

Cognitive Construction Grammar in Translation Studies

Zhang Caifeng

School of Foreign Studies, Yangtze University, China

Received: 04 Sep 2025; Received in revised form: 02 Oct 2025; Accepted: 07 Oct 2025, Published on: 14 Oct 2025
©2025 The Author(s). Published by TheShillonga. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)



Abstract— *The construction grammar (CG), as a major ramification of cognitive linguistics, has attracted more and more attention in recent years. The study of grammar under cognitive construction grammar takes "construction" as the basic unit of translation, uses the concept of construction to elaborate and explain various phenomena and thinking representations in the field of translation, and reveals the law and essence of translation behavior from the cognitive level. This paper briefly discusses the integration of the constructional grammar and translation studies, reviews and evaluates the principles and strategies of the constructional grammar in promoting translation, the development of translation process and translation transformation, and finally discusses the contribution of translation studies in promoting the constructional grammar.*

Keywords— *construction grammar; constructional translation view; translation studies*

I. INTRODUCTION

Wang Yin (2005) argues that translation is a cognitive process involving multiple interactions among cognitive agents whose activities are grounded in real-life experience. Translators must thoroughly grasp the rich meanings conveyed by the source text and strive to transfer and project these meanings into the target language. A translation should aim to faithfully reflect the reality and cognitive world portrayed by the original author, thereby laying a solid foundation for the advancement of cognitive translatology.

After more than a decade of development, current research in cognitive translatology primarily focuses on using theories from cognitive linguistics to explain translation phenomena. "By integrating categorization theory, construal theory, metaphor theory, conceptual integration theory, and other frameworks into translation studies, researchers have been able to uncover the cognitive mechanisms and mental activities underlying translation, thereby expanding the boundaries and perspectives of translation research" (Luo Dijiang, 2022). Among these approaches, cognitive studies explaining translation phenomena through categorization, construal, and metaphor theories are relatively common, while

research based on construction grammar remains comparatively limited. However, as construction grammar and translation research become increasingly integrated, the importance of constructions in translation studies is gaining recognition. Many scholars have explored translation principles, strategies, processes, and transformations through this lens, offering valuable insights for guiding translation practice.

Zheng Man (2022) proposed the Construction-Based Translation View: "The construction-based translation view regards the 'construction' as the basic unit of translation, uses the notion of construction to describe and explain various phenomena and mental representations within the domain of translation, and reveals the cognitive rules and essence of translation behavior." Scholars have increasingly acknowledged the importance of construction grammar in guiding translation practice. They have discussed cognitive research principles and strategies for construction-based translation, examined translation processes and transformations, and provided case studies involving special linguistic phenomena in English and Chinese, as well as sentence-level and discourse-level analyses. These efforts have introduced new perspectives to translation studies. However, more in-depth and

fine-grained research is still needed.

This paper outlines the integration of construction grammar and translation studies, reviews and evaluates how construction grammar has promoted the development of translation principles and strategies, translation processes, and translation transformations, and finally discusses how translation studies, in turn, contribute to the theoretical development of construction grammar. Construction-based thinking and translation research thus demonstrate a mutually beneficial and bidirectional relationship.

II. THE INTEGRATION OF CONSTRUCTION GRAMMAR AND TRANSLATION STUDIES

Construction Grammar, an important theoretical branch of cognitive linguistics, offers a new perspective on the relationship between language and thought and provides multiple advantages for guiding translation practice.

Goldberg (2006) defines the concept of a construction as follows: “Any linguistic pattern whose form, meaning, or function is not fully predictable from its constituent parts or from other constructions already established should be regarded as a construction. Moreover, even if certain linguistic patterns are fully predictable, they may still be stored as constructions if they occur with sufficiently high frequency.” This means that any linguistic expression — whether a morpheme, word, phrase, clause, sentence, or even discourse — can be viewed as a construction if some aspects of its form or meaning cannot be entirely predicted from its components or from pre-existing constructions. In other words, constructions cover all levels of language, and adopting the construction as the basic translation unit gives translators greater flexibility in selecting appropriate translation units.

Wang Yin (2005) points out that “Construction Grammar adheres to a ‘non-modular’ view of grammar, viewing grammar as a continuum of syntax–semantics–pragmatics. The ‘form’ of a construction encompasses knowledge of phonology, morphology, and syntax, while its ‘meaning’ involves semantic, functional, pragmatic, and discourse-related information.” According to Szymańska, the pragmatic and cultural turns in translation studies have already been

integrated into the Construction Grammar perspectives of form–meaning pairing, continuum, and usage-based theory. Construction Grammar thus holds promise as a unified framework for explaining classic issues in translation. In other words, taking the construction as the translation unit allows for simultaneous consideration of structural, semantic, functional, and cultural dimensions, making it more advantageous for guiding translation practice than defining translation units along a single dimension. Szymańska (2011), in the first chapter of her book, summarized the development of translation studies into three stages: the linguistic approach, the discourse and pragmatic approach, and the cultural turn. By adopting the construction as the translation unit, the longstanding debates over these “turns” in translation studies may be deemphasized.

According to Shi Chunhong (2022), Construction Grammar exhibits both online generativity and entrenched conventionality. It places strong emphasis on the frequency of linguistic forms. Using constructions as translation units can make translated texts more idiomatic, as translators must consider the usage frequency and structural features of constructions in the target language. By choosing the most frequently used and natural expressions, translations can become smoother and more authentic.

Yang Zi and Wang Xueming (2014) argue that constructional thinking effectively captures how differences between the source and target languages affect the choice of translation units. When two languages are highly similar, more equivalent correspondences exist across linguistic levels, leading to smaller translation units; conversely, when the languages differ greatly, translation units tend to become larger (for example, translation units between English and French are often smaller than those between English and Chinese. Chinese scholars studying English–Chinese translation often propose larger units than Western scholars studying translation among Indo-European languages). Construction Grammar emphasizes the language-specificity of constructions — each language has its own ways of structuring and combining constructions. Translation, therefore, is a process in which the constructional networks of the source language are transformed and reorganized within the target language environment. The selection of translation units

must thus account for how constructions and their combinations correspond across languages. In this way, operating at the constructional level inherently integrates the bilingual characteristics of both source and target languages, giving the construction-based view of translation units a broadly cross-linguistic applicability.

III. THE DEVELOPMENT OF CONSTRUCTION-BASED THINKING IN GUIDING TRANSLATION STUDIES

The construction-based perspective on translation has provided new theoretical insights into research on translation principles and strategies, the translation process, and translation shifts, yielding many valuable achievements for guiding translation studies.

3.1 Constructions and Translation Principles and Strategies

Regarding special constructions in English, Yang Zi (2015) adopted the construction as the basic unit of analysis and classified the Chinese translations of English personal-name constructions into four types: personal-name constructions, quasi-personal-name constructions, super-personal-name constructions, and non-personal-name constructions. He analyzed how imagery is constructed in the translated text and explained how to select strategies in name translation, including reverse transliteration, approximate phonetic transliteration, and semantic translation. This study shows that the constructional patterns underlying the translation play a decisive role in shaping the representational imagery of the translated text and in determining translation strategies.

Regarding special constructions in Chinese, Tang Jing and Yang Yang (2016), drawing on Goldberg's Cognitive Construction Grammar, conducted an in-depth analysis of the structural properties, formation mechanisms, and cognitive motivations of the “好不 + AP” construction. Their research revealed that when this construction carries a metalinguistic negation meaning, it is often rendered in translation as a prefix of negation plus an adjective; when it lacks such metalinguistic negation, it is typically converted into a noun phrase corresponding to the adjective phrase or a noun phrase with a similar meaning. Their work enriched the translation strategies and practical handling of the “好不 + AP” construction and provided

valuable guidance for translation practice. Exploring the form-meaning characteristics, usage features, and translation strategies of such special constructions offers important reference value for translating other idiosyncratic constructions and contributes to the formulation of more generalizable translation strategies.

At the sentence level, Wei Zaijiang (2020), taking sentence constructions in Zhang Peiji's *Selected Modern Chinese Essays Translated into English* as examples, proposed four translation principles based on key tenets of Construction Grammar: the Holistic Principle, the Salience Principle, the Interaction Principle, and the Polysemy Principle. The Holistic Principle requires translators to consider both how lexical meaning influences the construction and how the construction as a whole constrains the meaning of its lexical items, thus guiding the overall translation process. The Salience Principle emphasizes that translators should highlight the salient elements of the construction in the target language context and creatively reconstruct them in the translation. The Interaction Principle holds that the meaning of a specific sentence pattern is primarily determined by the integration of the construction's meaning and the verb's meaning, rather than requiring strict one-to-one equivalence with the source text. The Polysemy Principle stresses that multiple constructions can share features while also having unique characteristics, forming complex inheritance networks that enable innovative translation solutions. However, Wei's work explored translation principles only at the sentence level and did not extend to other linguistic levels.

Building on Wei's research, Ma Junjie (2022) further investigated translation principles and strategies at the discourse level under the construction-based perspective. Ma proposed three guiding principles: the Meaning-Centered Principle, the Holistic Principle, and the Interactive Principle. The Meaning-Centered Principle emphasizes that translation is fundamentally a process of meaning transfer and communication. The Holistic Principle builds on meaning-centeredness while requiring translators to maintain the overall integrity of the form-meaning pairings in constructions. The Interactive Principle highlights the interaction between constructions and syntax. Ma also proposed three basic translation strategies: constructional equivalence, constructional

fine-tuning, and constructional variation. Constructional equivalence seeks to find target-language expressions that closely match the source construction. Constructional fine-tuning modifies an initially equivalent construction to ensure syntactic consistency or preserve patterns such as rhyme. Constructional variation applies when no equivalent construction exists in the target language and structural adaptation is required.

Although construction-based translation principles and strategies have significantly contributed to guiding translation practice, more empirical studies are still needed to verify their applicability and to further test their universality.

3.2 Constructions and the Translation Process

In exploring the translation process, Szymańska (2011) proposed a unique analogy, likening translation to the reconstruction of a mosaic. She argued that the source text is like a mosaic composed of a library of source-language constructions, and the translator's task is to recreate this mosaic using the construction inventory of the target language. This "mosaic reconstruction" process, grounded in Fillmore's Frame Semantics and Goldberg's Cognitive Construction Grammar, helps us grasp the cognitive mechanisms of translation as a whole and provides valuable insight. However, Zheng Man (2022) notes that current translation models have yet to fully capture the mental activities of translators across different stages of the process.

Addressing this gap, Yang Zi and Wang Xueming (2014) analyzed Chinese translations of the opening sentence of *Pride and Prejudice* to explain translation operations. They argued that in the pre-translation analysis stage, translators decompose the source text into constructions of different attributes and levels and map their interactions. During the execution stage, translators adopt a bottom-up approach: they begin with basic constructional units and progressively move toward higher-level constructions. This study demonstrates the effectiveness and flexibility of using constructions as translation units, enabling translators to freely select appropriate units.

Similarly, Hu Yanqi and Li Qingming (2017), drawing on Conceptual Integration Theory, Frame Semantics, and Cognitive Construal Theory, developed a

cognitive model of the translation process. From a micro-level perspective under the framework of Construction Grammar, they proposed that translation involves understanding, deconstructing, and reconstructing meaning across Construal Space I, Construal Space II, the Generic Space, and the Blended Space. Using the translation of English caused-motion constructions into Chinese as an example — for instance, rendering "the wind blows the ship off the course" as "风把船吹离航道" — they demonstrated the applicability and effectiveness of this model for analyzing the cognitive process of translation.

3.3 Constructions and Translation Shifts

Halverson (2007) and Szymańska (2011) examined the cognitive mechanisms behind translation. Halverson systematically analyzed translation strategies proposed by earlier scholars such as Vinay and Darbelnet, linking them to four cognitive operations described by Croft and Cruse — attention, judgment, perspective, and constitution. She argued that translation shifts can be explained through these detailed cognitive processes. Szymańska, meanwhile, viewed translation as a re-creation of source constructions within the cultural and linguistic environment of the target language, emphasizing the form–meaning unity and language-specific properties of constructions. From this perspective emerges the notion of constructional resistance — the difficulty translators encounter when attempting to replicate the features of a source construction in the target language. Translation shifts, therefore, can be seen as translators' efforts to negotiate partial matches when faced with such resistance.

Tan Yesheng (2010) focused on the translation shifts of metonymic constructions between Chinese and English. He argued that these shifts occur at the complex "schema–instance" level, where translators perform cognitive processing within interconnected conceptual frameworks. For example, the Chinese expression "..... 二人闲谈漫饮....." can be translated as either "drinking slowly" or "between leisurely sips of wine"; the latter employs a manner–action metonymic schema, representing a richer and more nuanced translation choice. Such schema-instance relationships in constructions open new perspectives for studying the translation of metonymy and metaphor and shed light on how translators use diverse

metonymic and metaphorical instances to achieve creative translation solutions.

Analyzing texts from the perspective of constructional units not only clarifies the complex processes behind translation shifts but also reveals the trade-offs and priorities in translation decision-making. Nevertheless, the classification and hierarchical structuring of constructions in translation shifts still require further refinement. Moreover, hypotheses about the cognitive mechanisms of translation depend on large-scale corpus validation and additional empirical research to be fully substantiated.

IV. THE CONTRIBUTION OF TRANSLATION STUDIES TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF CONSTRUCTION-BASED THINKING

In research on Construction Grammar and the translation process, the relationship between the two is not one-directional: while construction-based thinking has advanced translation studies, translation studies have likewise contributed to the growth of constructional thinking. This interaction reflects a mutually beneficial and bidirectional development.

First, the methodological diversification within translation studies has created new opportunities for the advancement of construction-based translation theory. With progress in computer science, cognitive science, cognitive psychology, and neuroscience, empirical research in translation studies has made significant achievements. These empirical methods now provide solid support for testing and applying construction-based translation theory, allowing researchers to validate theoretical claims with data-driven evidence.

Second, applying construction theory to translation practice offers new evidence for the psychological reality of constructions. If human language processing indeed follows the patterns proposed by Construction Grammar — namely, that linguistic competence consists of a fixed network of form–meaning pairings — then translators, when engaging in the highly cognitively demanding task of translating across languages and cultures, will naturally rely on constructional principles to guide their comprehension and reformulation of texts.

Finally, the products of translation themselves can

serve as a direct evidence base for testing Construction Grammar. By examining translated texts across different languages, researchers can observe and analyze how constructions in the source language correspond to those in the target language. This comparative analysis provides empirical insight into the applicability and explanatory power of Construction Grammar in real-world translation practice.

REFERENCES

- [1] Wang, Y. (2005). The translation perspective of cognitive linguistics. *Chinese Translators Journal*.
- [2] Luo, D., & Tang, X. (2022). Approaches to the interdisciplinary integration of translation studies and the cognitive paradigm. *Foreign Languages and Literature*.
- [3] Zheng, M., & Hu, X. (2022). Theoretical foundation, development, and prospects of the construction-based translation view. *Journal of Xi'an International Studies University*.
- [4] Goldberg, A. E. (1995). *Constructions: A Construction Grammar Approach to Argument Structure*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- [5] Goldberg, A. E. (2006). *Constructions at Work: The Nature of Generalization in Language*. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press.
- [6] Szymańska, M. (2011). *Mosaics: A Construction-Grammar-Based Approach to Translation*. Warszawa: Semper.
- [7] Shi, C. (2022). The three perspectives of construction: Fundamental concepts of Construction Grammar. *Journal of Northeast Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*.
- [8] Yang, Z., & Wang, X. (2014). A review of Mosaic Reconstruction — A Construction Grammar Approach to Translation Studies. *Shanghai Journal of Translators*.
- [9] Yang, Z. (2015). English–Chinese personal name translation from the perspective of Construction Grammar. *Journal of University of Science and Technology Beijing (Social Sciences Edition)*.
- [10] Tang, J., & Yang, Y. (2016). Cognitive construction grammar interpretation and translation of the Chinese construction “好不 + AP”. *Journal of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies*.
- [11] Wei, Z. (2020). The constructional perspective on translation: New exploration of translation principles based on Construction Grammar. *Chinese Translators Journal*.

- [12] Ma, J., & Ma, H. (2022). Principles and strategies for translating “Hua’er” under the construction-based translation view. *Foreign Language Research*.
- [13] Yang, Z., & Wang, X. (2014). A construction-based operational approach to translation: A case study of the opening sentence of *Pride and Prejudice*. *Foreign Languages and Their Teaching*.
- [14] Hu, Y., Li, Q., & Liu, F. (2017). Cognitive pathways of construction-based translation: Three stages and four spaces — A case study on the Chinese translation of caused-motion constructions. *Journal of Xi’an Technological University*.
- [15] Halverson, S. L. (2010). Cognitive translation studies: Developments in theory and method. In G. M. Shreve & E. Angelone (Eds.), *Translation and Cognition* (pp. xx–xx). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- [16] Halverson, S. L. (2007). A cognitive linguistic approach to translation shifts. *Belgian Journal of Linguistics*.
- [17] Tan, Y. (2010). Schema–instance relations and the cognitive pathway of metonymic construction translation. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*.
- [18] Wang, Y. (2011). *Research on Construction Grammar*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- [19] Niu, B. (2011). *Studies on Construction Grammar Theory*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- [20] Vinay, J. P., & Darbelnet, J. (1958/1995). *Comparative Stylistics of French and English: A Methodology for Translation*. (J. Sager & M. J. Hamel, Trans.). Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- [21] Rojo, A., & Valenzuela, J. (2013). Constructing meaning in translation: The role of constructions in translation problems. In A. Rojo & I. Ibarretxe-Antuñano (Eds.), *Cognitive Linguistics and Translation: Advances in Some Theoretical Models and Applications* (pp. xx–xx). Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter Mouton.
- [22] Wen, X., Yu, P., & Si, W. (2019). Category shifts in translation and their cognitive explanation. *Chinese Translators Journal*.
- [23] Lu, W., & Wang, F. (2013). A new paradigm in translation studies: A review of research in cognitive translatology. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*.