
RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Hermeneutic Approach to the “Rebirth” of a Classic: Translator’s Subjectivity in Seamus Heaney’s *Beowulf*

Guo Yueyi

Postgraduate student, School of Foreign Languages, Jiangxi University of Finance and Economics, Nanchang, Jiangxi China

Corresponding Author: Prof. Xiao Rui, **E-mail:** 1010138941@qq.com

ABSTRACT

Over the centuries-long translation practice of the Old English epic *Beowulf*, the modern English translation by the Northern Irish poet Seamus Heaney is regarded as a classic “rebirth” of the epic. However, prior studies of his translation focus on partial discussions of cultural identity or translation strategies. It lacks a systematic interpretation of the translator’s subjectivity under a unified theoretical framework. Therefore, backed by George Steiner’s hermeneutic translation theory, this paper employs its four-step analytical framework — trust, aggression, incorporation, restitution, to interpret Heaney’s translation practice combined with close reading and case studies. The study finds that Heaney creatively integrated Irish dialect vocabulary (e.g., “thole”, “bawn”), modernized syntactic structures, simplified Old English compound words, and compensated for alliteration and cultural terms. Through these strategies, his translation not only faithfully recreated the epic style, but also infused the translation with Irish cultural traits, strengthening a cultural dialogue between Britain and Ireland. The paper demonstrates that translator’s subjectivity is not a deviation from the source text (ST). Rather, it is the core factor enabling a classic to achieve “creative transformation” and “modern rebirth”. Therefore, this paper provides a new interpretive path for *Beowulf* translation research. What’s more, it offers the practice for utilizing translator’s subjectivity to achieve the cross-cultural “rebirth” of Chinese literature translation.

KEYWORDS

Hermeneutic translation theory; Seamus Heaney; *Beowulf*; Translator’s subjectivity; Classic “rebirth”

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1. Introduction

Beowulf, an ancient Anglo-Saxon heroic epic, is one of the oldest and longest complete literary works from early medieval Europe, thus a treasure of British and world literature. Composed in Old English with 3,182 lines, this epic recounts the heroic deeds of the Scandinavian hero Beowulf, and portrays the customs and communal life of early Germanic society. However, its verse is described as “solemn, ornate, obscure, elusive, metaphorical, simultaneously concise and complex, implicit yet intense” (Deng Hong et al., 2007). Its vast difference from Modern English prevents general readers from apprehending. Therefore, generations of translators tried to translate this epic into Modern English to bridge the linguistic gap. Statistics show that since 1786, *Beowulf* has been translated into numerous Modern English and multilingual versions (Wu Lan, 2014). Among these, John Mitchell Kemble’s first complete prose translation in 1837 established the early translation tradition.

Those ongoing translation activities confirm the assertion of German scholar Kubin (2020:43): “A text expects to be discovered, understood, and translated, thereby expanding and continuing its vitality.” From this perspective, in the 1980s, with an invitation from the editors of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Seamus Heaney (1939–2013), the Northern Irish poet and Nobel laureate, spent fifteen years retranslating *Beowulf* from the poetic verse to restore the work’s poetic value, rather than then-dominant prose form. Published in 2000, the translation was immediately hailed as “a masterpiece made from a masterpiece” (Andrew Motion, 1999). The *New York Times* praised it for “accomplishing what before had seemed impossible: a faithful translation

that is itself a gripping poem," and for "so perfectly fulfills the needs of most readers for a version that is both accurate and poetic" (Shoaf, 2021). Ultimately, among more than sixty translations to date, "Heaney's version, distinguished by its uniqueness and readability, won the Whitbread Book of the Year Award and topped the American bestseller list" (Hu Qinling et al., 2014). It successfully effected a "rebirth" of this epic in the contemporary cultural context.

The achievement of Heaney's translation has earned it a significant place in translation studies. Existing studies predominantly focus on aspects such as cultural identity, translation strategies, linguistics, cultural memory, and dialect vocabulary. Deng Hong (2009) and Li Chengjian (2007) employed Homi Bhabha's hybridity theory to analyze the hybridity of cultural identity and language in the translation, extending it from the local to the universal. Both scholars (2007) also paid attention to Heaney's translator's subjectivity. Du Xinyuan (2016) explored the "otherness" and "metonymic" translation in the work. Wu Lan (2014) conducted a linguistic comparison from the perspective of spatial deixis. Yuan Guangtao (2023) interpreted the translation's renewal and expansion of memory from a cultural memory perspective. Furthermore, Zhu Chenyun (2021) and others discussed the use of Irish dialect vocabulary. Although Zhang Jian (2010) analyzed Heaney's strategies drawing on Steiner's "four-step process" from a hermeneutic perspective, he did not systematically analyze the overall impact of Heaney's subjectivity on the translation. In summary, while those studies offer multiple perspectives for understanding Heaney's translation, there is a core question that how does Heaney's translator's subjectivity specifically reflect within the translation process, ultimately catalyzing the "rebirth" of the epic. What insights does such study offer for the international dissemination of Chinese culture facing similar challenges of "cultural filtering" and "semantic renewal"?

Hermeneutic translation theory provides an ideal theoretical framework to address those questions. This theory demonstrates that translation is inseparable from understanding, as "understanding is translation". The completely faithful representation is impossible because the translator and author inhabit different historical contexts and horizons (Gadamer). Translation is a process of fusion between the translator's horizon and the author's horizon. The translated text (TT) inevitably reflects the translator's subjective understanding and historicity. As Kubin (2020:43) observed, "something from another space and time speaks to us; in this process, something withers, something is reborn." A successful translation, as Kubin (2017:138) stated, can satisfy the target reader's deep-seated expectations of being 'articulated,' 'confided in,' and 'touched.' It allows them to confirm their own identities through the 'Other' (the source culture) or satisfy their curiosity about alterity (cultural otherness)."

Therefore, this paper is grounded in George Steiner's hermeneutic translation theory. It employs his proposed four-step framework — trust, aggression, incorporation, restitution to systematically examine Seamus Heaney's Modern English translation of *Beowulf*. The paper aims to deeply analyze how Heaney's cultural identity, poetic concepts, and linguistic choices dynamically functioned throughout the entire translation process, thereby dominating the epic's "rebirth". Not only a deep analysis of a Western classic translation case, this paper but also provides a referential theoretical framework and practical model for the globalization of Chinese culture and "rebirth" of Chinese literature in the world.

2. George Steiner's Hermeneutic Translation Theory and Translator's Subjectivity

2.1 George Steiner's Hermeneutic Translation Theory

In *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, George Steiner further developed the hermeneutic theories of Heidegger and Gadamer, extending them into a hermeneutic translation theory. He claimed that "Understanding as translation," revealing the intrinsic relationship between the nature of understanding and translation. He divides translation into four steps — trust, aggression, incorporation, and restitution. First, "Translation begins with trust." (Steiner, 1976: 296). The translator must believe the work to be translated is meaningful and worthy. Only then can they accurately interpret the source, consciously or unconsciously undergoing the step of "trust." The second step is "aggression." After establishing trust in the source text, the translator inevitably encounters cultural conflicts between the source and target languages during interpretation and transmission, thus leading to deviations. Therefore, the translator must free from the constraints of their own cultural literacy and historical background. In practice, the translator inevitably infuses their subjective consciousness into the source text and incorporates personal understanding into the translation. The third step is "incorporation." Translation process is necessary to adjust or alter the structure of the source text. The translator adopts appropriate strategies to seek balance between the source and target languages, avoiding excessive domestication or foreignization. It is noted that the third stage is not the endpoint of translation. Translation must disrupt the equilibrium. The translator's trust in the source text actually reflects a certain preference for it. During the stages of "aggression" and "incorporation," translator's cultural and linguistic differences cause the loss of some information. Therefore, the fourth step, "restitution" is essential to achieve translation balance for an ideal translation, with the translation's fidelity and its acceptability (Xie Tianzhen, 2018).

2.2 Translator's Subjectivity from a Hermeneutic Perspective

"Traditional Western translation theory has been dominated by a 'source-text-oriented' and 'author-centered' paradigm, which equates fidelity with literal correspondence to the original"(Lawrence Venuti,1994). Consequently, in practice, the translator's role

was consistently marginalized, their significance neither fully recognized nor valued. The early 1980s witnessed a seminal “cultural turn” in translation studies, after which a consensus emerged: translation is far more than the mere substitution of linguistic signs; it is a profound form of cultural exchange and interaction. With translation thus redefined as a cultural act, the translator's central and indispensable agency has come into sharp focus. There is now a growing, critical awareness that the translator—long a neglected subject—must be re-evaluated and accorded greater attention and respect across the discipline (Yuan Li, 2003). Translator's subjectivity is defined as “the subjective initiative of the translator-as-subject, who, while respecting the source text, acts to fulfill the translation purpose. It is characterized by a conscious cultural awareness, a humanistic sensibility, and cultural as well as aesthetic creativity” (Zha Mingjian, Tian Yu, 2003). This subjectivity permeates the entire translation process: “It is evident not only in the translator's comprehension, interpretation, and artistic recreation at the linguistic level, but also in the choice of text, the cultural aims of translation, the selection of strategies, and the manipulation of the translation's anticipated cultural effect in paratexts like prefaces and postscripts” (Zha Mingjian, Tian Yu, 2003). Thus, translator's subjectivity plays a pivotal role in translation practice.

Translator's subjectivity permeates the entire translation process. Within the hermeneutic school tradition, Schleiermacher framed translation as a bidirectional practice of understanding involving “Restoration of the Historical Context” and “projection of psychological empathy”. Heidegger revealed the prior constraints of the translator's historicity through the concept of “pre-understanding”. Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) further dissolved the subject-object dichotomy with his notion of the “fusion of horizons,” emphasizing the historically dynamic nature of understanding. Building on this lineage, George Steiner's (1929–2020) hermeneutic translation theory deconstructs the act into four steps — trust, aggression, incorporation, and restitution. In the stage of trust, the translator selects and commits to the source text; aggression denotes a deep, interpretive penetration into it; incorporation involves the creative assimilation of its meaning; and restitution serves to compensate for the inevitable imbalances incurred during the process. This theory extends the hermeneutic reflection on historicity and inter-subjectivity while foregrounding the translator's indispensable agency as a creative mediator who constructs dialogues across time and space. Consequently, hermeneutic translation theory offers a robust framework for translation practice, while also providing the theoretical ground for affirming the translator's central and subjective role. Accordingly, this paper will employ George Steiner's hermeneutic translation theory to systematically interpret Seamus Heaney's Modern English translation of *Beowulf*, with data statistics and multi-level textual analysis (lexical, syntactic, textual). All those efforts are to develop a systematic and in-depth understanding of the role of translator's subjectivity in the classic “rebirth”.

3. Examining Translator's Subjectivity in Seamus Heaney's *Beowulf* Translation from the Perspective of Steiner's Translation Theory

Based on the preface of Heaney's *Beowulf* translation, and through data and textual analysis, this section delves into the manifestations of Heaney's subjectivity during the translation process. The analysis follows the four steps proposed by Steiner — trust, aggression, incorporation, and restitution.

3.1 Data Analysis of Seamus Heaney's *Beowulf* Translation

The frequency and partial examples of the application of Steiner's four translation steps — trust, aggression, incorporation, and restitution — in Seamus Heaney's *Beowulf* translation are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Frequency and Partial Examples of Steiner's Four Translation Steps

Step	Specific Manifestations	Specific Cases	Frequency
Trust	Translator expresses recognition of the source's value and emotional connection through paratexts like the preface.	Heaney details in the <i>Introduction</i> his resonance with Anglo-Saxon poetry and the affinity between his home dialect and Old English.	\
Aggression	Incorporation of Irish dialect vocabulary.	① “thole” (to endure/suffer, Irish dialect) ② “bawn” (fortified dwelling, alluding to Irish tribal strongholds)	14
	Use of modern general vocabulary.	Using “sword” to unify various Old English terms for swords (e.g., “hildebord,” “sweord”).	87
	Sentence segmentation and word order adjustment.	Use of existential sentence structures like “There were...”	7

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Incorporation	Literal translation of Old English compounds, using colloquial expressions to enhance readability.	① "bone-house" (colloquial body metaphor) ② "battle-torch" (colloquial reference to a torch) ③ "sky-roamer" (colloquial reference to a dragon)	17
	Simplification of complex Old English syntax into Modern English.	Translating the Old English compound "hēah-cyninges" as "the king."	141
Restitution	Preservation of alliteration and rhythm in verse lines.	and find friendship in the Father's embrace.	1214
	Retention of vocabulary carrying cultural connotations.	"ring-giver" referring to kings or lords.	117
	Use of subheadings to divide sections.	e.g., "Beowulf's funeral," etc.	146

3.2 Textual Analysis of Seamus Heaney's Beowulf Translation

3.2.1 Trust

During his studies at Queen's University, Belfast, Seamus Heaney studied *Beowulf* and other Anglo-Saxon poems. This process gave him a profound feel for its language, and he was deeply attracted by the melancholy and resilience inherent in such poetry. This early learning experience provided him with a preliminary understanding of *Beowulf*; it also sparked a positive emotional engagement with the work, forming the starting point for his "trust" in it. As his studies deepened, Heaney discovered that his own early poetic compositions unconsciously followed Anglo-Saxon metrics. His lines often made up of two balancing halves, each half containing two stressed syllables, and skillfully employed metrical features like alliteration. This creative connection made him aware of an indescribable inner link between himself and the Anglo-Saxon poetic tradition represented by *Beowulf*. It seemed as if he had been writing content intrinsically related to this tradition from the beginning; there appeared to be countless threads connecting his creative inspiration and this ancient work. This discovery deepened his trust in *Beowulf*. He began to believe in a special affinity between himself and the work, further affirming his trust. He realized that *Beowulf* was not merely an ancient poem but a cultural heritage that resonated with his own creativity. This resonance ignited his strong desire to translate the epic. He felt a responsibility and capability to present this cultural treasure through translation to a wider readership.

This intrinsic poetic kinship was further linked to an external cultural lineage. Heaney discovered in his home dialect usages related to Old English vocabulary from *Beowulf*. For instance, the word "thole" is frequently used by his aunt to mean "to endure/suffer", which shares the same meaning as the Old English "flolian." Upon deeper investigation, he found this word had a rich historical transmission trajectory, spreading from Scotland to Ulster and then to the American South. This discovery made him profoundly aware that his own dialect was not merely a local language but a heritage bearing a deep historical culture. It had a close connection with the Old English culture represented by *Beowulf*. This connection strengthened his awareness of linguistic and cultural transmission. This realization—that the translation of *Beowulf* was a mission of cultural transmission beyond mere interlingual transfer—solidified his trust in the epic. It convinced him that renewing the historical thread connecting his personal linguistic roots to the ancient poetic tradition through translation would ensure the transmission of this precious heritage, making its cultural connotations accessible to a wider reader (Heaney, 2002).

3.2.2 Aggression

In the "aggression", the translator must fully deploy their subjective function as both reader and interpreter. As a reader, the translator comprehensively mobilizes their literary foundation and talents, including deep emotional engagement, acute aesthetic appreciation, and rich creative thinking and imagination. Those ensure the source text can be conveyed to the target readership in a vivid and accurate manner. As an interpreter, the translator conducts an in-depth and meticulous analysis and exploration of the work's underlying ideological meanings and emotional values. They must strive to unearth and highlight the work's literary value and socio-cultural significance in a comprehensive, multi-layered manner. This section analyzes the "aggression" process in Heaney's translation with specific examples:

Example 1:

ST: Hwaet wē Gār-Dena in geār-dagum
pēod-cyninga prym gefrūnon,
hū ðā æpelingas ellen fremedon. (Anonymous, 2001:31)

TT: So. The Spear-Danes in days gone by
and the kings who ruled them had courage and greatness.
We have heard of those princes' heroic campaigns. (Heaney, 2002:30)

At the lexical level, "aggression" manifests as the appropriation of cultural imagery and the reshaping of semantic focus. In traditional translations, the interjection "hwaet" is often rendered with archaic or formal words like "lo" "hark" "behold" or "attend". These attempts are to preserve the Old English literary flavor, but they are obscure for readers to understand the source text. However, drawing on his Irish cultural background and the "Hiberno-English Scullionspeak" of his relatives, Heaney chose the word "so". In Irish English dialect, "so" has a unique function. As an interjection, it swiftly captures the reader's attention. As a particle, it simultaneously serves to cut off prior discourse and initiate a new narrative, as a signal emphasizing and guiding the reader into a new situation (Heaney, 2002). This translational decision exemplifies the "aggression" stage, where the translator implants an expressive habit from his native dialect into an Old English term. Demonstrating his subjectivity, Heaney bypassed conventional models. Guided by his own grasp of the source's style and linguistic instinct, he deemed "so" better capable of capturing the direct and forceful tone of the opening. To the readers, "So. The Spear-Danes..." creates immediate focus, "so" immersing them in the narrative. That amplifies the translation text's expressive power and resonance, aligns it with modern reading conventions, and preserves a measure of the source's solemnity.

Example 2:

ST: on Heaþo-Ræmes holm up ætbær.
 Ðonon hē gesōhte swæsne ēðel,
 lēof his lēodum, lond Brondinga,
 freoðo-burh fægere, þær hē folc āhte,
 burh ond bēagas. Bēot eal wið þē (Anonymous, 2001:48)

TT: He was cast up safe and sound one morning
 among the Heathoreams, then made his way
 to where he belonged in Bronding country,
 home again, sure of his ground
 in strongroom and bawn. So Breca made good (Heaney, 2002:47)

The substitution of keywords is a more profound level of "aggression". In Example 2, the source text contains many elements. However, to highlight the locative concept represented by "bawn", Heaney selectively omitted from the source passage enumerations of people, animals, and treasure—such as "*lēof his lēodum*" (beloved of his people) and "*þær hē folc āhte, burg ond bēagas*" (where he had people, a fortress, and rings)—concentrating instead on locative expressions. The term "bawn" itself derives from the Irish "bódhún" (cattle fort), denoting the defensive settlements erected by English colonists in Ireland against the dispossessed native population. It transcends mere physicality, symbolizing the foundation and security of a family or tribe. The translation conveys a strong sense of belonging and dependence when describing the relationship between the characters and the "bawn," much like the emotional connection the Irish people have with their homeland. Thus, Heaney reshaped the original meaning based on his own translation intent, reflecting his subjectivity in "aggression". By using "bawn", he shifts the emphasis and embodies his cultural experience and image for readers to a deeper appreciation of its significance.

Example 3:

ST: Hæfdon swurd nacod, þā wit on sund rēon,
 heard on handa; wit unc wið hron-fixas
 werian þōhton; (Anonymous, 2001:49)

TT: Each of us swam holding a sword,
 a naked, hard-proofed blade for protection
 against the whale-beasts. (Heaney, 2002:48)

Example 4:

ST: Mē tō grunde tēah
 fāh fēond-scaða, fæste hæfde
grim on grāpe; hwæpre mē gyfeþe wearð,
 þæt ic āglæcan orde geræhte, (Anonymous, 2001:49)

TT: Pinioned fast
 and swathed in its grip, I was granted one
 final chance: my sword plunged

and the ordeal was over. (Heaney, 2002:48)

Beyond the direct term for "sword" like "swurd" in Example 3, the source poem contains various poetic and culturally specific Old English words describing swords. These words embody the unique Germanic cultural understanding of swords, with subtle differences in shape, craftsmanship, and symbolism. For instance, "grim on grāpe" in Example 4 means "a fierce weapon". However, as modern readers' unfamiliarity with these Old English terms and a wider comprehensibility, Heaney chose the modern general term "sword". Therefore, translator's subjectivity lies in the prioritization of reader accessibility, namely, in the attempt to balance culture preservation with reader comprehension—a conscious "aggressive" move of superimposing Modern English usage onto Old English vocabulary.

Example 5:

ST: gesāwon ðā æfter wætere wyrm-cynnes fela,
sellice sǣ-dracan sund cunnian,
swylce on næs-hleoðum nicras licgean,
ðā on undern-mæl oft bewitigað
sorh-fulne sīð on segl-rāde, (Anonymous, 2001:79)

TT: The water was infested
with all kinds of reptiles. There were writhing sea-dragons
and monsters slouching on slopes by the cliff,
serpents and wild things such as those that often
surface at dawn to roam the sail-road (Heaney, 2002:84)

Beyond lexical choices, Heaney's "aggression" is also evident in his reconstruction of source syntactic structures. Old English often employs paratactic short clauses for narrative, as shown in example 5 dense, compact description of Grendel's lair's horrors. In the TT, to suit the rhythm and narrative habits of Modern English poetry, Heaney did not strictly follow the source syntactic order. Without the source syntactic sequence, Heaney reconstructed the straightforward descriptions through segmentation, added connectives, and adjusted word order into modern verse lines of greater layering and dramatic effect. In Example 5, Heaney deconstructed the static "there were dragons in the water" into a dynamic, cinematic scene. He used the existential "There were..." structure and added vivid details like "slouching on slopes". This is the "aggressive" that his poetic narrative intuition imposes on the source syntax, for TT's visual imagery and literacy. It is a clear manifestation of translator's subjectivity at the syntactic level.

3.2.3 Incorporation

In the "incorporation" phase of translation, the translator first encodes the information extracted from the source language. At this stage, the translator's perspective is from the source language society to the target language society. They must present the refined essence of the content in terms of meaning and form of expression in the target language. The translator's subjectivity is reflected in application of translation strategies and their attitude towards handling the source text. As a key component of translation practice, that phase is the core stage where the translator exercises subjectivity and creativity. Old English extensively uses compound words and paratactic structures. In Heaney's translation, he creatively transformed the unique vocabulary and syntactic structures of Old English. For example,

Example 6:

ST: Ðā se gist onfand,
þæt se beado-lēoma bitan nolde, (Anonymous, 2001:82)

TT: But he soon found
his battle-torch extinguished: the shining blade... (Heaney, 2002:87)

Old English uses many compound words with diverse formations and rich meanings. In translation, Heaney simplified the tactic of compounds to adapt to Modern English expression habits. For example, for some compounds denoting weapons or battle scenes, like "beado-lēoma" (battle-light, possibly referring to the gleam of a sword in battle) in Example 6, he directly translated it as "battle-torch". Without the word-for-word formation of the Old English compound, the TT presents its core meaning and uses a common Modern English lexical combination to express it. This tactic preserves the basic meaning of the ST in a clearer sentence structure for modern readers. It reflects the absorption and simplification of Old English syntactic compound forms.

Example 7:

ST: Heht ðā eorla hlēo eahta mēaras
fæted-hlēore on flet tēon,

in under eoderas; þāra ānum stōd
 sadol swearwum fāh, since gewurþad.
 Þæt wæs hilde-setl hēah-cyninges, (Anonymous, 2001:65)

TT: Next the king ordered eight horses
 with gold bridles to be brought through the yard
 into the hall... (Heaney, 2002:66)

The prominent rhetorical features of Old English poetry are its paratactic syntactic structure, accumulation and the widespread use of so-called "kenning" (metaphorical compounds). Most of these compounds consist of two nouns, forming unique compound syntax. Without adhering to the source expression, he preferred to use common, direct Modern English expressions to translate the word. For instance, "hēah-cyninges" in Example 7 is translated as "the king." In contrast, the Gummere version translates it as "earls' defence" (Deng Hong et al., 2007), employing the kenning rhetorical device. "earls" commonly means "counts/nobles" and "defence" means "protection." "earls' defence" can be understood as "the protector of the earls" or "the defence of the nobles", referring to the king through this metaphor. Heaney's tactic is to make the translation easier for readers to understand, reducing comprehension difficulties. Therefore, it reflects his translator's subjectivity in the use of Modern English expressions and his adjustment of the source text.

3.2.4 Restitution

During the execution of the above three steps, differences between the source and target languages inevitably lead to breaks and losses at each stage. Steiner emphasizes that "interpretation must make restitution", highlighting the role of the restitution phase. In this stage, the translator exercises creativity, striving to seek balance between the source and the translation, fully reflecting the translator's subjectivity and agency. Heaney's restitution strategy is comprehensive, from micro-poetic metrics to macro-structure to reconstructing the epic's overall aesthetic beauty in Modern English.

Example 8:

ST: Þā wæs Hrōðgāre here-spēd gyfen, (Anonymous, 2001:33)
 rice tō rūne, ræd eahtedon, (Anonymous, 2001:36)
 ond tō Fæder fæþmum freoðo wilnian! (Anonymous, 2001:37)

TT: The **f**ortunes of war **f**avoured Hrothgar (Heaney, 2002:32)
 the highest in the **l**and, would **l**end advice, (Heaney, 2002:35)
 and **f**ind **f**riendship in the **F**ather's embrace. (Heaney, 2002:36)

In Old English poetry, alliteration is an important metrical feature. It typically requires words in specific positions (such as the beginning of a line or specific syllables within the two half-lines) to share the same initial consonant sound. The three sentences in Example 8 strictly adhere to traditional alliterative rules. Alliteration is achieved through letters like "f" and "l" in the respective half-lines. The use of alliteration enhances the verse's musicality and rhythm to attract the reader's attention. For instance, in Example 8, words like "fortunes" and "favoured" are closely linked through alliteration, highlighting the influence of fate and war on Hrothgar. Through that restitution of poetic meter, Heaney led readers to feel the atmosphere. For a better understanding of the poem. What's more, the tactics of alliteration within the TT is also a strong support for the dissemination and appreciation of *Beowulf* in the world.

Example 9:

ST: Ic ðæt mæl geman, þær wē medu þēgun,
 þonne wē gehēton ūssum hlāforde
 in bior-sele, ðe ūs ðās bēagas geaf,
 þæt wē him ðā gūð-getāwa gyldan woldon,
 gif him þyslicu þearf gelumpe,
 helmas ond heard sweord. (Anonymous, 2001:119)

TT: I remember that time when mead was flowing,
 how we pledged loyalty to our lord in the hall,
 promised our ring-giver we would be worth our price,
 make good the gift of the war-gear,
 those swords and helmets, (Heaney, 2002:134)

In Example 9, the phrase "ðe ūs ðās bēagas geaf," "bēagas" means "rings"; "geaf" is the past tense form of the verb "giefan" (to give/grant). The entire phrase describes the act of a lord granting "us" these rings. Heaney directly translates this as "ring-giver." This is an important concept in the source poem of the specific social relationships and value system between lords and warriors in Germanic culture. Heaney preserved this meaning without a straightforward modern English word, to retain the cultural distinctiveness of the ST. Ring-giver represents the lord, who rewarded warriors by distributing rings and other valuables, controlled the allocation of power, wealth, and honor, as well as the contractual bond between them. Warriors pledged loyalty and fought for their lord, while the lord provided them with material rewards and protection. This restitution tactic offers readers access to the terms' deep cultural connotations, revealing the poem's cultural charm and the hierarchical values of Germanic society.

Example 10:

ST: Him ðā gegiredan Gēata lēode
āð on eorðan unwāclīcne,
helmum behongen, hilde-bordum,
beorhtum byrnum, swā hē bēna wæs;
ālegdon ðā tōmiddles mǣrne þēoden
hæleð hīofende, hlāford lēofne.
Ongunnon þā on beorge bæl-fýra mǣst
wīgend weccan: wudu-rēc āstāh
sweart ofer swioðole, swōgende lēg,
wōpe bewunden —wind-blond gelæg—
oðþæt hē ðā bān-hūs gebrocen hæfde,
hāt on hreðre. Hīgum unrōte
mōd-ceare mǣndon, mon-dryhtnes cwealm;
... (Anonymous, 2001:135)

TT: **Beowulf's funeral**

The Geat people built a pyre for Beowulf,
stacked and decked it until it stood four-square,
hung with helmets, heavy war-shields
and shining armour, just as he had ordered.
Then his warriors laid him in the middle of it,
mourning a lord far-famed and beloved.
...
Then twelve warriors rode around the tomb,
Chieftain's sons, champions in battle,
all of them distraught, chanting in dirges,
mourning his loss as a man and a king.
They extolled his heroic nature and exploits
and gave thanks for his greatness... (Heaney, 2002:157)

Beyond the above micro-level, Heaney's "restitution" is also in his creative reconstruction of the epic's macro-narrative structure and its reception by readers. He sustained the epic's grandeur in specific scenes with dignified, plain language and a measured pace; through structural intervention, he secured a clear narrative comprehension for the modern reader. As a heroic epic, *Beowulf* moves from martial intensity to funerary solemnity. With a poet's sensitivity, Heaney consistently adopts a dignified, concise, and rhythmically colloquial narrative style—a "restitution" for the Old English oral tradition in modern terms. In Example 10 of Beowulf's final words, his translation rejects ornate sentimentality, using plain, forceful language and curt rhythms to convey the hero's resolve and pathos. This sustained stylistic unity compensates for losses in epic grandeur incurred by linguistic change, securing the translation's artistic parity with the original. This is a profound manifestation of translator's subjectivity at the textual level.

Heaney's insertion of subheadings (e.g., "Beowulf's funeral")—entirely absent in the original—transcends conventional translation, asserting his subjectivity as interpreter-reconstructor. The source text is translated from an oral and continuous flow into discrete narrative units for modern readers. That is not mere formatting but a strategic "restitution": it compensates for contextual loss across time and medium (aural to visual), for readers to follow plot and emotion as ancient listeners once did. Consequently,

through this macro-architectural intervention with micro-stylistic choices, Heaney's translation achieves a coherent, layered classic "rebirth", demonstrating how translator's subjectivity revitalizes a classic.

4. The Impact of Translator's Subjectivity on the Translation

The distinct subjectivity demonstrated by Seamus Heaney in translating *Beowulf* is not a collection of scattered translation tactics. It is a coherent, interconnected set of hermeneutic strategies. This theory shaped the distinctive character of Heaney's translation, of which the influence manifests concretely in three dimensions: classic accessibility, literary modernity, and cultural dialogicity.

In classic accessibility, Heaney's subjectivity manifests as an effective "cultural filtering" and "meaning clarification", drawing more readers into reading the epic. His modernization and consolidation of archaic vocabulary (e.g., unifying various sword terms with "sword"), his poetic reconstruction of complex syntax, and his clear segmentation of the overall narrative structure (e.g., adding subheadings) are centered on modern readers. This enabled his translation to ultimately gain dual recognition from both academia and the market for being "unique and readable". Those practices promote the translation of distinctiveness and readability, thus securing dual recognition in academia and the marketplace. What's more, it transformed an arcane scholarly text into a wide known and bestselling work, bridging the classic from the ivory tower to the public sphere.

In literary modernity, Heaney's subjectivity drove a successful "poetic transformation", making the translation as an outstanding modern poem. Rather than imitating Old English poetry, he reconstructed its rhythm and atmosphere within modern English. Through meticulous alliteration, steady and powerful colloquial rhythm, and tangible contemporary imagery, the translation revives the source text's sonic effects and emotional tension. As many critics noted, Heaney's translation is a gripping original poem. Consequently, *Beowulf*'s value is verified not merely as an long-time epic, but earning its place in the modern canon through a living poetic language.

On cultural dialogue, Heaney's subjectivity achieved a profound "semantic extension", resonating the ancient epic with contemporary issues. By integrating distinct cultural identity (Irishness) and personal linguistic experience (dialect), his translation transcends simple interlingual transfer. The implantation of terms like "bawn" constitutes a subtle infusion of Irish historical memory into the English national epic. This infusion enables the ancient narratives of lordship, homeland, and conflict to engage with contemporary concerns—cultural identity and colonial legacy in a post-colonial context. Therefore, Heaney's translation functions as a powerful cultural hermeneutic, accomplishing the transformation of *Beowulf* from a singular nationalist narrative into an open field for cross-cultural, transhistorical reflection.

In summary, Heaney's translator subjectivity fundamentally enabled *Beowulf*'s transition from historical document to living classic. His creative interpretation ensured both textual accessibility and spiritual resonance across ages. The translation's success illustrates that a classic's survival hinges not on its original state but on active re-creation by translators. Such intervention frees the work from temporal and cultural limitations, achieving its continuous renewal through repeated engagement. This model provides clear guidance for reviving cultural classics abroad, as in the "rebirth" of Chinese literature globally.

5. Conclusion

From the perspective of George Steiner's hermeneutic translation theory, this paper conducts a systematic analysis of Seamus Heaney's *Beowulf* translation, which analyses the pivotal role and operational mechanism of translator's subjectivity in literary translation. The paper finds that Heaney's practice validates and enriches Steiner's four-step of hermeneutic translation theory — trust, aggression, incorporation, and restitution. As a sustained creative force, his subjectivity originates in culturally-poetic trust, unfolds through identity-driven aggression, materializes via reader-oriented incorporation, and culminates in aesthetic restitution. This process demonstrates that translator's subjectivity not as textual deviation but an essential pathway for a classic "rebirth" in new contexts.

Heaney's case offers a deeper understanding of the translator's role as cultural interpreter, dialogue initiator, and meaning co-creator, rather than a mere linguistic mediator. The success of his work demonstrates that literary translation's ultimate goal, particularly for classics, is not mechanical correspondence but the achievement of spiritual resonance and poetic transformation. For China's ongoing cultural Going Global initiative, Heaney's practice constitutes a valuable model. It underscores that effective international communication necessitates the full empowerment of translators. The selection of translators for classics therefore prioritize "scholar-poets" or "poet-scholars" — individuals distinguished by profound bilingual-cultural proficiency, poetic creativity, and strong subjective agency. Their creative mediation constructs a bridge of resonance between Chinese cultural "antiquity" and target-reader "modernity".

More importantly, for Chinese culture going global strategy, Heaney's practice proves a key model that effective cross-cultural communication relies on empowering translators. With selecting translators for classics, priority should go to "scholar-poets" or "poet-scholars" with deep bilingual insight, poetic creativity, and strong agency, for bridging cultural antiquity and modern readership. Therefore, translator's subjectivity must be valued—the key to complex translation choices and the source of a classic "rebirth".

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