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# Exploring Gendered Body Language in Male and Female Translations: A Corpus-Assisted Study

*Explorando la influencia del género en el lenguaje corporal en traducciones masculinas y femeninas: un estudio asistido por corpus*

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**ABSTRACT:** This study employs corpus linguistics to analyze gendered body language in the translations of Zhang Jie's *Chenzhong De Chibang* by Gladys Yang and Howard Goldblatt. The research aims to explore how gendered body language is translated and portrayed differently by male and female translators. Quantitative and qualitative analyses reveal distinct patterns: Goldblatt's translations emphasize traditional gender roles, depicting female characters as physically dependent and emotionally vulnerable through detailed physical interactions. In contrast, Yang provides a more gender balanced portrayal of gendered body language using rewriting and omitting, presenting female characters as less physically dependent. These findings illuminate how translators' gender identities shape their translation and depiction of gendered body language.

**KEYWORDS:** corpus linguistics; gendered body language; literary translation; Gladys Yang; Howard Goldblatt.

**RESUMEN:** Este estudio emplea la lingüística de corpus para analizar la influencia del género en el lenguaje corporal en las traducciones de *Chenzhong De Chibang* de Zhang Jie realizadas por Gladys Yang y Howard Goldblatt. La investigación tiene como objetivo

explorar cómo traductores y traductoras representan y traducen el lenguaje corporal de manera diferente. Los análisis cuantitativos y cualitativos revelan patrones distintos: las traducciones de Goldblatt enfatizan roles de género tradicionales, representando a los personajes femeninos como físicamente dependientes y emocionalmente vulnerables a través de interacciones físicas detalladas. Por otro lado, Yang ofrece una representación más equilibrada del lenguaje corporal mediante la reescritura y la omisión, presentando a los personajes femeninos como menos dependientes físicamente. Estos hallazgos iluminan cómo las identidades de género de los traductores moldean su traducción y representación del lenguaje corporal.

PALABRAS CLAVE: lingüística de corpus; lenguaje corporal influenciado por el género; traducción literaria; Gladys Yang; Howard Goldblatt.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

It is widely accepted that «language is not only a tool for communication, but also a tool of manipulation» (Von Flotow 2016, 8). Over the last several decades, numerous discussions and arguments have emerged regarding the relationship between language and power (Conley et al. 1978; Mooney and Evans 2018; Talbot 1998; Thornborrow 2014). These discussions demonstrate the ability of language to shape power dynamics. Translation plays an unparalleled role in the global dissemination of ideas. Just as there are countless interpretations of Hamlet, different translators create distinct versions of the same work. Translation is considered a creative endeavor that requires translators to exercise a certain level of autonomy. Chamberlain (1998) compares writing to composing a piece of music and translating to performing that piece, emphasizing that translation is fundamentally distinct from the original work. Translation is influenced by power relations that determine how the original text is recreated, and gender imbalance is a significant aspect of this power tension (Meng 2019). In recent decades, gender awareness in translation has garnered significant attention from scholars, covering a wide range of topics from practical translation issues to translation history, criticism, and new ideas in translation theory. Feminist writers and translators strive to liberate women from patriarchal oppression in language and critique the problematic concepts that marginalize women and translation in society and literature (ibid.). Since the early 2000s, under the influence of post-structuralist understandings of gender and third-wave feminist linguistics, researchers have begun to combine discourse analysis with feminism in translation studies. This shift moves away from the traditional binary view of gender and embraces a diverse-oriented view known as gender performativity, which posits that gender can be deliberately constructed and expressed in translated texts (Castro 2009, 2013; Elmiger 2013; Ergün 2013; Meng 2019; Santaemilia 2012). However, most studies on gender performativity in translation have been qualitative, and empirical studies focusing on the discursive aspects of gender are relatively rare. By employing systematic methodologies and large datasets, empirical research can uncover patterns and trends that might be overlooked in qualitative analyses.

This study aims to use both quantitative and qualitative analysis to examine how translators' gender identity is constructed and reflected in the translation of body language

in female and male translations of literary works. Specifically, the study will examine the gendered body language in two translations of the acclaimed novel *Chenzhong De Chibang* (1980) (*沉重的翅膀*) written by the renowned female writer, Zhang Jie, who won the Mao Dun National Prize for Fiction in 1985. The novel's English translations, *Leaden Wings* by female translator Gladys Yang (1987) and *Heavy Wings* (1989) by male translator Howard Goldblatt, will serve as the corpus for both quantitative and qualitative analysis. Both translators are English native translators who have made significant contributions to the translation of Chinese-English literary works. Previous research has acknowledged the feminist elements in Yang's translation of *Leaden Wings* (Fu 2011; Meng 2019; Wang 2014), while research on *Heavy Wings* is relatively limited. Meng (2019) has examined the gendered elements in these two translations, such as modality, transitivity and pragmatics features, but has not focused specifically on gendered body language. This study aims to investigate the gendered practices of these translators and how they represent gender in literary translation through body language using corpus-assisted methods. This study is the first to systematically explore linguistic descriptions of gendered body language in literary translation, aiming to fill the gap in the quantitative analysis within gender-based translation studies. The research question this study addresses is: do female (Gladys Yang) and male (Howard Goldblatt) translators construct their gender identities differently in translating *Chenzhong De Chibang* in terms of gendered body language?

By combining both quantitative data and qualitative insights, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how gendered body language is translated and whether the translators' gender identities influence their translation choices.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts the corpus linguistics method for quantitative analysis, on which basis, further qualitative analysis is carried out for a detailed description of usage of gendered body language in context. Specifically, two corpora have been built. One is the English translation of *Chenzhong De Chibang* by female translator Gladys Yang, *Leaden Wings*; the other is the translation of the same book by male translator Howard Goldblatt, *Heavy Wings*. The scanned versions of the two translations have been collected and converted into editable text versions. After carefully cleaning the corpus manually to remove irrelevant text and characters, two text datasets are generated. Table 1 provides an overview of the two corpora. AntConc 4.0.10 (Anthony 2022), a freeware corpus analysis toolkit for concordancing and text analysis, has been widely used in corpus linguistics. Its «Key-Word-In-Context» (KWIC) function is utilized to examine the frequencies of gendered body language and how these expressions are commonly used in the two corpora.

| Texts  | Translated text by Goldblatt (1989) | Translated text by Yang (1987) |
|--------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Tokens | 111,893                             | 57,258                         |
| Types  | 9,559                               | 6,925                          |

*Table 1. Overview of the Two Comparable Corpora*

Following Mahlberg (2013) and Čermáková and Mahlberg (2022) who employ five-word body part clusters as indicators, clusters that include «at least one body part noun and at least one third person singular possessive determiner or pronoun including *he, his, him, she, her*» (ibid., 15), this study uses similar gendered body language patterns. Due to the relatively small number of five-word body part clusters in the corpora of this study, the retrieval method adopted is slightly different from their research. The frequently used body parts in literary works, which have been examined by Čermáková and Mahlberg (ibid.), such as *hand(s), face, knee, knees, head, eye(s), arm(s), neck, back, foot (feet), heel, ear(s), mouth, teeth, hips* are searched using the KWIC function in AntConc, with context range set to include gendered words *he / his / him* or *she / her* in «Window Span From 5L To 5R». This study also considers character names as gendered words, such as «Yuanyuan» being identified as «she» or «her», which was done through manual screening. Among the retrieval results, data not considered to represent body language, such as «a hair of his head», are deleted through manual screening. The remaining results, which represent gendered body language clusters, are referred to as gendered body language lexical bundles (GBLLBs) in this study. Expressions of the same GBLLBs in different tenses are categorized as one, expressed in the present tense. For example, «he opened his eyes» and «he opens his eyes» are both represented as «he opens his eyes». The most frequent GBLLBs in the two corpora are compared quantitatively, and a further manual check of the context is performed to identify the differences in their use between the two corpora.

### 3. RESULTS

Table 2 presents the top fifteen GBLLBs in Goldblatt and Yang translations. The results reveal distinct patterns in how male and female characters are portrayed through GBLLBs in the translations by Goldblatt and Yang.

| GBLLBs                 | Goldblatt (male) |             | Yang (female) |             | LL <sup>1</sup> |
|------------------------|------------------|-------------|---------------|-------------|-----------------|
|                        | Freq.            | Per million | Freq.         | Per million |                 |
| he opens his eyes      | 1                | 8.94        | 5             | 8.73        | 6.25            |
| he closes his eyes     | 0                | 0.00        | 2             | 3.49        | 4.33            |
| ...look in his eye(s)  | 5                | 44.69       | 0             | 0.00        | 4.13            |
| she close(ed) her eyes | 2                | 17.87       | 5             | 8.73        | 4.11            |
| he lowers his head     | 3                | 26.81       | 0             | 0.00        | 2.48            |
| he raises his head     | 3                | 26.81       | 0             | 0.00        | 2.48            |
| smile on her face      | 3                | 26.81       | 0             | 0.00        | 2.48            |
| cup...in his hand      | 2                | 17.87       | 0             | 0.00        | 1.65            |

<sup>1</sup> LL = Log Likelihood.

|                                |    |        |   |      |      |
|--------------------------------|----|--------|---|------|------|
| reaches/sticks out his hand    | 2  | 17.87  | 0 | 0.00 | 1.65 |
| he takes her hand              | 2  | 17.87  | 0 | 0.00 | 1.65 |
| chin in his hand               | 2  | 17.87  | 0 | 0.00 | 1.65 |
| ...look/expression on her face | 2  | 17.87  | 0 | 0.00 | 1.65 |
| she ... look him in the eye    | 2  | 17.87  | 0 | 0.00 | 1.65 |
| ...look/expression on his face | 17 | 151.93 | 5 | 8.73 | 1.30 |
| rests her head against/on his  | 5  | 44.69  | 1 | 1.75 | 0.89 |

*Table 2. Comparison of the Top Fifteen GBLBs in Male and Female Translations*

Goldblatt's translation exhibits a strong emphasis on the physical actions and facial expressions of male characters. For instance, descriptions such as «...look in his eye(s)» and «...look/expression on his face» are notably frequent, with 5 and 17 occurrences respectively (per million words values of 44.69 and 151.93). Additional actions like «He lowered his head» and «He raised his head» also appear multiple times (3 occurrences each, 26.81 per million words). These descriptions are statistically significant, reflected by high log likelihood values (e.g., 4.13 for «...look in his eye(s)»). The higher frequency and variety in male characters' descriptions may suggest a focus on portraying male actions and expressions in a more detailed and dynamic manner. Conversely, Yang's translation shows a reduced frequency of these actions, suggesting a less detailed portrayal of male characters' movements and expressions.

In Goldblatt's translation, female characters are depicted with certain physical and emotional interactions, though less frequently than their male counterparts. For example, «she rests her head against his» occurs 5 times (44.69 per million words), and «she close(ed) her eyes» appears twice (17.87 per million words). However, other actions, such as «smile on her face» and «...look/expression on her face», are rare or absent (2 occurrences each, 17.87 per million words). Yang's translation, while more restrained overall, provides a relatively balanced portrayal of eye-related actions for female characters, as seen with «she close(ed) her eyes» occurring 5 times (8.73 per million words). This suggests a slight shift towards a more even representation between genders.

Goldblatt provides a translation with a more action-oriented and expressive portrayal of male characters, highlighting physical movements and facial expressions. Female characters are less frequently described in such terms, reflecting a potential gender bias or a focus on male-centric narratives. Yang offers a more balanced but less detailed depiction of both genders, focusing less on physical actions and expressions, which may suggest a different narrative style or focus. The presence of some balanced actions for female characters (e.g., eye-related actions) indicates an attempt to provide a more neutral representation. Overall, the data suggests that the translators' choices reflect different narrative focuses and potential gender biases, with Goldblatt emphasizing male actions and expressions more heavily, while Yang provides a more subdued and balanced portrayal of both genders. This finding is also confirmed by the following qualitative analysis.

| Source text  | Literal translation  | Goldblatt (male)  | Yang (female)  |
|--|--|---|--|
| 她笑着，可是眼泪却一滴滴地掉在正在热敷的丈夫的肩膀上。陈咏明扳过她的肩膀，她却把头扭开，不看他的眼睛；而他，固执地把她湿漉漉的眼睛对准自己：“我不是好好的么？等我好了，我背你爬香山去……” (Zhang 1980, 85). | She smiled, but tears fell onto the shoulder she was compressing. Chen Yongming pulled her close, but she turned her head away, not looking into his eyes. He, stubbornly, aligned her tearful eyes with his: “Aren’t I alright? Once I’m well, I’ll carry you up Mount Xiang...”. | As she smiled, her tears fell onto her husband’s shoulder. When he pulled her shoulder away, she turned her head, for she was ashamed to look him in the eye. But he stubbornly reached out and turned her head to face him. “I’m doing fine, aren’t I? Just wait until I’m back to normal, and I’ll carry you up Mount Xiang on my back” (Goldblatt 1989, 75). | She smiled, but couldn’t hold back her tears. When he pulled her close she turned her head away, unwilling to meet his eyes. “Aren’t I doing fine?” he demanded. “Once I’m well again. I’ll carry you on my back up the Western Hills...” (Yang 1987, 45). |

*Table 3. Example 1*

In Example 1, the phrase «不看他的眼睛» (not looking into his eyes) from the source text is translated into «she was ashamed to look him in the eye» by Goldblatt. This addition of «ashamed» introduces an extra layer of meaning, suggesting a judgment or emotional state that reflects the male translator’s interpretation of the woman’s feelings, potentially influenced by a traditional view of gender roles where the woman feels guilt or shame. In contrast, Yang translates the same phrase as «unwilling to meet his eyes», which directly states the woman’s reluctance without implying a deeper emotional state of shame. This difference indicates Yang’s more neutral or perhaps empathetic perspective, framing the woman’s actions without additional moral judgment.

Furthermore, the source text phrase «他，固执地把她湿漉漉的眼睛对准自己» (He, stubbornly, aligned her tearful eyes with his) is rendered by Goldblatt as «he stubbornly reached out and turned her head to face him». Here, Goldblatt adds the gesture «reached out», which portrays the male character as caring or friendly, potentially softening the stubbornness implied. However, by changing «tearful eyes» to «head», Goldblatt reduces the emotional impact and the reader’s sympathy for the woman’s distress. Yang, on the other hand, chooses to omit this specific interaction, focusing on the stubbornness of the man in the text by using the expression «demanded». This choice shifts the emphasis from a physical gesture to the forcefulness of the man’s words. This difference highlights how each translator’s gender identity and perspective influence their interpretation and portrayal of characters’ emotions and interactions.

| Source text  | Literal translation  | Goldblatt (male)  | Yang (female)  |
|--|--|---|--|
| 万群举起无力的双手，象受了委屈的孩子一样，扑向他的怀抱，把头靠在他的胸前，呜咽着说：“哦，家彬，家彬，为什么一切都是那么别扭啊！” (Zhang 1980, 296). | Wan Qun raised her weak hands, like a wronged child, and threw herself into his arms, resting her head on his chest, sobbing: “Oh, Jiabin, Jiabin, why is everything so awkward?”. | She raises her arms weakly, like an abused child, and rushes into his arms, sobbing as she rests her head against his chest, “Oh, Jiabin, Jiabin, why has everything turned out so badly?” (Goldblatt 1989, 220). | Joy threw herself into his arms like a child unfairly treated. “Jiabin, Jiabin!” she sobbed, “Why is everything so difficult?” (Yang 1987, 123). |

*Table 4. Example 2*

In Example 2, the source text describes a highly emotional scene where Wan Qun, feeling distressed, seeks comfort by physically leaning into Jiabin’s embrace. Goldblatt and Yang’s translations differ notably in their portrayal of this scene. The inclusion of «rests her head against his chest» in Goldblatt’s translation reinforces the dependency of the female character on the male character, suggesting a need for protection and comfort. This aligns with the pattern observed in his translation of frequent physical interactions that underscore traditional gender dynamics. Yang’s omission of this physical detail shifts the focus from physical to emotional support, suggesting a perspective that values the expression of feelings over physical gestures. This choice reduces the emphasis on physical dependency and instead highlights the emotional distress and the act of seeking verbal comfort.

The high frequency of the phrase «rests her head against/on his» in Goldblatt’s translation, occurring 5 times (44.69 per million words), compared to only one occurrence (1.75 per million words) in Yang’s translation, is particularly noteworthy. Goldblatt, as a male translator, might subconsciously highlight traditional gender norms, emphasizing the protective role of male characters and the dependent or nurturing role of female characters. This emphasis on physical comfort and intimacy can create a narrative that aligns with certain cultural expectations of gender roles. Yang, as a female translator, may intentionally avoid such portrayals to present female characters as more independent and self-reliant, reflecting contemporary views on gender equality.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the analysis of gendered body language in the translations by Goldblatt and Yang reveals distinct differences in how each translator constructs their gender identity through their work. Goldblatt’s translation tends to emphasize traditional gender roles, portraying female characters as more vulnerable and physically dependent on male characters. Yang’s translation, on the other hand, presents female characters as more emotionally articulate and less physically dependent. These differences align with

Meng's (2019) findings, which suggest that the female translator, Yang, is more active in manipulating the text and clearly women-identified, while the male translator, Goldblatt, presents a traditional gender view. This study underscores how translators' gender identities and perspectives can significantly influence the portrayal of characters and their interactions, offering readers different interpretations and experiences of the same source material.

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