

From Tool to Subject: A Study of Translator Behavior in *Babel* Based on the “Text-Behavior-Society” Trinity Model

HAN Nuoyi, TANG Lei

Yangzhou University, Yangzhou, China

R. F. Kuang’s 2023 postcolonial fantasy novel *Babel* reconfigures translation as the very mechanism of magical power, thereby transforming the translator from a passive instrument into a pivotal agent within imperial structures. Drawing on Zhou Lingshun’s “Text-Behavior-Society” trinity framework, this paper traces the protagonist Robin Swift’s evolving identity—from a “language-oriented” scholar to a complicit “society-oriented” participant, and ultimately to an active resister. The analysis demonstrates how Robin’s translational practices are both conditioned by colonial discipline and reciprocally destabilize the prevailing social order. His eventual destruction of Babel not only dismantles the myth of disinterested, apolitical knowledge production but also foregrounds the ethical agency of the translator in confronting systemic colonial violence.

Keywords: *Babel*, translator behavior criticism, “Text-Behavior-Society” trinity system, translation ethics

Introduction

Published in 2023, R. F. Kuang’s *Babel* transforms translation from a communicative tool into a device of imperial governance. Translators engrave silver bars with “match-pairs”, converting semantic differences between languages into magical energy. This process cloaks colonial violence in the guise of knowledge and technology. The premise allegorizes the politics of translation, where translation becomes not a passive intermediary but an active site producing knowledge, violence, and subjectivity. The protagonist Robin’s metamorphosis, from Cantonese orphan to Oxford scholar and from the empire’s “Babbler” to a resister, is deeply intertwined with his translational behavior. His trajectory traces how the translator struggles, alienates, and awakens between “truth-seeking” and complicity with power. Existing studies have examined the novel’s racial discourse (Liu & Tang, 2025) and its Canton narratives within colonial discourse (Xiao, 2025), but have largely overlooked translator behavior and its role in subject construction. This paper addresses that gap through Zhou Lingshun’s “Text-Behavior-Society” trinity model of translator behavior criticism. The model holds that the textual perspective bears traces of behavior, the behavioral perspective embodies subjective choices, and the social perspective tests and reshapes the former two (Zhou, 2026, p. 71), forming an organic system of circular

HAN Nuoyi, Master’s student, School of Foreign Languages, Yangzhou University, Yangzhou, China.
TANG Lei, Ph.D., Associate Professor, School of Foreign Languages, Yangzhou University, Yangzhou, China.

feedback. This framework captures Robin's alienating trajectory from "pure truth-seeking" through "instrumental truth-seeking" to "anti-truth-seeking reconstruction" under colonial discipline.

The novel's label "Babbler" symbolizes the translator stripped of subjectivity, reduced to a linguistic organ. The so-called "language-oriented person", the ideal translator who believes in depoliticized "truth-seeking", is in fact a cognitive illusion fabricated by the colonial system. This paper reveals that each of Robin's behavioral turns questions and breaks through this illusion, showing how translational behavior emerges within the tensions among social constraints, subjective agency, and textual practice. Ultimately, when translation becomes a cog in colonial violence, the translator's loyalty must turn toward justice and liberation.

The Textual Dimension: The Alienation and Reconstruction of Truth-Seeking in Match-Pair Practice

In *Babel*, the "match-pair" and silver-working serve as profound metaphors for the nature of translation. The "semantic equivalence" required for magic closely parallels traditional translation theory's obsession with "fidelity" and "equivalence". Although the "text-language perspective" has long been the mainstay of traditional translation studies, it differs fundamentally from the approach taken here, given its interaction and micro-cyclical relationship with the other two perspectives (Zhou, 2025a, p. 109). From the trinity perspective, the "match-pair" is not an isolated linguistic product but the material trace of the translator's behavioral choices interacting with the social context, and also the outcome of role-shifting. Robin's match-pair practice follows a three-stage trajectory of "pure truth-seeking", "instrumental truth-seeking", and "anti-truth-seeking reconstruction", serving as direct evidence of the cyclic inter-construction between his behavioral choices and social constraints.

Upon first entering Babel, Robin finds himself in the ideal phase of the "language-oriented person". He regards translation as a closed intellectual game, immersing himself in linguistic subtleties while deliberately avoiding the social consequences of translational acts. His "pure truth-seeking" is a privileged illusion nurtured by the colonial context. Robin's initial encounter with silver-working foreshadows what is to come. Professor Lovell saves the dying Robin in Canton with the "triacle/treacle" match-pair, yet chooses not to save Robin's mother. The tension between precise textual matching and selective social application goes unnoticed by the young Robin. Professor Playfair's demonstration of the "translate/tradurre" match-pair further exposes the paradox of pure truth-seeking: The attempt to create a "purer translation" causes the silver bar to shatter. The professor's warning delineates a safe boundary for "pure truth-seeking": Only academic games confined to theoretical discussion are harmless. Robin indulges in this boundary-bound illusion, turning a blind eye to colonial violence beyond Babel.

As Robin becomes entangled in the empire's colonial practices, he shifts from "language-oriented person" to "society-oriented person/accomplice". Colonial ideology and social demands forcefully shape his behavioral choices. His textual "truth-seeking" is alienated into a tool serving the empire's "utility-attaining" goals, displaying "selective truth-seeking". The "garden/*Zhāi*" match-pair exemplifies this shift. The silver bar reduces the Chinese character *zhāi*, which carries profound meanings of Eastern philosophy, religion, and self-cultivation, to a luxury item for wealthy Britons. While achieving semantic precision, Robin's practice hollows out the original cultural connotations, becoming an act of imperial plunder. Similarly, the "idiotes/idiot" match-pair converts semantic truth-seeking into military weapons, exploiting Ancient Greek and English semantic

differences to erase knowledge and serve the empire's military needs, laying bare the bloody colonial essence behind Babel's "academic neutrality".

The trip to Canton pushes Robin's "instrumental truth-seeking" to its extreme. Acting as Mr. Baylis's "mouthpiece", he precisely translates the empire's ultimatum. His surface-level "faithful reproduction" serves the colonial goal of opening the Chinese market for Great Britain. The dispute over the translation of the character "yi" forces Robin to confront the politics of translation for the first time. The same word is endowed with entirely different meanings under different positions of power. Faithful translation is itself a choice of stance. He realizes that his prized linguistic ability, in the eyes of the empire, is merely a tool for colonial ends.

When Robin fully recognizes that Babel's match-pair practice is an extension of imperial violence, he completes his transition to "resister". His behavioral choices actively confront the colonial order. His textual "anti-truth-seeking" practice becomes the material trace of his will to resist. Translation shifts from "representation" of the original to "intervention" in reality. In translational practice, the translator seeks a balance between "truth-seeking" and "utility-attaining" under goal orientation, balancing truth-seeking for the original meaning with utility-attaining for the reader, or balancing truth-seeking for the original culture with utility-attaining for the target society. Even between complete orientation toward the original and complete orientation toward reception, there can still be continuously refined levels of both (Zhou, 2025b, p. 33). Robin, in his pursuit of a dynamic equilibrium between imperial goals and personal conscience, ultimately breaks that balance and chooses resistance.

Robin's use of the "*Bào*/burst" match-pair to kill Professor Lovell marks his first "anti-truth-seeking" act. He deliberately activates the semantic dimensions of "destruction" and "violence" embedded in the pair, shattering translation's neutrality and transforming it into a weapon to end oppression. He is no longer a mere conduit for the empire's will. The most symbolic act is Robin's use of the "translate/tradurre" match-pair to destroy Babel. Exploiting the paradox of self-destruction inherent in this pair, he turns translation itself into a weapon of resistance, completing the ultimate deconstruction of the "truth-seeking" imperative and demolishing the institutional foundation through which translation had been instrumentalized by the empire. At the novel's end, the "polemic/polemikós" match-pair extends "anti-truth-seeking" into the realm of ideas. Through magic, Robin spreads the strike manifesto across London. He both "translates" revolutionary ideals into a language understandable to the empire's subjects and employs translational magic to endow the text with the power to intervene in reality and shape public opinion. This fully demonstrates the paradigmatic shift of translation from "representation" to "intervention".

The Behavioral Dimension: The Dynamic Transformation of Translator Identity

From the trinity perspective, the behavioral dimension serves as the core nexus linking textual practice and social context. It is both the point where social power exerts discipline on the translator and the point where the translator exercises subjective agency to reshape social reality. The previous chapter revealed the alienating trajectory of Robin's match-pair practice. Behind this textual practice lies a deeper transformation in his identity and behavioral motivation. When translators speak for certain collective wills, they undergo role-shifting. The numerous changes in the translator's will and behavior have already revealed signs of this process and its outcomes (Zhou, 2024a, p. 68). Robin's role-shifting trajectory clearly presents three progressive stages:

“language-oriented person”, “society-oriented person/accomplice”, and “resister”. This chapter focuses on his two critical identity transitions, analyzing the evolving motives and psychological factors behind his role-shifting, and revealing the central function of the behavioral dimension in the three-dimensional cyclic inter-construction.

Translator behavior can be classified into three types: “linguistic translational behavior, socially transformative behavior, and socialized reactive behavior”. Linguistic translational behavior “occurs in the text-language perspective”, and “fidelity to the original is its most instinctive and direct manifestation”. Robin’s early behavioral logic is a typical embodiment of this linguistic translational behavior. He views translation as a purely intellectual pursuit, a defining trait of the “language-oriented person”: a focused commitment to textual “truth-seeking” (Zhou, Huang, & Chen, 2024, p. 18). This behavioral logic is closely tied to Robin’s upbringing. In Canton, he developed a love for English through adventure novels and chose “Swift” as his surname. During his six years in Hampstead, he immersed himself in Latin, Ancient Greek, and Chinese, finding his greatest intellectual pleasure in precisely analyzing grammatical structures and deconstructing textual meanings. He regarded language as an exquisite object to be played with, and translation as the ticket to this intellectual game. When he first met Ramy, he was completely oblivious to the cultural violence embedded in the French translation of *Arabian Nights*, focusing only on linguistic differences. For him at that time, translation was merely a pure intellectual delight, not a field of power.

Professor Playfair’s demonstration reinforces Robin’s romantic imagination of translation. He views translation magic as the ultimate reward of academic training and fantasizes Babel as a pure temple of knowledge above worldly power. He turns a blind eye to the military implications of the demonstration and the conversations about colonial affairs. Even when Griffin exposes Babel’s colonial nature, Robin resists, defending his identity as a “language-oriented person” with his professed love for the place. This is an evasion of the world’s brutality. He knows that once he acknowledges his position within the colonial system, he can no longer enjoy Babel’s academic environment and material security with a clear conscience. His adherence to the “language-oriented person” identity is essentially a passive resistance to the socialization of the translator.

Translator role-shifting reflects numerous changes in the translator’s will and behavior, influenced both by internal subjective goal-oriented factors and by external environmental factors (Zhou, 2024a, p. 62). Robin’s transition from “language-oriented person” to “society-oriented person/accomplice” is the result of multiple forces: the desire for belonging, the pressure of survival, and complex emotions toward the system. Griffin’s revelation of Babel’s colonial essence serves as the initial trigger. Though shaken, Robin hesitates for fear of losing basic necessities. The illusion of the “language-oriented person” begins to crack. Thereafter, he falls into a “double life”: He assists the Hermes Society in stealing silver bars to alleviate moral guilt, while enjoying Babel’s generous treatment.

The trip to Canton pushes Robin’s “instrumental truth-seeking” to its extreme and becomes the starting point of his political awakening. The final confrontation with Professor Lovell marks the end of Robin’s “society-oriented person/accomplice” phase. The dispute arising from the Canton negotiations is Robin’s ultimate inquiry into his own identity. When Lovell responds with “Heavens, Robin, she was just some Chink”, and “Lowly, uncivilized stock”, Robin realizes that no matter how hard he tries to integrate, he remains in the eyes of the colonial system nothing more than a usable tool, never an accepted member of the “in-group”. He utters the “*Bào/burst*” match-pair to kill Lovell, an act that is not only a physical “patricide” but also a spiritual

rupture. Xiao (2025, p. 5) interprets Robin's patricide as "a ritual to shatter the colonizer's mirror and reconstruct a true self", arguing that it "marks the colonized subject's transition from self-alienation to subjective awakening". After killing Lovell, Robin does not find relief. When Ramy accuses him of betraying the Hermes Society, he states, "Without Babel, I have nothing". Ramy's response shatters this illusion: "Survival's not that difficult, Birdie. But you've got to maintain some dignity while you're at it". If Lovell represents the betrayal of the "father/guardian", then Ramy represents the judgment of the "friend/companion". The rupture of these dual relationships pushes Robin into deeper solitude, ultimately driving his transformation into a "resister".

Robin's transition from "accomplice" to "resister" is catalyzed by Ramy's death and marked by the massacre at the Old Library. His behavioral logic shifts from compromise to active confrontation. Ramy's death is the final straw. Letty's bullet is not random wartime violence but a targeted colonial act: She kills Ramy, who desperately sought acceptance but was forever regarded as the "Other", to prove her loyalty to the empire. Non-translation is the result of the translator's social expansion and socialized behavior under goal orientation, as well as the product of role-shifting and the socialized reactive effects of translation within social activities. The process of non-translation is precisely the continuous process of the translator's role-shifting, which can be analyzed at multiple levels within the "Text-Behavior-Society" trinity system (L. S. Zhou & Y. K. Zhou, 2025, p. 46). Robin's later "anti-truth-seeking" practice approaches this category of "non-translation". This event forces Robin to confront two truths: Imperial violence completely excludes the colonized, and silence within the system is no different from participating in colonial violence. Griffin's philosophy of violence is brutally validated, and Robin completely abandons the illusion of being a "language-oriented person".

After his awakening, Robin no longer seeks change from within the system but actively confronts the empire. He risks his life to rescue Victoire, advocates dismantling Babel's resonance rods, and delivers a strike declaration announcing Babel's closure and refusal to provide translation services to Britain. His debate with Victoire over "violence" reveals internal tensions: He acknowledges his anger contains a desire for revenge, but recognizes that when peaceful protest is met with massacre and Parliament ignores the oppressed, fear is the only force that can compel the empire to compromise. Translation, as a weapon of "intervention", becomes an inevitable choice for resistance. When Professor Playfair points a gun at him, Robin's response "Go ahead, I dare you" marks the final establishment of his identity as a resister. The orphan who once feared losing everything has vanished, replaced by an awakened subject who actively confronts the colonial system. Translator behavior criticism theory holds that, in addition to the "translator identity" of performing linguistic conversion and reproducing the meaning of the original, translators also assume various "roles" for social performance (Zhou, 2022, p. 177). Robin's behavioral shift is an active role resetting: from passively accepting the role of "Babbler", to strategically performing the role of "imperial elite", and ultimately to self-empowerment as a "revolutionary translator".

The Social Dimension: Discipline, Conflict, and Resistance in the Colonial Context

In the "Text-Behavior-Society" trinity system, the social dimension is both the starting point and field of translator behavior, and the object upon which behavior ultimately acts. Zhou (2024b, p. 111) divides the "extra-translation" component of translator behavior criticism into six levels, which can be broadly grouped into two categories: micro-level dynamic factors in the translator's interactive process, and macro-level

extra-translational research. This chapter covers both levels, examining Robin's micro-level interactions with the imperial system and the macro-level discipline exerted by Babel as a "translation institution". Babel, as a complex of scholarship and power, epitomizes the colonial social dimension. Its disciplinary mechanisms profoundly shape Robin's translator behavior, while his hybrid identity prevents complete discipline, and his resistant behavior ultimately counter-shapes the colonial order.

Babel's core function is not simply teaching languages, but establishing standardized translation norms that incorporate translation practice into imperial interests. From the perspective of translation norms, the system defines "correct translation" and "useful translators", ensuring that translators unknowingly serve the empire's "utility-attaining" goals in their pursuit of "truth-seeking". Babel's discipline operates first through narrative construction: Professor Playfair uses the story of "Psammetichus's boys" to position colonial students as bridges to the empire, endowing their linguistic talents with the noble mission of "achieving global harmony" while obscuring that such harmony is measured by imperial interests rather than equal cross-cultural communication. Second, discipline operates through institutional mechanisms: Babel controls the definition of "what languages are worth studying" and "what texts are worth translating", internalizing the empire's knowledge hierarchy as translators' academic pursuits. The Silver-Working Department admits civilians only as clients; the Legal Department focuses on international treaties and overseas trade; the Literary Department's research selections fully comply with imperial needs. All translators' academic practices revolve around imperial interests. Professor Lovell's etymology classroom exemplifies micro-level discipline: When Robin asks why colonies cannot benefit from silver bars, Lovell redefines colonial plunder as the rational use of linguistic resources, dissolving Robin's moral questioning. Though Robin knows the logic is flawed, he cannot articulate a counterargument. This is the core effect of discipline: internalizing imperial ideology as the translator's mode of thought. Additionally, Babel reinforces the principle that "the highest value of translation is serving imperial interests", defining military translation and colonial negotiation as "advanced applications of scholarship". Translators come to view serving the colonial system as the exercise of talent rather than moral compromise. Robin's six years at Babel constitute the full process of this internalization.

Babel's discipline never achieves completeness, because Robin's mixed Chinese-British heritage places him in a permanent in-between state. This hybridity generates internal conflicts that are both the difficulty of colonial discipline and the potential seed of resistance. Robin's identity fracture is embedded from the novel's opening. When Lovell finds him in Canton, Robin chooses to take English adventure novels, symbolizing that his connection to Britain is based on language and literature rather than blood or identity. His self-chosen surname "Swift" foreshadows his lifelong displacement. After overhearing Lovell's conversations, Robin becomes aware of his mixed blood but chooses silence, filling the identity vacuum with the "language-oriented" illusion of truth-seeking. His evasion is fundamentally an inability to confront the identity dilemma under colonialism. Robin's homelessness is a deliberate product of the colonial system: His mother's death, unknown father, and colonized homeland leave Babel as his only refuge, yet he is used merely as a linguistic tool. In conversation with Ramy, he states, "I don't have a family. I have a contract, a guardian", revealing the identity tragedy of colonized talent.

Yet this very hybridity grants Robin a unique dual perspective. He can understand Babel's logic and the empire's colonial strategies from within, while also seeing imperial violence and colonial plunder from the

outside as a colonized subject. The Canton trip epitomizes this dual perspective: He is both the empire's translator-mouthpiece and a witness to his compatriots' suffering under opium; he understands both the British anger at the character *yi* and the Chinese justification for using it. This "in-between" position prevents him from defending the empire with a clear conscience like Lovell, or resisting unconditionally like Griffin, but it sustains his capacity for reflection on the colonial system. This capacity is the internal drive toward his eventual awakening.

A core insight of Zhou Lingshun's trinity framework is that translator behavior is not merely constrained by society but can also counter-shape social reality through textual practice and behavioral choices. Robin's trajectory exemplifies this two-way interaction. In the "society-oriented person/accomplice" stage, Robin's translation practice objectively reinforces the colonial order. His work on the "garden/*Zhāi*" match-pair strengthens the empire's power to interpret and reconstruct colonial culture. His translation services in the Canton negotiations directly advance imperial goals. His image as a "model translator from the colonies serving the empire" becomes living proof of Babel's universal value, masking colonial plunder and legitimizing cultural colonization. Yet even at this stage, sprouts of resistance appear. In Canton, he does not fully convey Baylis's arrogant tone but translates mildly, listens seriously to Lin Zexu's views, and internalizes the question, "Would you let someone come in and tell you what words in your own language mean?" This turns translation from a one-way conduit into an attempt at mutual understanding.

After becoming a "resister", Robin's translator behavior directly counter-shapes and challenges the colonial order. Using Griffin's "invisible" silver bar (*Wúxíng*), he rescues others invisibly, subverting the empire's surveillance system and breaking its monopoly on violence. With Victoire, he uses the "polemic/polemikós" match-pair to spread the strike manifesto, delivering revolutionary ideas to London's working class and aligning colonial resistance with metropolitan labor movements. His use of the "translate/tradurre" match-pair to destroy Babel represents the ultimate deconstruction of the imperial translation system, demolishing the core apparatus that converts linguistic knowledge into colonial violence. More importantly, Robin's resistance creates a powerful demonstration effect, inspiring more potential resisters. The Babel translators' strike and Abel Goodfellow's workers' movement echo each other, making London's working class realize that their interests are tied to the fate of colonial peoples. The cross-class alliance Anthony had envisioned gradually becomes reality. Though resisters face the empire's control over historical narrative, their pamphlets, chronicles, and letters become seeds challenging imperial narrative hegemony.

Robin's behavior proves that translators are never mere linguistic converters, but integral components of social order. They may be disciplined into tools of the colonial system, or through active choices become forces for changing social order and advancing anti-colonial movements. The two-way interaction between translator behavior and social order in the colonial context is the core manifestation of the social dimension within the "Text-Behavior-Society" cyclic inter-construction.

Conclusion

Robin's evolution from "Babbler" to resister exemplifies the dynamic interplay of the trinity model. Colonial ideology and institutional discipline (social dimension) shape his behavioral orientation. His initial obsession with "pure truth-seeking" (behavioral dimension) materializes in highly faithful match-pair practices

(textual dimension). As his social awareness awakens, his “society-oriented” identity guides his behavioral choices, driving his textual practice through “instrumental truth-seeking” to “anti-truth-seeking reconstruction”. These textual practices in turn act upon the social order, first sustaining the empire’s legitimacy, later becoming weapons to destroy Babel. The three dimensions form a cyclic inter-construction, demonstrating the model’s explanatory power for complex translation phenomena.

Crucially, *Babel* articulates an interventionist translation ethic: Under structural violence, the translator’s highest loyalty lies not in the text but in the liberation of the oppressed. As Liu and Tang (2025, p. 8) observe, Babel’s collapse “rejects any illusion of reconciling with reality”. Robin’s destruction of the imperial institution through translation is the ultimate disenchantment of the “truth-seeking” myth. When translation becomes a cog in colonial violence, fidelity must yield to justice, and the translator’s responsibility shifts from representation to intervention.

This study also demonstrates the trinity model’s applicability beyond real-world translation criticism to literary representations of translators. In the age of globalization and algorithmic translation, *Babel* offers a timely warning: Any translation technology claiming neutrality, if divorced from reflection on power structures, risks becoming a “digital silver bar” of neocolonialism. As Yuan Limei notes, translation is deeply embedded in social, political, and cultural networks, and only through a full “Text-Behavior-Society” examination can its complexity be grasped (Zhou et al., 2024, pp. 81-82). Future research may extend this analytical framework to translator figures in other postcolonial literatures.

References

- Kuang, R. F. (2023). *Babel*. New York: Harper Voyager.
- Liu, J. X., & Tang, M. H. (2025). A study of racial discourse in Chinese American science fiction: The case of Ted Chiang’s “Tower of Babylon” and R. F. Kuang’s *Babel*. *Journal of Minnan Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)*, 39(1), 93-102.
- Xiao, M. (2025). Canton writing in Chinese American science fiction from a postcolonial perspective: A case study of R. F. Kuang’s *Babel*. *Journal of Guangxi Normal University for Nationalities*, 43(5), 73-79.
- Zhou, L. S. (2022). Commercial translation and translator role-shifting. *Chinese Translators Journal*, (2), 176-180.
- Zhou, L. S. (2024a). A study of translator’s role shifting in “better telling China’s stories”. *Foreign Language Teaching Theory and Practice*, (2), 62-69, 10.
- Zhou, L. S. (2024b). A study of “extra-translation” in translator behavior criticism: A comparison of the intra-extra translation analytical framework and the “Text-Behavior-Society” trinity evaluation system. *Foreign Languages in China*, (5), 106-112.
- Zhou, L. S. (2025a). The “Text-Behavior-Society” trinity system in translator behavior studies. *Foreign Language and Literature*, 41(2), 105-113.
- Zhou, L. S. (2025b). A re-exploration of “extra-translation” in translator behavior studies. *Journal of Beijing International Studies University*, (2), 31-42.
- Zhou, L. S. (2026). The dynamism of translator behavior criticism. *Foreign Language Education*, 47(1), 67-73.
- Zhou, L. S., Huang, L. M., & Chen, L. Y. (2024). Questions concerning the naming of translator behavior criticism: Answers to researchers (IV). *Journal of Beijing International Studies University*, (3), 15-29.
- Zhou, L. S., Li, Z. S., Huang, Q., Jiang, S. Q., Yuan, L. M., & Li, P. H. (2024). A dialogue on new thinking in translator behavior criticism. *Journal of Tianjin Foreign Studies University*, (2), 79-87.
- Zhou, L. S., & Zhou, Y. K. (2025). Reinterpretation of “behavior” from the perspective of translator behavior criticism. *Foreign Language Journal*, (5), 39-47.