

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH TO TRANSLATOR SUBJECTIVITY

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Annotation. This article adopts phenomenology to investigate how translators' lived experience – what Husserl calls the lifeworld – inflects semantic decision-making when rendering memoirs. A synthesis of interview-based studies and descriptive process research shows that lexical choices, tone and the treatment of silence in life writing all correlate with translators' personal histories, emotional repertoires and cultural allegiances. Drawing on twenty recent sources, including Uzbek scholarship, the discussion reframes “subjectivity” as an interpretive resource rather than a contaminant. The conclusion proposes pedagogical exercises and ethical guidelines that legitimise reflexive positioning while guarding against solipsism.

Key words. phenomenology; translator subjectivity; lifeworld; memoir translation; in-depth interviews; interpretive agency; Uzbek studies; qualitative methods

Memoir is the literary genre in which author and narrator openly coincide; translating it therefore demands unusual sensitivity to another person's remembered life. Traditional process studies tended to treat the translator as an impersonal conduit, yet growing evidence from think-aloud protocols and eye-tracking points to the decisive role of affect and autobiography in textual shaping (Hubscher-Davidson, 2024). A phenomenological lens clarifies why: every cognitive act unfolds within a *lifeworld* – the pre-reflective horizon of meanings sedimented by biography, culture and bodily disposition (Zahavi, 2019). When a translator meets a memoir, two lifeworlds interact, and semantic decisions become moments of intersubjective negotiation.

Phenomenology asks researchers to bracket preconceptions (*epoché*) before describing experience in its immediacy (Gallagher, 2021). Translators can never achieve complete bracketing, but interview data show that disciplined self-reflection heightens awareness of value-laden defaults: one Uzbek translator explained that she routinely softened references to parental authoritarianism because her own upbringing normalised strict discipline (Gayvullayeva, 2025). Such findings align with Ball's longitudinal diary of a French-to-English translator, where lexical hesitations mirrored personal memories of migration (Ball, 2021). Phenomenological description thus relocates “bias” from a defect to a traceable horizon that can be dialogically managed.

Seventeen peer-reviewed studies since 2020 have used semi-structured or phenomenological interviews to map the felt dimension of translating life writing. Researchers consistently identify three vectors of influence. *Emotional attunement* – the translator's capacity to resonate with the author's affective arc – guides choice between evaluative synonyms, especially in confessional passages (Hubscher-Davidson, 2024). *Moral proximity* – how closely the translator's ethics align with the memoirist – affects whether ideological metaphors are retained or domesticated (Bekmuradova, 2024). Finally, *temporal self-construal*



– memories of the translator’s own past – shapes narration of time: translators who have experienced exile prefer spatial metaphors for temporal rupture, a pattern echoed in New Yorker interviews with Damion Searls (Rees, 2024).

Methodologically, phenomenological interviewing offers thick, first-person data while avoiding the stimulus intrusions of keystroke logging (Kvale, 2019). Recent guides stress the need to keep questions open, inviting narrators to “dwell” on moments of felt tension (Adams & van Manen, 2023). In a Persian-to-English memoir project, researchers found that 70 % of meaning shifts mentioned in interviews did not register in retrospective rationalisations, underscoring the value of real-time phenomenological prompts (Kazemi & Sanei, 2020).

Close textual comparison reveals how subjectivity materialises on the page. In the Uzbek edition of *Educated*, phrases of bodily vulnerability were amplified, replacing “his hands trembled” with “his fingers quivered like autumn leaves” to conjure an imagery familiar from Uzbek poetic codes; the translator later linked this choice to childhood memories of *Navro‘z* readings (Inomjonova & Batirova, 2024). Conversely, an Arabic-to-English team deliberately flattened sensorimotor metaphors of taste because the lead translator, a cancer survivor, found visceral descriptions of chemotherapy “untranslatable without retraumatising” (Lahiani, 2022). These examples demonstrate phenomenology’s claim that interpretation is embodied and historically situated.

Foregrounding subjectivity raises ethical dilemmas. Venuti famously criticised domesticating translations for masking cultural difference, yet a phenomenological stance suggests that invisibility also hides the translator’s situated responsibility (Venuti, 2018). Professional codes across AIIC and the Uzbek Association of Literary Translators now encourage short reflexive notes where memoir translators can disclose positionality without overshadowing authors. Phelan et al.’s framework for public-service interpreting likewise urges practitioners to acknowledge “affective sympathies” while preserving procedural impartiality (Phelan, 2020). Empirical data show that readers appreciate such transparency: survey respondents rated paratextual translator statements as increasing trust by 18 % (Nurminen, 2019).

If subjectivity is inevitable, translator education must teach critical reflexivity rather than pretend to objectivity. At Uzbekistan State World Languages University, a new workshop pairs phenomenological interviewing with parallel-text annotation: students first translate a memoir excerpt, then conduct bracketing interviews with peers to uncover hidden biographical triggers. Preliminary assessment indicates heightened awareness of semantic alternatives and reduced over-domestication. Digital tools can assist; corpus interfaces that tag affective clusters help translators notice where their personal resonance might skew choice (Lei, 2025). Future projects could combine eye-tracking with in-situ verbalisation to triangulate phenomenological self-report.

A phenomenological approach redraws the map of translator agency. By situating semantic decisions within lived experience, it validates the translator’s voice while providing rigorous methods – epoché, reflective interviewing, textual triangulation – to keep that voice accountable. Memoir translation, in which authorial memory and translator memory converge, exemplifies the creative-ethical stakes of subjectivity. Recognising – and researching – this convergence will enrich both scholarly models and professional practice, ensuring that the translated memoir remains a dialogic space where multiple lifeworlds can speak.

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