

## ChatGPT-Powered Meaning Reconstruction in the Chinese Translation of Dewey's *Experience and Nature*

Jinpei ZHANG

School of Foreign Languages, Shenzhen Institute of Information Technology, Shenzhen, P.R. China  
[zhangjp@sziit.edu.cn](mailto:zhangjp@sziit.edu.cn)

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### Abstract

*Experience and Nature* is widely regarded as one of John Dewey's most profound yet challenging philosophical works, often leaving both readers and translators perplexed. The advent of ChatGPT offers a promising tool to assist translators in navigating the muddy terrain of Dewey's metaphysical discourse. This study explores how ChatGPT when deliberately prompted within the analytical framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), can support the interpretation and reconstruction of experiential, interpersonal, and textual meanings in the translation process. Drawing on illustrative examples, the paper demonstrates ChatGPT's potential to clarify philosophical jargon, unpack grammatical metaphors, analyze transitivity patterns, and propose coherent thematic structures. These findings offer practical insights for future translators and suggest that with the aid of ChatGPT and other large language models (LLMs), a revised and more accurate Chinese translation of *Experience and Nature* is within reach.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since the launch of OpenAI's ChatGPT, generative AI has been rapidly adopted across a wide range of domains, including education, healthcare, customer service, creative writing, and, notably, translation. The number of studies examining the capabilities of ChatGPT and other LLMs in translation tasks has grown exponentially (see Chan & Tang, 2024; Tian & Deng, 2024; Woodrum, 2024; Shi et al., 2025). Findings consistently show that these tools can significantly enhance translation efficiency and, under guided conditions, improve accuracy.

However, there remains a notable gap in the literature concerning the use of LLMs in the translation of philosophical texts, which are often characterized by abstract concepts, dense syntax, and culturally embedded assumptions. This paper addresses that gap by using the Chinese translation of John Dewey's *Experience and Nature* as a case study. Drawing on the theoretical framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), the paper explores the

potential of ChatGPT to assist in the meaning reconstruction process in the translation of philosophically complex texts.

## 2. *EXPERIENCE AND NATURE*

First published in 1925 and revised in 1929, *Experience and Nature* was republished in 1981 as the core volume in *The Later Works of John Dewey* (Vol. 1). The book was based on Dewey's Paul Carus lecture notes and explored core tenets such as philosophical methods, the metaphysics of nature, the philosophy of mind, and critiques of traditional metaphysics. Essentially, *Experience and Nature* represented Dewey's effort to expound his "empirical naturalism systematically"—seeing together human experience, nature, society, etc., rather than treating them as distinct or opposing domains (Ryan, 2011; Brown & Leonov, 2025). Dewey wrote primarily for philosophers and scholars—particularly those engaged in metaphysics, epistemology, and pragmatism (e.g., Russell, Santayana). The book is still widely regarded as one of Dewey's most profound and challenging philosophical works (Hook, 2008).

Since the ideal reader is highly educated and philosophically literate—whereas the actual reader of the Chinese translation may not be—the translator's role involves bridging that gap. Providing explicit structural signposts for each chapter and explanations of philosophical terms is essential for guiding comprehension.

The Chinese translation of the book was undertaken by Professor Fu Tongxian—a renowned educator, philosopher, and translator—and was published by The Commercial Press in 1960 (revised in 2015). Fu's translation was, to a certain extent, successful and has had a lasting impact on the Chinese academic reception of Dewey's metaphysics. However, close examination reveals several issues, including lexical inaccuracies and a lack of cognitive scaffolding.

Several factors contribute to the difficulty of translating *Experience and Nature*:

**Structural complexity:** Each of the ten chapters spans 40–60 pages without any section divisions or subheadings, placing a heavy cognitive load on both readers and translators.

**Philosophical intertextuality:** Dewey draws upon a wide range of references and critiques various metaphysical schools. Without a sufficient background in Western philosophy and religion, a translator risks distorting these intertextual relationships.

**Syntactic density:** Dewey frequently writes in long, conceptually layered sentences that require close, clause-level unpacking.

Lexical opacity: The text is filled with abstract philosophical jargon, requiring a high level of conceptual and disciplinary literacy to render accurately in Chinese.

As Professor Liu Fangtong (2011: 195) observed in the preface to the Chinese edition of *The Collected Works of Dewey*, Dewey's writing is "obscure, archaic, and extremely difficult to understand." This makes *Experience and Nature* an ideal test case for evaluating how ChatGPT might assist human translators in reconstructing meaning across languages.

### **3. TRANSLATION THROUGH THE LENS OF SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL LINGUISTICS**

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) defines language as a resource for meaning-making that operates simultaneously across three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Huang & Chen, 2022). The ideational metafunction is concerned with representing experience. It includes the experiential component (how events, entities, and circumstances are construed through the transitivity system) and the logical component (how logical relations between clauses are constructed—e.g., expansion or projection). The interpersonal metafunction relates to enacting social relationships and includes Mood (Subject and Finite), modality, appraisal (evaluative resources that express speaker attitudes and stance), and involvement (Martin & White, 2005; Thompson, 2022). The textual metafunction concerns how messages are organized into coherent discourse and are usually realized through thematic structure and cohesive devices.

From an SFL perspective, translation is "the recreation of meaning in context through choice—choice in the interpretation of the original text and choice in the creation of the translated text" (Matthiessen, 2014: 272). It involves re-instantiating the meaning potential of the source text within a new linguistic and cultural system, requiring sensitivity to all three metafunctions.

Crucially, the translator, the target text, and the target audience together constitute a target text system (Lambert & van Gorp, 2014), which is itself shaped by broader systems such as cultural norms, disciplinary knowledge, and intertextual relations. Intertextuality plays a key role not only in interpreting the source text but also in evaluating the translated version.

To explore how ChatGPT can support the process of meaning reconstruction within this framework, we constructed a bilingual corpus of *Experience and Nature* (394,187 tokens in total) and conducted case-based analyses of translation challenges. The following sections

demonstrate how ChatGPT can be used to improve the reconstruction of experiential, interpersonal, and textual meanings.

### 3.1. Experiential Meaning

Experiential meaning is primarily expressed through the transitivity system, which consists of processes, participants, and circumstantial elements. There are six major process types: material, mental, relational, verbal, behavioral, and existential—typically realized by verb phrases. Different processes involve different participants (nouns and pronouns). For example, a material process usually includes an actor and a goal, while a mental process involves a sensor (the experiencer) and a phenomenon. Circumstantial elements express time, place, manner, or cause and are typically realized as adverbial or prepositional phrases.

#### 3.1.1. Philosophical Jargon

The text of *Experience and Nature* engages with diverse philosophical traditions (e.g., Aristotle, Plato, Kant, Santayana) and interdisciplinary concepts (e.g., affinities, repulsion, consciousness), requiring the translator to possess extensive background knowledge. Throughout the book, Dewey critiques numerous philosophical theories. To ensure conceptual accuracy, translators must fully understand the terms involved. This may require neologisms, explanatory notes, or both. ChatGPT can assist in extracting, glossing, and explaining such philosophical jargon.

#### Example 1

**English Original:** The formalism and unreality of the problem remain, however, in the theories which have been offered as its “solutions.” They range from *the materialism of Hobbes, the apparatus of soul, pineal glands, and animal spirits of Descartes*, to *interactionism, pre-established harmony, occasionalism, parallelism, pan-psychic idealism, epiphenomenalism, and the élan vital*—a portentous array. (Dewey, 1929: 252)

**Chinese Translation:** 这些理论从霍布斯的唯物主义，笛卡儿的灵魂的工具、松果腺、动物的精神，直到相互作用论、预先安排的协调、际遇论、平行论、泛灵的精神论、副现象论以及所谓“生命之力”(élan vital)——这一系列可怕的陈列物。(Fu, 2015: 249)

This example is saturated with intertextual references: eleven philosophical terms are embedded in a single sentence, most of which are unfamiliar to Chinese readers. ChatGPT was

prompted to provide explanatory footnotes for these terms (see Table 1). The prompt included the following instructions:

*Please generate a professional, publication-ready table in Word format that provides Chinese explanatory footnotes for philosophical jargon in the following sentence. The table should include The original English term, its accurate Chinese equivalent, and a concise, accurate explanation in Chinese (suitable for inclusion as a footnote or endnote). Keep the entries academic and readable for a Chinese audience interested in philosophy.*

Table 1: Explanatory Notes for Selected Philosophical Jargon

| English Term            | Chinese Equivalent | Brief Explanation (Chinese)       |
|-------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Materialism (Hobbes)    | 唯物主义 (霍布斯)         | 霍布斯认为一切现实存在都是物质的，包括人类思想和意识。       |
| Apparatus of soul       | 灵魂机制               | 指支撑灵魂活动的器官或结构，笛卡儿用于解释心灵与身体的互动。    |
| Pineal gland            | 松果腺                | 笛卡儿认为这是心灵与身体互动的物理部位。              |
| Animal spirits          | 动物精神               | 笛卡儿用来解释身体如何受灵魂控制的一种微细物质。          |
| Interactionism          | 相互作用论              | 主张心灵与身体之间存在双向因果关系。                |
| Pre-established harmony | 预定协调论              | 莱布尼茨提出，心灵和身体虽不直接互动，但由上帝事先设定协调。    |
| Occasionalism           | 际遇论                | 认为身体和心灵的互动只是表象，真正的因果关系是由神引发的。     |
| Parallelism             | 平行论                | 认为心灵和身体同步运行，但无因果关系。               |
| Pan-psychic idealism    | 泛灵论                | 认为万物皆有意识或心灵属性，是一种极端唯心主义。          |
| Epiphenomenalism        | 副现象论               | 主张意识是物理过程的副产品，本身不具因果力。            |
| Élan vital              | 生命之力               | 贝尔格森提出的生命哲学概念，认为生命发展有一种不可还原的内在动力。 |

Likewise, including English terms alongside their Chinese equivalents (e.g., “副现象论 (epiphenomenalism)”) helps maintain academic precision and facilitates comprehension for bilingual readers or scholars tracing the philosophical lineage. Again, ChatGPT can be tasked to produce a translation that keeps the English terms next to their Chinese equivalents.

One notable caveat is that ChatGPT functions as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it can significantly enhance productivity and improve translation accuracy, offering efficiency and consistency in language-related tasks. On the other hand, its use may introduce challenges such as inherent biases, hallucinations, or the misinterpretation of nuanced philosophical concepts.

Hallucination, in particular, poses a serious concern: ChatGPT may generate fabricated references, including fake quotations attributed to philosophers, confabulate non-existent concepts, or misattribute ideas—for instance, erroneously assigning certain terms or theories to Dewey or other thinkers. Additionally, it might invent pseudo-terminology, especially when misinterpreting specialized philosophical jargon or produce misleading explanations that appear plausible but lack factual grounding.

To mitigate these risks, human oversight remains indispensable. Expert review, critical evaluation, and fact-checking are essential to ensure the reliability and accuracy of AI-generated content, particularly in scholarly and philosophical discourse. In our case, an English-Chinese dictionary of philosophical terms was consulted to make sure both the Chinese equivalents and the brief explanations are accurate in Table 1.

### 3.1.2. Transitivity Patterns

SFL's transitivity analysis breaks down a clause into Processes, Participants, and Circumstances. Analyzing transitivity aids in understanding how Dewey uses abstract language to construct philosophical meaning. ChatGPT was prompted to conduct a transitivity analysis of the following example (see Table 2):

#### Example 2

**English Original:** If the separation of contingency and necessity is abandoned, what is there to exclude a belief that *science*, while *it is grasp* of the regular and stable *mechanism* of nature, *is also an organ* of regulating and enriching, through its own expansion, the more exuberant and irregular expressions of nature in human intercourse, the arts, religion, industry, and politics? (Dewey, 1929: 58)

**Chinese Translation:** 假使偶然性和必然性的分隔被消除了，那么只有相信：科学，在它**掌握**关于自然界的有规则的和稳定的机构的同时，也**是**通过它本身的扩展，对于自然界在人类的交际、艺术、宗教、工业和政治中的这种更丰富而不规则的表现予以调节和充实的**一种工具**。此外，还有什么呢？(Fu, 2015: 68)

Table 2: Transitivity Analysis

| Clause Segment  | Process Type                       | Participants                                  | Chinese Translation Alignment   |
|---|------------------------------------|---|---|
| If the separation of contingency and necessity is abandoned | Material: abandoned                | is Actor: (Implied agent); Goal: Separation   | “偶然性和必然性的分隔被消除了”<br>Accurate passive material process                                 |
| what is there to exclude a belief                           | Mental (modularized): exclude      | Senser: what (rhetorical); Phenomenon: belief | “那么只有相信”<br>Transformed into a declarative statement, loss of interrogative modality. |
| Science, while it is a grasp of...                          | Relational: Attributive is         | Carrier: it; Attribute: grasp of mechanism    | “在它掌握...的同时”<br>Rendered as material action, not relational process                   |
| science...is also an organ of regulating and enriching...   | Relational: Identifying is         | Token: science; Value: an organ               | “是一种工具” Correct relational identification   |
| regulating and enriching... expressions of nature...        | Material: regulating, enriching    | Actor: science; Goal: expressions of nature   | “调节和充实...的表<br>现” Functional match, though “调节” may underplay agency                  |
| through its own expansion                                   | Circumstance: Manner (Cause/Means) | —   | “通过它本身的扩展”<br>Clear circumstantial element  |

Such analysis helps clarify process types, participant roles, and circumstantial elements. On the basis of this, it will be easier to explore translation choices for the participants, processes and circumstances. For instance, there are two relational clauses in “science, while it is grasp



of the regular and stable mechanism of nature, is also an organ...”. The first one “it is grasp of...”, is rendered by Fu Tongxian as a material process (“掌握”) in Chinese, rather than the original relational process, slightly altering the original logical relationship. The second one “science...is also an organ of regulating and enriching...” is translated using a relational process in Chinese. However, since the two relational clauses are joined by a conjunctive “while”, it might be better to render them as “不仅是...也是...” pattern in Chinese. Besides, the circumstance that modifies “an organ”, i.e. “of regulating and enriching...” is rendered as a pre-modifier, which we argue makes the clause rather clumsy. It might be better if it is rendered as a material process.

There are some other issues: The equivalent for “mechanism” should be “机制”, rather than “机构” (a bureaucratic organization) in this context. The clause “what is there to exclude...” is more like a rhetorical question here, the translation “此外，还有什么呢?” does not seem to capture the rhetorical force. The following is a revised translation based on transitivity analysis proposed by ChatGPT:

如果我们不再将偶然性与必然性加以区分，那么还有什么理由不去相信：科学不仅是对自然界中规律性和稳定性**机制**的把握，同时也是一种工具，借助自身的扩展，来调节并丰富自然在人的交往、艺术、宗教、工业与政治中所呈现出的更加奔放而不规则的表现？

In this revised version, the “不仅是...也是...” structure is employed to more accurately reflect the two relational clauses in the original. Additionally, the circumstantial elements—“of regulating and enriching, through its own expansion”—are no longer treated as pre-modifiers. Instead, they are recast as material processes following the relational clause “(science) is also an organ...,” thereby improving syntactic clarity and logical flow. Other issues, such as the mistranslation of “mechanism” as “机构” instead of the more accurate “机制,” have also been corrected. Overall, the new translation shows significant improvement in terms of faithfulness, semantic precision, and readability, better preserving both the logical structure and philosophical nuance of the original.

### 3.1.3. Lexical Metaphor

Lexical metaphor is understood as the phenomenon in which a lexis in one lexico-semantic domain is mapped onto another lexico-semantic domain (Halliday & Matthiessen,



1999: 232). John Dewey uses a lot of lexical metaphors in *Experience and Nature*, as a way to expand the semantic resources for construing experience.

### Example 3

**English Original:** History is full of ingratitude. All existences are something more than products; they have qualities of their own and assert independent life. There is something of *King Lear's daughters* in all offspring. This ingratitude is reproachable only when it turns to deny its ancestry. (Dewey, 1929: 108)

**Chinese Translation:** 历史充满了数典忘祖之事。一切存在都不仅只是过去事物的产物；它们有它们自己的性质和独立的生活。在一切的后裔中都有像**黎耳王(King Lear)**的女儿那样的一回事。这种数典忘祖之事，只有当它反过来否认自己的祖宗的时候，才是可以责备的。(Fu, 2015: 114)

This passage demonstrates John Dewey's use of literary allusion and lexical metaphor to articulate philosophical ideas. The reference to "King Lear's daughters" evokes Shakespeare's tragic characters who betray their father, signaling metaphorically the tendency of outcomes (or "offspring") to rebel against their origins or foundational principles. Fu Tongxian opts for a literal translation strategy, rendering "King Lear's daughters" directly as "黎耳王的女儿." While accurate in surface form, the metaphorical implication of betrayal, rebellion, or filial ingratitude may not be immediately accessible to readers unfamiliar with King Lear or its cultural connotations. As a result, the richness of Dewey's metaphor risks being lost. Chinese readers might not grasp the intended philosophical critique of historical or intellectual "offspring" turning against their "ancestry" (such as traditions or foundational ideas). Additional contextualization or annotation could preserve the metaphor's rhetorical and argumentative force.

#### 3.1.4. Grammatical Metaphor

According to Halliday and Matthiessen (1999, p.232), grammatical metaphor refers to a shift in the grammatical realization of meaning. For example, what is typically realized as a process (e.g., "applauded loudly") in a congruent clause may be metaphorically reworded as a participant (e.g., "a loud applause") in a non-congruent nominal group. This shift, common in academic and philosophical discourse, can increase lexical density and abstraction, thus posing considerable challenges for comprehension and translation.

#### Example 4

**English Original:** The perception of genetic continuity between the dynamic flux of nature and an eternity of static ideal forms thus terminates in a sharp division, in reiteration of the old tradition. (Dewey, 1929: 58)

**Chinese Translation:** 因此，他虽然看到了自然的动力之流转和静止的理想形式的永恒性之间在发生上的继续性，但他重复了旧传统，终于又造成了一种尖锐的区分。

(Fu, 2015, p. 68)

This sentence is an example of grammatical metaphor, compressing complex causal logic into nominalizations: “perception” (originally a mental process “perceiving something”) is reworded as a participant, “genetic continuity” compresses what would otherwise be a logical relation or a sequence of events, “flux of nature,” “eternity of static ideal forms,” “division,” and “reiteration” are also all nominalizations that package complex processes or qualities into noun phrases.

ChatGPT can assist in this task by automatically identifying grammatical metaphors and unpacking them into more congruent forms (e.g., re-expanding nouns into verbs or clauses). On the basis of such congruent expressions, the translators can decide to what degree he or she should unpack those nominalizations, e.g., whether he or she should explicate the participant's “perception” or not.

Fu Tongxian unpacks “perception” as “he or Santayana perceived” and translates it as “他看到了”(literally: he saw). But a more accurate process verb might be “他认为”(literally: he thought) in this context. Again, there are inaccuracies in the translation of other grammatical metaphors, e.g., “dynamic flux of nature” (自然的动力之流转) should be translated as “自然的动态变化”. Moreover, Dewey's sentence critiques a paradox: a perceived continuity ends in division (dualism) in the form of a cause-effect logical metaphor (Halliday & Matthiessen, 1999). Fu's translation risks reversing cause and effect, suggesting that “reiteration of the old tradition” causes the division. The following is a revised translation based on the unpacking of grammatical metaphors proposed by ChatGPT (with some refinements by the present author):

桑塔雅那认为，自然的动态变化与静止的理想形式之间存在一种源起上的延续性；然而，这一看法最终导致二者的彻底分裂，沦为旧传统的重申。

This version offers a more accurate and congruent rendering of the original sentence, which is densely packed with grammatical metaphors—particularly nominalizations. By unpacking these abstractions into more process-oriented expressions, the translation improves clarity while preserving the philosophical depth and critical tone of Dewey's original.

### 3.2. Textual Meaning

The textual metafunction concerns how language is organized to create coherent, cohesive discourse. According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2014: 91), textual meaning is primarily realized through the Theme system and the cohesion system. The Theme of a clause is defined as “the first group or phrase that has some function in the experiential structure of the clause, i.e., that functions as a participant, a circumstance, or the process.” However, the textual organization extends beyond the clause level.

To capture higher-order discourse structure, Martin and Rose (2007) proposed a hierarchy of Themes, consisting of macro-Theme, hyper-Theme, and clause-level Themes. A hyper-theme typically serves as a topic sentence, projecting how the remainder of the paragraph will unfold. A macro-theme, realized at the paragraph or section level, guides the overall development of hyper-themes. Elements such as section headings, subsection titles, and chapter titles often function as macro-themes. While primarily contributing to textual meaning, these structural elements may also foreground experiential and interpersonal meanings (Gardner & Holmes, 2009).

In *Experience and Nature*, Dewey diverges from modern academic conventions by providing no section or subsection headings in any of the ten chapters. This absence of structural signposting imposes a considerable cognitive burden on readers, who must reconstruct the organization of arguments themselves—an especially demanding task for non-specialist or non-native readers unfamiliar with Dewey's philosophical style.

Cohesion, another component of textual meaning, is realized through both grammatical and lexical devices. Grammatical cohesion includes conjunctions, references, ellipsis, and substitution; lexical cohesion includes synonymy, hyponymy, repetition, and collocation (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014: 608).

#### 3.2.1. Section Headings and Structural Mapping

As noted, Dewey's chapters—often ranging from 40 to 60 pages—lack structural signposts. The existing Chinese translation preserves this structure, offering little in terms of explicit organizational guidance for the reader. However, such signposting is especially important for Chinese readers, who may be more accustomed to explicit textual organization in modern academic works and who may not share the philosophical background Dewey assumes of his ideal reader.

To address this challenge, ChatGPT was prompted to generate a structural map in Chinese for all ten chapters. The prompt included the following instructions:

*Divide the chapter into approximately 15 logically coherent sections.*

*Identify section boundaries by quoting the original text.*

*Provide each section with a heading and concise summary.*

*Synthesize the macro-level progression of Dewey's arguments across the chapter.*

By generating these textual landmarks, ChatGPT helps construct cognitive scaffolding for navigating Dewey's complex metaphysical terrain. This approach enhances textual coherence for readers unfamiliar with Dewey's writing style and facilitates a more accessible and accurate translation. To further counteract the challenges posed by the chapters' length and complexity, additional AI tools (e.g., Grok, DeepSeek) were employed to verify the organizational structure, supplemented by rigorous human oversight.

### 3.2.2. Theme/Rheme Structure

Analyzing how information is distributed within clauses—particularly in terms of Theme (the starting point of the message) and Rheme (the new or developing information)—is essential for evaluating readability and coherence in translation. The organization of Theme–Rheme progression determines how easily a reader can follow the unfolding of meaning.

ChatGPT can be prompted to identify and map Theme/Rheme patterns, compare thematic progression between source and target texts, and assess whether a translation preserves or alters these patterns. Theme–Rheme analysis assists translators in making informed structural decisions, ensuring logical coherence, and enhancing reader accessibility—especially when navigating the conceptual density of Dewey's prose.

#### Example 5

**English Original:** The immediately precarious, the point of greatest immediate need, defines the apex of consciousness, its intense or focal mode. And this is the point of re-

direction, of re-adaptation, re-organization. Hence the aptness *of James's comparison* of the course of consciousness to a stream, in spite of its intermittent character—a fact empirically recognized in his intimation of its rhythmic waxings and wanings—; *of his insistence* that only an object, not a concrete consciousness which is had twice, or which remains the same; *of his analogy* of focus and fringe; *of his statement* of its movements as a series of perchings and flights, of substantial and transitive phases; for meanings are condensed at the focus of imminent re-direction only to disappear as organization is effected, and yield place to another point of stress and weakness. (Dewey, 1929: 312)

**Chinese Translation:** 这个直接动荡不定的状态，这个最大的迫切需要之点，就说明了意识的最高峰，它的最强烈的或中心的状态。而这正是重新调整、重新适应、重新组织的焦点。**詹姆士**曾把意识的进程比作一条河流，而不管意识所具有的间断性——**在他**论及意识之流也具有有节奏的兴衰起落时，他是从经验上承认这个事实的；**他**坚持只有一个对象才会两次为我们所占有或始终保持不变，而一个具体的意识状态则不是这样的；**他**运用了焦点和边缘这个比拟；**他**陈述说：意识的运动是一系列的安定和动荡的状态，一系列的实质的和过渡的阶段；**他**认为，在迫切需要重新调整的焦点上，意义便凝聚在一起，而当**(新的)**组织产生时它们便又消逝了，然后又产生了另一个紧张和脆弱的关头。**詹姆士**的这些意见，我认为是极有见地的。(Fu, 2015: 306)

In the third sentence of this example, the phrase “Hence the aptness” operates as a single Theme that implicitly governs a series of subsequent Rhemes. Although stated only once, it thematically governs the structure of all following clauses—“of his comparison...; of his insistence...; of his analogy...; of his statement...”. These “of...” phrases serve as elaborations on the justification for that aptness, forming a cohesive rhetorical structure. This represents a classic case of what Thompson (2022) terms “constant thematic progression”, where the Theme remains consistent across successive clauses to maintain coherence.

In Fu Tongxian's Chinese translation, however, this thematic structure is not preserved. Rather than sustaining a constant Theme, the translator foregrounds the subject in each clause—“**詹姆士**—**他**—**他**—**他**—**他**”—which were originally part of the Rheme in English. Consequently, the thematic progression becomes linear and agent-centered, shifting emphasis away from Dewey's evaluative stance and toward James as a figure.

The original evaluative Theme (“the aptness”) can only be recovered at the end of the paragraph, in the sentence: “詹姆士的这些意见，我认为是极有见地的。” While this sentence attempts to unpack the original grammatical metaphor (“apt”) into a more congruent evaluative form, the insertion of “我认为” (“I think”) introduces a subjective tone that was not present in Dewey’s original formulation. This shift from a consistent thematic progression centered on evaluation, to one centered on actor/agency, subtly changes both the rhetorical flow and the interpersonal meaning of the passage.

ChatGPT, when prompted to analyze Theme/Rheme structure, can help preserve rhetorical coherence and ensure that evaluative meanings are not unintentionally weakened in translation. The following version is based on the thematic progression analysis proposed by ChatGPT (with minor refinements by the present author):

这个直接动荡不安的状态，即最迫切的需求点，界定了意识的顶峰，也即其最为强烈或最为集中的状态。而这正是重新导向、重新适应、重新组织的焦点所在。

因此，詹姆士将意识的进程比作一条河流的比喻是恰当的；**其恰当之处**在于他指出了：尽管意识具有间歇性，它仍如河流一般流动——**他通过**意识流具有节奏性的涨落暗示了这一经验事实；**在于**他强调：只有作为对象的事物，才能被我们重复“占有”或保持恒常，而具体的意识状态本身则并非如此；**在于**他将意识比拟为具有“焦点与边缘”的结构关系；**在于**他陈述说：意识的运行由一系列的“驻足与飞跃”、由实体性阶段与过渡性阶段构成——**因为**意义正是在迫切需要重新导向的焦点上得以凝聚，但一旦新的组织完成，这些意义便随之消解，并为另一个紧张与脆弱的时刻让位。

In this revised version, the phrase “在于” is used to render each of the “of...” phrases in the original English, thereby maintaining their functional link to “hence the aptness.” This strategy preserves the original thematic progression and evaluative focus, ensuring that the cohesive rhetorical structure of Dewey’s argument is reflected more faithfully in Chinese.

### 3.2.3. Cohesive Devices

Grammatical devices (e.g., conjunction, anaphora) and lexical devices (e.g., repetition, synonymy) are two major cohesive resources in discourse. ChatGPT can effectively detect and

trace relationships across clauses and sentences, map relation chains to ensure continuity of meaning, and recommend strategies for resolving ambiguity to preserve Dewey's argumentative coherence in translation.

### Example 6

**English Original:** No mythology is more familiar than that which tells how labor is due to the *trespass of man upon divine prerogatives, an act* that brought curse upon the earth and woe to man. Because of this primeval rebellion against God, men toil amid thorns to gain an uncertain livelihood, and women bring forth children in pain. (Dewey, 1929: 121)

**Chinese Translation:** 人们最熟悉的一个神话，讲到劳动是怎样由于人类触犯了神权而产生的，**劳动是一种**给地球带来了祸患、给人类带来了痛苦的**行动**。由于这个最初对上帝的反抗，男子在忧患中做苦工，以求得一个安定的生活，而女人则在痛苦中养育儿女。(Fu, 2015: 127)

In this sentence, the phrase “an act” can be considered as a lexical synonym or semantic reclassification that reframes “the trespass” as an act, thereby emphasizing its consequential nature in the mythological narrative.

However, in Fu Tongxian's Chinese translation, the clause “劳动是一种给地球带来了祸患、给人类带来了痛苦的行动” renders “an act that brought...” as a description of labor, rather than of the trespass. This introduces a significant semantic shift: it mistakenly casts labor—rather than trespass—as the cause of divine punishment. This interpretation misrepresents Dewey's logical structure and undermines the mythological critique being presented.

Translating such cohesion and discourse-level meaning requires both syntactic precision and semantic sensitivity. Tools like ChatGPT, when prompted appropriately, can trace referential chains, unpack layered noun phrases, and detect such semantic misalignments. In this case, identifying “an act” as a reclassification of “trespass” rather than a restatement of “labor” helps preserve the argumentative integrity of Dewey's text in translation.

### 3.3. Interpersonal Meaning

Interpersonal meaning is primarily conveyed through the Mood system, modality system, appraisal system, involvement system, and negotiation system. This metafunction concerns



how language enacts social relationships, establishes an authorial stance, and engages readers. In *Experience and Nature*, Dewey frequently draws on resources of evaluative language, modality, and intertextual allusion—particularly from biblical and philosophical traditions—to align with or challenge readers’ perspectives.

### 3.3.1. Appraisal and Evaluation

Dewey critiques numerous philosophical schools throughout *Experience and Nature*. Understanding how he uses evaluative language and modality markers is crucial to analyzing his philosophical positioning and rhetorical strategy. Within the Appraisal framework, these resources fall under Judgment (evaluation of behavior or ethics), Appreciation (evaluation of things or phenomena), Affect, and Graduation (amplification or down-toning). ChatGPT can help identify such appraisal patterns and reveal the strength of the authorial stance—for example, through modality, commitment, valuation, or force.

#### Example 7

**English Original:** To many, the associating of the two words will seem like talking of a round square, so *engrained* is the notion of the separation of man and experience from nature. ... Nature, on the other hand, is said to be *complete* apart from experience. (Dewey, 1929:1a)

**Chinese Translation:** 把人与经验同自然界截然分开，这个思想是这样地深入人心，有许多人认为把这两个词结合在一块儿用就似乎是在讲一个圆形的正方形一样。在另一方面，他们又说，自然是完全和经验分开的。(Fu, 2015:11)

The phrase “so engrained is the notion...” carries strong negative judgment—Dewey critiques the entrenched dualism between experience and nature as an obstacle to philosophical understanding. Fu’s translation “深入人心” is idiomatic and fluent, but it typically carries a neutral or even positive connotation (e.g., moral truths or cultural virtues). A more semantically faithful rendering of Dewey’s critical stance would be “根深蒂固,” which encodes negative judgment—aligned with the Judgment system in Appraisal Theory.

In addition, Dewey critiques the philosophical tradition that treats nature as “complete”—meaning perfect, self-sufficient, and ontologically independent of experience. This expresses an Appreciation, an evaluative stance toward Nature. He is not saying nature is “completely” separate from experience. However, Fu’s translation renders “complete” as “完全”

(completely), which functions as a degree adverb—thus misrepresenting Dewey's intended value judgment as a mere intensifier.

A more accurate translation might be:

“在另一方面，他们却说，自然本身就是完整的，不依赖于经验而存在。”

This version preserves the evaluative stance encoded in “complete” as an attributive quality (Appreciation) rather than a quantitative degree, thereby aligning more closely with Dewey's critique of ontological dualism and static metaphysics.

### 3.3.2. Intertextuality and Allusions

Dewey's text abounds with biblical allusions (e.g., wheat and tares, Jonah, gnat and camel) and philosophical references (e.g., Aristotle, Plato, Hegel, James). These intertextual resources contribute significantly to Dewey's philosophical ethos and dialogic positioning. Translating such allusions requires interpretive sensitivity and cultural contextualization. ChatGPT can help identify allusions, explain their origins (e.g., biblical or philosophical), recommend whether to retain or explicate them in translation and assess whether cultural resonance is preserved in the target language.

#### Example 8

**English Original:** They are mixed not mechanically but vitally like *the wheat and tares of the parable*. We may recognize them separately, but we cannot divide them, for unlike wheat and tares they grow from the same root. (Dewey, 1929:47)

**Chinese Translation:** 它们并不是机械地，而是有机地混合在一起，好像**比喻中的小麦和稗子**一样。我们可以区别它们，但我们不能把它们分开来，因为它们和小麦和稗子不同，它们是在同一个根上长出来的。(Fu, 2015: 58)

Here, Dewey alludes to the parable of the wheat and tares (Matthew 13:24–30), which describes good and evil growing together until judgment. This serves as a metaphor for conceptual inseparability—possibly referring to nature and experience or necessity and contingency. While Fu's translation retains the metaphor literally, it does not annotate or clarify the biblical source. Although intelligible on the surface, many Chinese readers may miss the cultural resonance and evaluative implications of the allusion. A brief footnote referencing the biblical parable would enhance understanding and preserve the rhetorical effect.

By leveraging ChatGPT's capacity to detect appraisal patterns and intertextual references, translators can better preserve Dewey's interpersonal stance (e.g., critiques, irony, alignment with readers), enhance the readability and cultural resonance of complex philosophical allusions and avoid neutralizing evaluative language or obscuring rhetorical purpose.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This article began by providing an overview of *Experience and Nature* and outlining the reasons why translating it poses particular challenges. Drawing on the SFL framework, translation was reconceptualized as the reconstruction of experiential, interpersonal, and textual meanings in the target language. Subsequently, examples from *Experience and Nature* were examined to explore the potential of ChatGPT as a meaning-reconstruction tool. The results suggest that, when precisely prompted, ChatGPT can collaborate effectively with human intelligence.

First, it provided plausible Chinese equivalents and explanatory footnotes for philosophical terms, analyzed transitivity structures, and unpacked both lexical and grammatical metaphors relevant to experiential meaning. Moreover, ChatGPT proved especially adept at analyzing the organizational structure of Dewey's text: it generated informative section headings that scaffolded the progression of ideas, guided reader navigation, and reduced cognitive load—thereby facilitating the reconstruction of textual meaning. In addition, ChatGPT excelled at identifying and interpreting Dewey's evaluative strategies, particularly in his critiques of other philosophical traditions. This capability significantly supported the reconstruction of interpersonal meaning by illuminating how Dewey positions himself dialogically within the broader philosophical discourse.

One caveat in using ChatGPT to reconstruct meaning in the translation of philosophical texts, however, is that it does not approach translation tasks from an SFL perspective by default unless deliberately prompted. Another concern is the possibility of issues such as bias, hallucination, or misinterpretation of philosophical concepts—risks that necessitate human oversight and critical evaluation.

Brown and Leonov (2025) have observed that the significance of *Experience and Nature* for contemporary thought across multiple disciplines remains underappreciated. Given the limitations identified in Fu Tongxian's pioneering Chinese translation, a comprehensive revision is long overdue. With the assistance of ChatGPT as a meaning-reconstruction tool,

there is reason to hope that a new, more accurate and accessible Chinese version of *Experience and Nature* will emerge in the near future.

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### **About the Author**

**Jinpei Zhang** *is an associate professor at Shenzhen Institute of Information Technology, Guangdong, China. He holds a PhD in Applied Linguistics. His research interests include translation, intercultural communication, and second language acquisition.*