowledged that subjectivity refers to the prescription of man as the subject. It basically refers to man's practicality and creativity. Briefly, it means the self-motivation exclusive to man. Li Nanming concludes that it is man's cognition, criticizing and alteration of the world that construct his subjectivity. And, he goes on to declare there are three characteristics of man's subjectivity: independence, creativity and transcendent freedom, the three respectively referring to man's consciousness of freedom as determining power, man's practical activity and man's infinite possibilities. He also confirms that subjectivity can only exist in the action of the subject on the object. No subject can enjoy absolute freedom in playing his initiative, for there should be no transcendence over the object (LI, 2004). These discussions highlight man's subjective creativity in the course of practice while avoid blindly exaggerating subjectivity, which leads to absolute egoism. These philosophical views on subject and subjectivity are helpful in our understanding of subject and subjectivity in translation.

## 2.2 Subject and Subjectivity in Translation

Although the study on translation subject and subjectivity is a heated topic in contemporary translation studies, no consensus for who is (are) the subject(s) of translation has been reached. The dispute mainly comes from different understandings of the connotation of translation. Some people think that the word "translation" only refers to the translation process, so it goes without saying that the translator is the subject of translation, for he is the only initiator and practitioner of translation. Another group of people hold different ideas, arguing that "translation" not only refers to the translating behavior but also involves all the related factors in translation activity, so there are two other subjects in translation to be included, namely the author and the reader. Xu Jun, after analyzing the two opposite arguments attains at a middle course that translator, author and the reader are all translation subjects, with translator as the subject in a narrow sense, the other two in a broad sense. Meanwhile, he adds that the translator is more dominant (XU, 2003). In this paper, the argument of the translator as the main subject of translation is adopted.

As we have explored the essence of subject in the above parts and know that only when man is carrying out

certain action can he be considered as the subject. Here, by "certain action", we mean translation. It is true that the original author produces the text; he does not mean to be translated. He is the initiator of writing while not dedicates in the process of translation. However, in a broad sense, without the author's work, the translator has no action to be carried out. So, we can say, the author indirectly dedicates in the process of translation and he is also an important participant in the process of translation. The same is true with the readers. Although they are only the accepters of the translated works and do not bring into play in the translation process, the value of translation can only be achieved through the readers' reading of the translated text. The readers are also the influential factors in translator's selection of translation strategies. We can say that in a broad sense, both the author and the reader can be the translation subject, but the translator is more dominant in the process of translation. In the latter part, we mainly concentrate our study on the subjectivity of the translator.

Since the translator is the subject of translation, it goes without saying that subjectivity refers to his characteristics in the process of translation. In this paper, we define translator's subjectivity as the translator's intention, initiative and creativity, in short, subjective creativity. Meanwhile, we have to bear in mind that considering the complexity of translation, the translator's subjective creativity should presuppose the restrictions it suffers from the objects and other subjects, namely, the author and the readers. The translator's subjectivity does not refer to his blindness and arbitrariness in manipulating the original text; he has to take restrictions into account.

## 3. IMPORTANT PRINCIPLES OF GADAMER'S PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS

As a discipline concerning understanding and interpretation, hermeneutics has a long history and evolves gradually. Philosophical hermeneutics comes into being with Heidegger's ontological turning from traditional methodological hermeneutics in the 1960s and further developed and perfected by Gadamer.

The important concepts of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics are included in his monumental work *Truth and Method* (1960), based on which we concentrate upon Gadamer's notion of the historicity of understanding, which is the one of the most important principles in his theoretical system. Besides, some of his other important concepts, such as prejudice, effective history, horizon, the fusion of horizons are also included.

### 3.1 The Historicity of Understanding

It is pointed out in the editor's preface of *Philosophical Hermeneutics* that all cognitive understanding and interpretation are based on the historicity of "being", that

is on the pre-retrospective understanding of "being" from its specific situations. To say that understanding is based on the historicity of "being" means that human beings exist in history; they can only understand and interpret things according to historical traditions. In fact, both the object to be interpreted and the interpreter exist as the specific elements of historical traditions. They help keep historical traditions consciously or unconsciously, and meanwhile, transmit and renovate those historical traditions. This is the historicity of understanding. Therefore, any understanding has three preconditions, which in Heidegger's words are: "fore-having", "fore-sight" and "fore-conception". Heidegger summed up the three with "pre-understanding". Gadamer accepted this concept of pre-understanding and developed it into "prejudice". For him, the historicity of understanding constitutes the prejudice of understanding. Human beings are always living in history where understanding is carried out, so the interpreter always understands things on the basis of prejudice which is achieved from tradition. Understanding is a kind of fore-project, expecting the object been understood in harmony with the tradition. This kind of meaning presupposition accompanies him in his understanding and constitutes the precondition of understanding and most of all, fuses the interpreter, the object, the past and the present in an open and ever-generating cultural whole. This justifies the diversity of translated texts in different periods of history (Gadamer, 1989).

The historicity of understanding has great enlightenment on translators. It argues that both the subject and the object of understanding exist historically, which, in translation goes that both the translator and the text are "beings" in history and are influenced by historical traditions. This justifies the restriction and creativity of the translator on the one hand and in addition, highlights the importance of context in the process of understanding. Gadamer's concept of prejudice requires the continuous communication between the translator and the translated text and ensures the openness of the text and the subjectivity of the translator.

### **3.2 The Concept of Historically-Effected Consciousness**

The concept of effective-history embodies Gadamer's basic standpoints on history. He holds that there are continuous interactions between past and present during which the activity of the subject and the object, namely, the horizon of the interpreter as the subject of interpretation and that of the text as the interpreted object are also included. Historical tradition is always a continuous impetus and influential force in the interactions. Both historical phenomenon and the text are no longer the objective objects of the interpreter regarding his forever embedded position in the two. History is the unity of one and another, for history itself also exists in history, thus history is substantially the unity

of history and the understanding of history. This kind of unity is what Gadamer said the effective-history. This concept is, in essence to acknowledge the history from the actual effect, which determines that whenever we try to understand certain historical phenomenon across the temporal distance, we are always entangled by the influence of effective-history.

The substance of Gadamer's concept of effective-history is to acknowledge the historicity of the text and the understanding, which in translation justifies the necessity and importance of retranslation. No version of a translated work is absolutely definite, for in Gadamer's words there is no "intentional meaning" of the original author. It is commonly acknowledged that translation is like a dialogue between the translator and the author, the former always considering what the meaning of the author really is. The truth is that in most cases, this dialogue is unilateral, and the exploration of the intentional meaning cannot be judged and acknowledged by the author. The pursuing of the intentional meaning is in vain. The interpreter should acknowledge that everything is living in history and his version is one created in history and should be judged by history. The text is open and the meaning is always waiting to be explored. The significance and the value of a text is always generating along with its translators. So some experts claim the necessity of retranslation and believe that it is the endless approaching of the real meaning of the original. Human beings transcend themselves through continuous understanding and write their own history as well as rethinking and criticizing their culture in the course of ever-generating and ever-developing "effective-history".

### **3.3 Fusion of Horizons**

Horizon is the possible reaching area of vision, with the area covering everything perceived from a certain vantage point. The text is bound to reveal the horizon of its author, while the interpreter possesses the horizon formed in the concrete social and cultural background of the present. The two horizons differ greatly and this can not be removed or ignored by any interpreter, thus Gadamer advocates a fusion of the two. The process of fusion is the communication and conversation between the interpreter and the text, both participating actively and transcending their original horizons accordingly, and as a result achieving a higher, superior and universal horizon. The past and the present, the subject and the object, the self and the other constitute a concrete historical unity.

Gadamer's concept of the fusion of horizons helps to conclude that translation is in essence a kind of interpretation. With the indeterminacy of the source text (ST) itself and the different horizons of the author and the interpreter, this kind of interpretation is a restricted one.

The interpreter's horizon is made up of two parts, i.e. his unique horizon and his shared horizon. By the latter we refer to the horizon shared by the interpreter with the

other members of the culture in which he lives. He should interpret the text according to the determinacy of the original and at the same time take into considerations of the acceptability of the target culture. In translation, the translator makes conscious and unconscious shifts and improvements in crossing the cultural obstacles. This is a kind of culture filtering, which is inevitable in translating. A typical case is the different interpretations of “beauty” in eastern and western cultures. As a culture image, the understanding of “beauty” reflects the cultures and customs of different nations. In the English culture, the so called “beauty” can be blond or brown, smart or dumb and they need not have regular features. But things are different in Chinese culture. The so called “beauty” must be fair and slim, having arched eyebrows and almond eyes, cherry lips and oval face.

#### **4. MANIFESTATIONS OF THE TRANSLATOR’S SUBJECTIVITY IN THE LIGHT OF GADAMER’S PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS**

The above three principles of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics lead to the conclusion that understanding is a historical movement in which neither the interpreter, its subject nor the text, its object can be considered as two autonomous parts. History is a fundamental continuity and a medium that encompasses every subjective act and the object it comprehends. Both the interpreter and the text exist historically and have their own horizons, which can be referred to as the starting point, or the possibilities of understanding. The fusion of horizons is the real approach of interpretation. Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics has provided theoretical bases for the presence of the translator, which suggests that the translator give full play of his presence to be the real subject of translation. The subjectivity of the translator embodies in the following three aspects, namely, in the translation process, in the translator’s cultural consciousness of the target culture and readers and in the inter-subjectivity of translating.

##### **4.1 In the Translation Process**

Translation process can be roughly divided into two phases: the understanding of the ST and the representation of it in the target text (TT). In the process of text understanding, the translator should be fully involved in this process to give full play to his literary capacities including his emotion, his volition, his imagination and his aesthetic tendency etc. In the dialogue with the text, the translator adjusts his individual pre-structure to the structure of the source text and hence comes to the fusion between the two fields of horizons so as to make the text meaning more completely constructed.

In the process of text representation, the translator should endeavor to convey the ST to TT on the layer of

content as well as the aesthetic characteristic and language style. He has to maneuver what he has obtained from the ST as a reader and interpreter, and makes it fuse into the language transformation. To perfectly represent the information and aesthetic conception of the original, he has to find the ideal language form in the target language.

##### **4.2 In the Translator’s Consciousness of the Target Language (TL) Culture and Readers**

The translator’s consciousness of the target culture and readers is one manifestation of his subjectivity and should be advocated in translation studies. In translation, a translator needs not only to think about the relationship between words, sentences, passages and then the whole text, but take into considerations all the aspects of the context of culture, the needs of the target reader and the concrete historical background of the original.

According to Skopos theory, translation is a purposeful activity, and it is a complex action designed to achieve a particular purpose (Munday, 2001). Hence, “knowing why a ST is translated and what the function of the TT will be are crucial for the translator” (p.79). These viewpoints from Skopos theory enlighten us to approach translation from cultural perspective. Translation is an act of cross-cultural activity and any translation activity proceeds from a certain cultural purpose. According to his consciousness of the demands of the target culture, the translator then determines what to be translated and what strategy and method are employed in the process of translating. A translator’s awareness of the culture of the TL is also embodied in his awareness of the target readers. According to the theories of aesthetics of reception, the historical essence of artistic works lies not only in the creation of the artist but also in the reception of the readers. Erwin Wolff proposed the concept of “intended reader” (Jauss & Horab, 1987). Similarly, Terry Eagleton advanced the concept of “implied reader (Eagleton, 1986).” The two concepts both refer to the imagined readers in the author’s mind when writing. In order to make the TT accepted and played a particular role in target cultural context, the translator has to consider the “horizon of expectation” of his “implied” or “intended” readers, such as their moral, cultural and literal expectations of that time.

##### **4.3 In the Inter-Subjectivity of Translating**

The translator is not an isolated participant in the translation, he has close interrelationship with the author and the readers. Therefore, he should keep a harmonious and conversational relationship with the text (the implied author) and the reader (the indirect object). As a matter of fact, what we have called as the “inter-subjectivity” of translation is actually referred to this kind of relationship. It is a feature of the interaction of different subjects, which is a necessary part of the subjectivity of human. The translator’s subjectivity also manifests in the inter-relationship of translating.

First, the translator’s subjectivity manifests in the

interrelationship with the author. Philosophical hermeneutics regards translation as understanding and interpretation, which requires a dialogue between the subjects. Understanding is by no means confined in the language level, nor is it meant to reestablish the intention of the original author. Both the author and the translator enjoy equal rights in the dialogue. As a result, both the author's voice and the translator's can be heard in the translated text with the two voices overlapping with each other.

The relationship between the translator and the reader is also an important part in the study of inter-subjectivity of translating. There is also a dialogue between the translator and the reader, the latter being the intended reader of the former. Their dialogue starts as early as the translator has a ST to be translated and employs the translation strategy. According to Skopos theory, translation is a kind of action which is "purpose-driven", "outcome-oriented" and "message-transmitter compounds involving intercultural transfer" (Munday, 2001). The reception theory provides ways to realize the translation purpose by pointing out that without the subjective activity of the reader's reading, a text would be meaningless and lifeless.

## 5. RESTRICTIONS ON THE TRANSLATOR'S SUBJECTIVITY

There are restrictions during the translating process. In truth, the translator cannot break away from limitations in his act of translation, and he merely enjoys relative freedom.

Firstly, restrictions come from the historicity of the translator. For a translator, his cultural background, emotions and feelings, his value system and personality are mainly related to his pre-understanding and will influence his understanding of the original. We call these factors the historicity of the translator. With different cultural backgrounds, emotions and feelings towards the original, different translators may present readers quite different target texts or characters, thus reveal their subjectivity one way or another. Besides these personal factors, the macro social environment and historical tradition of a translator's time also account for his restrained subjectivity.

There are restrictions from the original text and the readers of the target text. The translator, while resorting to his subjectivity in translating, has to satisfy his "intended readers". The readers' expectations, their responses towards the translated work are also factors worth of attention. The reader groups exert certain restrictions upon the translator's action in translating and thus the translator's subjectivity is restricted accordingly. The restriction on the translator's subjectivity also comes from his commissioner. The translator has to satisfy

his employer. When a translation is commissioned, instructions, guidelines, and preferences from the commissioner have to be followed.

## CONCLUSION

The translator's subjectivity refers to his subjective creativity, which aims at a dialectical and harmonious unity between the translator, the author and the target readers. The translator's historical existence proves the inevitability of his subjectivity during translating and also influences his selection of translation strategies. His understanding bears the influence of his historical existence. His social and cultural identities call for his consciousness of the target culture and readers. All these views are the enlightenments of philosophical hermeneutics upon translation. With the help of Gadamer's hermeneutic thoughts, this paper examines why and how the translator's subjectivity influences translation and also explains the restrictions on the translators. The translator's subjectivity by no means refers to the absolute freedom and arbitrariness of his manipulation of the original. The translator's historical existence influences his understanding of the original, thus develops his cultural consciousness. Therefore, his interpretation is a limited interpretation and he can only enjoy restrained subjectivity.

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