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Student perception of epistemic submissiveness in translation: a case study of future translators in Kazakhstan

The study is devoted to the subject of the epistemic submissiveness of future translators in the process of working with Central Asian archaeological discourse including latent colonial markers. The work is based on the analysis of translation of archaeological binary oppositions in the incoming (English-Russian) and outgoing (Russian-English) vectors. A student translation corpus (STC) and the findings of a survey of 41 students of the Buketov Karaganda National Research University provide an empirical base. A mixed-method design and non-parametric statistical approaches (Fisher's exact test, Mann-Whitney, Spearman correlation) were used to compare the respondents' psychological attitudes with their real translation decisions. The results revealed a striking paradox: in the overwhelming majority of situations, even when students recognize the ideological slant of the original, they turn to semantic calquing. And this leads to the pragmatic reduction and voluntary self-exoticization of national cultural heritage for the Western reader in the outgoing vector. It is argued that to overcome the automatism of epistemic submissiveness, it is required to implement techniques of intentional deconstruction and to change students from passive transmitters of foreign hierarchies into active subjects of intercultural communication.

Keywords: translators, epistemic submissiveness, decolonial translation, archaeological discourse, binary oppositions, psychological attitudes, pragmatic adaptation, corpus-assisted discourse studies.

Introduction

In the context of globalization, translation is not a neutral linguistic operation, but a means of distribution of epistemic authority. In the decolonial turn, translation is regarded as a process of identity and social representation construction [1]. The problem is particularly apparent in relation to the archaeological heritage of Central Kazakhstan, which, in the Western popular scientific discourse, is typically presented as a system of hierarchical binary oppositions, such as “*center / periphery*” or “*civilization / barbarism*” [2]. Following J. Derrida, these oppositions are never neutral; they inherently establish the supremacy of one element over the other [3]. Within the framework of cultural semiotics, Russian scholarship carefully analyzes analogous mechanisms of centering and marginalization [4].

The theoretical foundation of this study rests on three main pillars. Firstly, decolonial translation criticism rests on the idea that the activity of translation has been a tool for colonial knowledge creation historically [5], [6]. Modern theorists believe that a decolonially oriented translator should actively undermine Orientalist frameworks rather than reproducing the hierarchies implicit in the source text [7]. The main difficulty is the phenomenon of the internalization of the subaltern status [8].

Secondly, corpus-assisted discourse studies (CADS) [9], [10] serve as a methodological tool for identifying ideologically relevant lexical choices in large text corpora. The quantitative frequency analysis combined with a qualitative interpretation avoids the problems of selective citation and at the same time maintains the depth of research that is necessary to detect the subtle ideological changes [9; 38].

Thirdly, the analytical unit employed is the concept of binary opposition itself. In the West, the depiction of Central Asian archeology is systematically activated by oppositional pairings [11], whose poles are

linguistically recorded, which makes it possible to calculate the index of an ideology shift for a certain translation decision [12].

The primary concern of this paper is the phenomenon of epistemic submissiveness or a cognitive propensity to unconditionally accept the ideological matrix of the source text, frequently demonstrated by translation students. While previous text-mining research has successfully mapped structural lexical asymmetries in translating Central Asian heritage [13], the underlying psychological mechanisms and students' perception of their own epistemic submissiveness remain unexplored. The purpose of this study is to analyze the perception of students of these mechanisms and to evaluate the usefulness of digital tools in the process of deconstruction of colonial concepts.

Methods and Materials

Unlike prior purely text-based analyses, a mixed research design was applied in this study, integrating corpus-oriented discourse analysis with psychological surveying to capture the future translators' intent and perception. The experiment involved 41 undergraduate students from Buketov Karaganda National Research University (English proficiency level B2-C1). The reception group (n = 22) performed translation from English to Russian (EN-RU). The presentation group (n = 19) performed translation from Russian to English (RU-EN).

For the final analysis of the questionnaires, data from 19 respondents from the second group who provided complete answers were included. The empirical base was formed by the *Student Translation Corpus (STC)*, including 195 short archaeological texts (200-250 words each) with a total volume of approximately 17,400 word tokens, fully deposited in open access for data verification [14]. Since this study is based on the integration of the corpus approach and digital humanities tools, we conducted a comparative audit of incoming and outgoing vectors of translation.

So that translation students could diagnose and correct dichotomies, we developed an original interactive web simulator “*Deconstruction Analyzer Steppe Code v.2.0.0*” [15] — a scenario simulator that allows the student to choose among three indexed solutions: index 0 denotes epistemic submissiveness and is displayed in red, whereas index 2 denotes the pragmatic restoration of subjectivity and is displayed in green. These indices correspond to specific translation strategies (calquing — index 0; pragmatic adaptation — index 1; and full restoration of subjectivity — index 2) (Fig. 1).

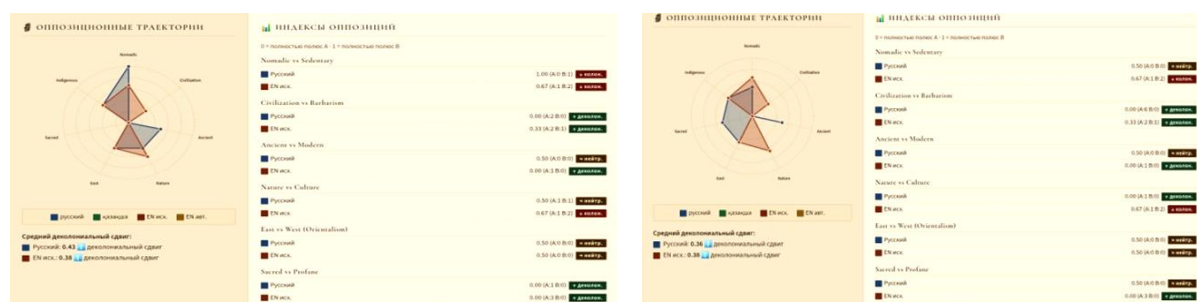


Figure 1. The interface of the “*Deconstruction Analyzer Steppe Code v.2.0.0*” web simulator

All statistical calculations were performed in Python 3.12 using the SciPy 1.12 library [16]. Ordinal distributions of the corpus index were compared using the one-tailed Mann-Whitney U test with the effect size calculated as $r = U / (n_1 \times n_2)$. To evaluate the distribution shape against a uniform distribution, we used the chi-square goodness-of-fit test. Intra-vector thematic variability was assessed using the Kruskal-Wallis H test. Questionnaire data on Likert scales are presented as mean (M), median (Me), and standard deviation (SD). Fisher's exact test was applied to 2×2 contingency tables; Spearman's rank correlation coefficient (r_s) was calculated for ordinal associations. The statistical significance level was set at $\alpha = 0.05$ (two-tailed, unless otherwise specified). Given the exploratory nature of the survey samples (n = 19–22), inferential statistics for the questionnaire data are reported alongside effect sizes and are interpreted as requiring replication in larger cohorts [17].

Results and Discussion

The analysis of the incoming vector (EN-RU, n = 22) revealed a gap between the perception of tone and the actions of translators. While 68 % of translation students did not perceive the tone of the source text as

arrogant, 72.7 % agreed with the statement that they are obliged to maintain the author's tone even if it contains stereotypes. Fisher's exact test ($p = 0.312$) showed that the choice of calquing strategy does not depend on the recognition of arrogance, supporting the hypothesis of automatic epistemic submissiveness. Spearman's correlation established a strong relationship between loyalty to the author and the choice of calquing strategy ($r_s = 0.611$, $p = 0.002$).

This automatic disposition is vividly reflected in the students' self-reported rationales. When asked to justify their translation of the controversial phrase "*free meal*," 63.6 % of students prioritized authorial fidelity over cultural defense, "*Translated literally to accurately convey the style of the Western author*" / «Перевел(а) буквально, чтобы точно передать стиль западного автора». Only a marginal 4.5 % actively resisted the framing, asserting, "*I selected an emphatically respectful word, as the original sounds incorrect for our history*" / «Я подобрал(а) подчеркнуто уважительное слово, так как оригинал звучит некорректно для нашей истории». Figure 2 illustrates the stark disproportion in student translation strategies regarding this ideological marker.

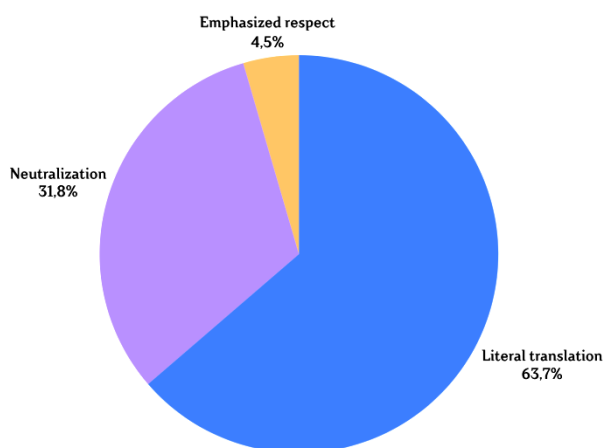


Figure 2. Student strategies for translating the ideological marker "*free meal*" (EN-RU vector)

In the outward group (RU-EN, $n = 19$), 76 % of students rated the original as "*elevated*" while 35.3 % admitted to intentionally simplifying the text for the Western reader. The Fisher's exact test confirmed ($p = 0.014$) that students striving to sound objective to the West resorted to pragmatic reduction and self-exoticism significantly more often. As shown in Figure 3, over a third of the respondents actively engaged in tone flattening.

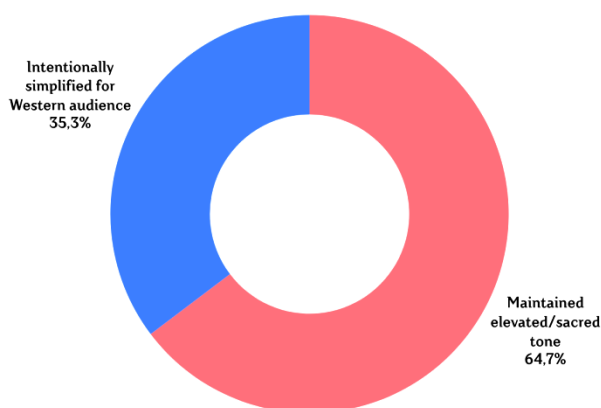


Figure 3. Student rationale for modifying the tone of specific cultural terms (RU-EN vector)

This tendency to artificially flatten their own cultural narrative is highlighted by their questionnaire responses, where 35.3 % openly justified their choice, "*Yes, I simplified the text because our complex metaphors would be incomprehensible to foreigners*" / «Да, я упростил(а) текст, так как иностранцам будут непонятны наши сложные метафоры». This tendency to artificially flatten their own cultural narrative resonates with G. Spivak's concept of the internalization of the subaltern status [8]. The students un-

consciously adopt a peripheral position, assuming their culture must be simplified to be accepted by the “center.” This paradox of epistemic submissiveness stems from lingering dominance of the “*fidelity to the original*” paradigm. While modern theorists like K. Batchelor urge translators to actively undermine orientalist frameworks [7], our empirical data demonstrates that translation students often lack the cognitive tools to resist these established hierarchies, prioritizing fidelity over epistemic justice. A consolidated summary of the inferential statistical analysis regarding the students’ perceptual dispositions and their translation choices is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Summary of inferential statistical analysis for post-translation questionnaires

Translation Vector	Variables Tested	Statistical Test	Test Statistic	p-Value	Interpretation
EN→RU (n = 22)	Arrogant tone recognition × Calquing strategy choice	Fisher’s exact test	-	0.312	Not significant. Supports the hypothesis of automatic epistemic submissiveness
EN→RU (n = 22)	Fidelity to the original × Calquing strategy choice	Spearman’s rank correlation	$r_s = 0.611$	0.002	Significant strong positive correlation
RU→EN (n = 19)	Intention to sound objective to Western readers × Frequency of pragmatic reduction	Fisher’s exact test	-	0.014	Significant. Confirms intentional flattening of the cultural narrative

The analysis of the student translation corpus revealed three main conflict zones. The first zone is associated with the opposition “*civilization / barbarism*.” In texts about Bronze Age ceramics, the English source text uses the marker “*barbarians*.” It is noteworthy that 100 % of the students translated it as «варвары» (index 0), thereby uncritically accepting the imposed marginalization of their region. The second zone reflects the opposition “*sacred / profane*.” More than half of students (63.6 %) calqued the metaphor “*free meal*” in relation to the domestication of the Botai horse as «бесплатный обед», thereby desacralizing the historical event. The third zone illustrates the opposition of “*subject / object*.” The marker “*so-called*” in the context of the Karazhertas pyramid introduces epistemic doubt into the discourse. When translating it word-for-word, students produced phrases like «так называемая монументальная гробница...» and «так называемые Казахстанские монументальные катакомбы...», thereby inadvertently delegitimizing the national monument. Similarly, the historical figure Timur, originally referred to as an “*infamous warlord*,” is reduced in student translations to “*bandit*” or “*military leader*” who steals sheep.

In the outgoing vector (RU-EN), the calquing strategy of specific cultural terms also demonstrates pragmatic reduction. For instance, the established archaeological term «курган с усами» was frequently translated through awkward literalisms like “*kurgan with whiskers*” or “*kurgan with mustaches*,” severely undermining the scientific validity of the local terminology in English. Table 2 provides a consolidated overview of characteristic translation decisions demonstrating varying degrees of pragmatic adequacy across both translation vectors.

Table 2

Characteristic examples of pragmatic adequacy indices in student translations

Translation Vector	Ideological Marker (ST)	Student Translation (TT)	Pragmatic Adequacy (Index)	Strategy
EN→RU	“barbarians”	«варвары»	Index 0	Epistemic submissiveness (calque)
EN→RU	“free meal”	«бесплатный обед»	Index 0	Epistemic submissiveness (calque)
EN→RU	“tribal chieftain”	«представитель элиты / правитель»	Index 2	Restoration of subjectivity
RU→EN	«курган с усами»	“kurgan with whiskers / mustached kurgan”	Index 0	Pragmatic reduction
RU→EN	«курган с усами»	“stone ridges extending from it”	Index 1	Pragmatic adaptation
EN→RU	“so-called”	«так называемая...»	Index 0	Internalization of epistemic doubt

It is precisely in this context that the application of the web simulator “*Deconstruction Analyzer Steppe Code v. 2.0.0*” [15] demonstrates its didactic effectiveness. The comparison of scenarios working on the same fragment of the transcript allows the student to instantly realize the pragmatic consequences of linguistic choices. The red indication of index 0 acts as a cognitive disruptor, prompting the student to shift from semantics to decolonial reflection. The mechanics of working with the simulator showed that visualization provides a powerful stimulus. Upon seeing the red marker for the term “*tribal chieftain*,” the student transitions to index 2 (“*elite representative*”), which restores the social complexity of ancient society.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the study shows that typical translation education renders students very vulnerable to epistemic pressure in a situation of knowledge asymmetry. Our empirical data show that even if future translators manage to identify ideological bias or arrogance in the source text, in the overwhelming majority of cases, they resort to epistemic submissiveness via semantic calquing. This involuntary action is an effect of a deeply entrenched commitment to the “*fidelity to the original*” paradigm. Thus, the incoming translation vector (EN-RU) enables students to unintentionally accept their own marginalization and to transfer hierarchical signals uncritically. In the outgoing vector (RU-EN), however, this same paradigm leads to pragmatic reduction and intentional self-exoticization, as students flatten and simplify elevated national narratives artificially to suit the expected Western standards.

To disrupt this automatism, it is vital to introduce specific instruments of digital humanities into translation pedagogy. The web simulator “*Deconstruction Analyzer Steppe Code v.2.0.0*” is shown to be effective in interrupting the reflex of literal translation with visual cognitive triggers, such as color signaling of pragmatic adequacy indices. The simulator objectifies visually ideological traps, allowing students to go from passive semantic transfer to active decolonial reflection, which allows them to recover the social and cultural complexity of their history in the language of translation.

The results finally reveal that decolonial translation competence cannot be acquired through academic sessions only. The future translators should be trained to recognize that they are not the passive transmitters of the hierarchies of others, but the active subjects of the international conversation who think critically. And while the exploratory nature of this study calls for additional replication on larger samples, it makes a persuasive case for the need to restructure translation education towards pragmatic awareness, active subjectivity and epistemic fairness.

CRedit Author Statement

G.R. Abdullina: Conceptualization, methodology (theoretical framework), validation, supervision, writing — review & editing.

A.N. Kalizhanova: Conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, software, writing — original draft preparation.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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