

## A Corpus-Assisted Study of Translation Styles in Eight English Translations of the Mencius (1895–2016)

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### CORRESPONDING

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### ABSTRACT

This study offers a panoramic view of the translation styles of the eight English translations of the Mencius across three centuries. A corpus-assisted approach, supported by WordSmith Tools and Readability Studio was employed to generate quantitative indicators of lexical diversity, sentence length and readability scores. A comparable corpus of the eight translations (Legge, 1895; Lyall, 1932; Lau, 1970; Hinton 1998; Zhao et al., 1999; Van Norden 2008; Bloom, 2009; Eno 2016) was constructed for comparative analysis. The findings reveal substantial stylistic variation across the translations in terms of lexical diversity, syntactic complexity, and readability, reflecting distinct translational preferences and linguistic styles. The results suggest that translators negotiate translation style differently when rendering the Mencius to fulfil different translation purposes across diverse historical and cultural contexts. Linguistic norms, translation purposes, translators' backgrounds, and individual linguistic preferences appear to influence the translation style. The study contributes to corpus-based translation studies by providing empirical evidence of diachronic stylistic changes in the English translations of the Mencius. It also offers practical implications for intercultural communication and translation pedagogy by demonstrating how translation style may affect accessibility and reception among contemporary English-language readers.

**Contribution/Originality:** This study contributes to the existing literature by adopting a diachronic perspective to examine changes in translation style across three centuries of translations of the same source text. It further investigates how stylistic variation reflects not only individual translators' choices but also broader historical, cultural, and social developments.

## 1. Introduction

Chinese philosophical classics have exerted a profound global influence, offering ethical

frameworks that facilitate intercultural understanding (Ames, 2022). Translating these works, such as the *Mencius* (1217/1960), is essential for making classical Chinese thought accessible to a broader international readership. The *Mencius*, documenting the teachings, actions, and debates of Mencius (371–289 BCE) and his disciples, is a cornerstone of Chinese philosophical literature. Since David Collie's first English translation in 1828, the text has undergone multiple retranslations, attracting sustained scholarly attention. Zhuang and Chen (2023) identify over 20 abridged or unabridged English translations. However, research on English translations has predominantly focused on works by James Legge (1895), D.C. Lau (1970), and Zhao et al. (1999), while more recent translations, including those by David Hinton (1998), van Norden (2008), Irene Bloom (2009), and Robert Eno (2016), remain relatively underexplored.

The concept of style in translation has been investigated for decades (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1995; Nida & Taber, 1974; Newmark, 1988; Boase-Beier, 2014; Huang, 2021). Traditionally, studies have examined how the style of the source text (ST) or its author is reproduced in the target text (TT), treating translation as an act of imitation in which the translator is largely invisible. The emergence of descriptive translation studies (DTS), however, has shifted focus, emphasizing the TT as an independent object of study (Baker, 1993) and advocating for greater translator visibility (Venuti, 1995; Hermans, 1996). Baker (2000) introduced the notion of 'translator's style'—a distinctive linguistic "thumbprint" that may emerge consistently across a translator's work. Expanding this, Saldanha (2011) defines translator's style as a consistent, recognizable manner that distinguishes one translator from another. Despite numerous investigations (Li, 2016; Wang & Li, 2020; Liu et al., 2023; Sun & Yue, 2023), methodological and conceptual challenges persist. To address this, the present study adopts the concept of 'translation style', defined as the comparative analysis of translated texts of the same ST to examine recurring patterns and linguistic preferences within TTs (Lai, Lau & Hijjo, 2025). Corpus-based translation studies provide a powerful framework for analysing translation style systematically, enabling the investigation of large datasets while reducing subjective bias (Hu, 2016).

This approach allows for a comprehensive analysis of how individual preferences, cultural backgrounds, and cognitive processes interact to influence translation style. By examining these interrelated factors, researchers can gain deeper insights into the complexities of stylistic variation and its implications for communication and interpretation.

This study therefore examines the panoramic overview translation style of eight English translations of the *Mencius* (Legge, 1895; Lyall, 1932; Lau, 1970; Hinton, 1998; Zhao et al., 1999; van Norden, 2008; Bloom, 2009; Eno, 2016), with the aids of corpus and identifying the factors contributing to these differences. This study investigates the following two research questions:

- i. What are the differences and similarities of these eight English translations of *Mencius* in terms of their lexical, syntactic and readability features?
- ii. How do the factors contribute to the differences in translation style?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Style in Translation Studies

Style has been a central concern in translation studies since the earliest discussions by

Cicero (circa 106–43 BC) and Horace (circa 65–8 BC) (Boase-Beier, 2014). Historically, translators have prioritized reproducing the source text (ST) style, often treating translation as an act of imitation rather than creative interpretation. The formal study of style in translation gained momentum in the 1960s with the emergence of stylistics as a discipline (Munday, 2016). Nida and Taber (1969) emphasized that while reproducing meaning is paramount, style also plays a crucial role in shaping the target text (TT), noting that “though style is secondary to content, it is nevertheless important” (p. 13).

Definitions of style in translation have varied widely, with traditional perspectives linking it to debates over literal versus free translation and the tension between content and form (Munday, 2016; Altamimi, 2016; Snell-Hornby, 1988). With the rise of descriptive translation studies (DTS), attention has shifted toward translator “voice” (Hermans, 1995), highlighting the translator’s active role in shaping the TT. This approach emphasizes the interpretive choices made by translators, which can significantly influence the style and reception of the TT.

In the present study, the term “translation style” is employed to compare multiple TTs of the same ST, assessing how translators respond to the ST. This builds on Baker’s (2000) and Saldanha’s (2011) frameworks, which distinguish between source-oriented styles—reflecting a translator’s response to the ST—and target-oriented styles, characterized by consistent idiosyncratic patterns across translations. Huang (2015) further operationalizes these distinctions through a corpus-based framework comprising three models: the intralingual comparable model (comparing TTs with non-translated texts and among themselves), the interlingual contrastive model (ST-TT comparison), and the multiple-complex model (integrating both approaches). These models align with Saldanha’s dichotomy, linking source/target-oriented approaches to persistent translator idiosyncrasies.

## **2.2. Indicators of Style in Corpus-Based Translation Studies**

Statistical, narrative, and linguistic parameters have been widely employed as operational indicators in corpus-based translation studies. Among these dimensions, statistical and narrative styles have received comparatively greater scholarly attention, whereas linguistic style remains relatively underexplored despite its importance in translational decision-making and textual representation (Huang, 2018). Common Statistical indicators measures include lexical diversity, average sentence length (ASL), readability indices, lexical density, keyword lists, and other stylometric features (Baker, 2000; Burrows, 2002; Bosseaux, 2004; Winters, 2004; Ji & Oakes, 2012; Aldawsari, 2019). These quantitative measures provide objective and replicable evidence of translators’ stylistic preferences. Lexical diversity, for example, reflects the range and variability of vocabulary in a translation, while sentence length indicates syntactic complexity and textual organization. Variations in sentence length may reveal tendencies toward simplification, explicitation, or normalization. Readability indices further assess textual accessibility and stylistic simplicity, particularly in comparative studies of translated and non-translated texts.

In addition to statistical measures, linguistic indicators focusing on lexical, syntactic, and collocational patterns have gained increasing prominence. As Hu (2016, pp. 105–106) observes, “features of translation in relation to language pairs refer to lexical, syntactic, and collocational features”. Lexical indicators include keywords, semantic prosody, and repetition patterns, while syntactic indicators involve clause complexity, passive

constructions, and cohesive devices. Collocational patterns additionally reveal translators' sensitivity to target-language norms and phraseological naturalness. Nevertheless, despite advances in corpus methodologies, linguistic style remains less systematically explored than statistical modelling. Consequently, greater integration of quantitative corpus analysis with qualitative stylistic interpretation is needed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how translators negotiate meaning, voice, and cultural representation through language. The integration of these complementary parameters enables researchers to examine stylistic variation more systematically and to account for the interaction between translators' linguistic choices, narrative positioning, and sociocultural constraints. Such multidimensional approaches have contributed to a more nuanced understanding of translator style and its implications for translation theory, translator visibility, and cross-cultural mediation.

### 2.3. Study on the English Translation of Mencius

*Mencius*, with a history of English translation for nearly two hundred years, has a profound influence on Chinese ideology and culture, the translation studies on *Mencius* are mainly confined to the commentary review on the English translations, the translation of core Confucian terms, translation strategies, and comparisons between different translations. However, it has not extensively explored the translators' identities, translation styles, or the broader impact of these translations.

Since its first English translation by David Collie in 1828, the translation of *Mencius* still arouses interest from scholars around the world. According to Zhuang and Chen (2023), it is estimated that there are more than 20 unabridged and abridged English translations of *Mencius*. The translation study on *Mencius* merits further investigation even though it has gained more attention in recent years. Zhuang and Chen (2023) point out that the research data on the English translation of *Mencius* is mainly confined to Legge's, Lau's and Zhao et al.'s translations, whilst recent translations such as Bloom's, and Hinton's received limited attention.

Through a thorough review of the English translation studies on *Mencius* using database JSTOR and China National Knowledge Infrastructure, it is found that the existing research mainly focuses on four categories: (1) comments on the translation or study of the translators (Nivison, 1980; Yue, 2004; He & Zhang, 2014; You, 2020); (2) perspective of theoretical framework: functional equivalence theory and communication equivalence theory (Chen, 2006), reception theory (Ji, 2016; Lai et al., 2018), manipulation theory (Liu, 2013), *skopos* theory (Wei, 2013); (3) in light of content, translation strategy (Wu, 2015; Zhang, 2016), culture-specific terms translation (Xie, 2020), philosophical terms translation (Zhang, 2016; Lai et al., 2018) and style (Yu, 2001; Yang, 2014); and (4) in terms of research methodology: the majority are introspective and intuition-based observation, which is criticized for its over subjectivity and impression, while few are empirical or corpus-based (Huang, 2021; Sun et al., 2024; Lai et al., 2025 ).

Corpus-based research on *Mencius* translations has emerged more recently. Huang (2021) conducts a corpus-based quantitative analysis of the translations by Legge and Hinton. Using measures such as TTR, LD, and ASL, the study finds that Legge's translation exhibits higher levels of explicitation and formality, while Hinton's version adopts a more reader-oriented style with greater accessibility. Huang's research represents one of the earliest attempts to apply corpus-based methods to the analysis of

translation style in *Mencius*. Sun et al. (2022) analyse subject-ellipsis constructions in the source text and their translation in David Hinton's version using a parallel corpus. Their results show that subject ellipsis, which occurs frequently in classical Chinese, is often resolved in English translation through strategies such as the addition of subjects or the use of modal verbs. These patterns are largely attributed to typological differences between Chinese and English. However, despite being described as corpus-aided, the study relies mainly on quantitative statistical counts rather than systematic corpus-linguistic procedures.

Other studies have examined stylistic variation among translations. For instance, Lai et al. (2025) compares the translations by Legge, Zhao et al., and Bloom, noting that Legge's version reflects nineteenth-century missionary discourse and contains extensive annotations and explanatory notes. Lau's translation, by contrast, is characterized by precision, readability, and academic rigor, which has contributed to its high reputation in Western sinological circles. Zhao et al.'s version adopts a relatively simple and accessible style, employing pinyin transliteration of names and places to facilitate readers' understanding of Chinese culture.

Overall, existing studies have examined the translation of *Mencius* from a variety of perspectives, including stylistics, functional equivalence, discourse analysis, and corpus-based approaches. However, most research focuses on individual translators or limited comparisons, and relatively few studies systematically investigate the stylistic variation across multiple English translations from a diachronic perspective. This gap provides the motivation for the present study, which adopts a comparative approach to examine translation styles across several English versions of *Mencius*.

### 3. Research Methods

#### 3.1. Research Data

The translation of the *Mencius* into English has expanded significantly since the 19th century. According to Zhuang and Chen (2023), over 20 English translations exist, including both abridged and complete versions, with 11 full translations listed in Table 1. For methodological and practical reasons, some versions are excluded from this study. Collie and Ware are omitted due to copyright restrictions and limited availability, while Dobson's translation is also excluded because the text is reorganized into thematic categories—such as "*Mencius on the Court*" and "*Mencius in Public Life*"—rather than following the original textual sequence. This restructuring makes systematic alignment with the source text difficult and therefore limits its suitability for corpus-based comparative analysis.

This study focuses on eight English translations produced between 1895 and 2016, selected for their historical and scholarly significance, accessibility, and temporal coverage. Legge's 1895 translation established exegetical conventions and influenced subsequent translators through detailed commentary and a distinctive Victorian style (Jiao & Ren, 2025; Pfister, 2004). Lyall (1932) emphasizes conciseness and transparency, refining Legge's verbose approach (Dubs, 1933), while Lau (1970) balances fidelity with readability for modern audiences (Coleman, 1972; Jonker, 1973). Hinton (1998) foregrounds literary and aesthetic expression, highlighting the philosophical depth of the text (Jin, 2010; Zhang, 2017). Zhao et al. (1999) aim to promote Chinese culture internationally, whereas Van Norden (2008), Bloom (2009),

and Eno (2016) adopt pedagogical approaches, providing commentary and critical notes to support educational use. Together, these eight translations offer a rich and diverse corpus for examining the evolution of translation style over more than a century.

Table 1: English Versions of *Mencius*

	PUBLICATION TITLE	TRANSLATOR	PUBLICATION YEAR	TRANSLATOR BACKGROUND
1	<i>The Chinese classical work commonly called the Four books</i>	David Collie	1828	Missionary, British
2	<i>The Works of Mencius. The Chinese Classics, vol. 2</i>	James Legge	1861/1895/ 1960/1990	Missionary, Professor of Chinese, British
3	<i>The Sayings of Mencius</i>	Leonard A. Lyall	1932	Diplomat, British
4	<i>The Sayings of Mencius</i>	James R. Ware	1960	Sinologist, American
5	<i>Mencius: A New Translation Arranged and Annotated for the General Reader</i>	W. A. C. H. Dobson	1963	professor of Chinese, Canadian
6	<i>Mencius</i>	D.C. Lau	1970/2003	Professor of Philosophy, Chinese
7	<i>Mencius</i>	David Hinton	1998	Poet, translator, American
8	<i>Mencius</i>	Zhao Zhentao et al.	1993/1999	Professor of English, Chinese
9	<i>Mengzi: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries</i>	Bryan W. Van Norden	2008	Professor of Philosophy, American
10	<i>Mencius</i>	Irene Bloom	2009	Professor of philosophy, American
11	<i>Mencius: Translation, Commentary, and Notes</i>	Eno Robert	2016	Professor of Philosophy, American

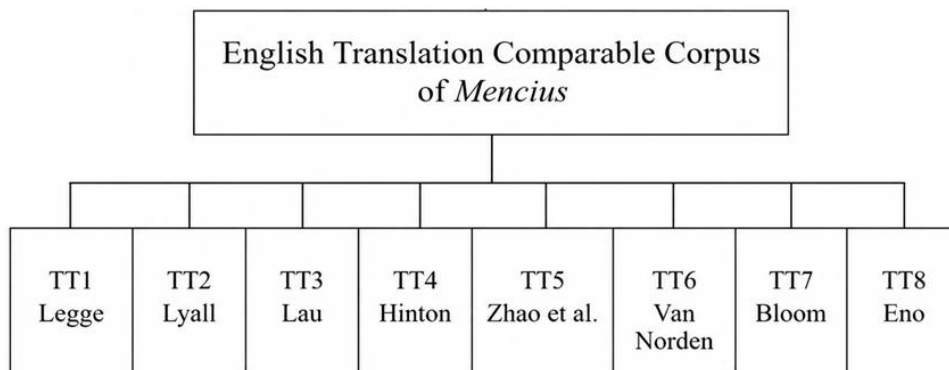
### 3.2. Corpus Construction

The research purpose determines the type of corpus. This study attempts to investigate the translation style of these eight English translations of the *Mencius* and discover the factors attributing to the differences in style. Accordingly, a monolingual comparable corpus comprising these eight translations was constructed (Figure 1).

The English translations of the *Mencius* were initially obtained in electronic PDF format. To prepare the texts for analysis, the PDFs were converted into computer-readable plain text files, which were then manually proofread and cross-checked against the hardcopy editions to ensure accuracy. Paratextual elements, including introductions, footnotes, and indexes, were separated from the main translation text to facilitate alignment. Following proofreading and cleaning, all texts were saved in UTF-8 Unicode format to

ensure compatibility with corpus analysis software. The cleaned texts of the eight English translations were compiled to form a comparable corpus. Quantitative analyses of translation style were conducted using WordSmith Tools, which provided measures such as type-token ratio (TTR), standardized TTR (STTR), ASL, word frequencies, keyword lists, clusters, and concordances. This corpus-based approach allowed for systematic and replicable investigation of linguistic patterns and stylistic features across the translations.

Figure 1: English Translation Comparable Corpus of *Mencius*



### 3.3. Corpus Analysis

The research aims to investigate translation style across lexical, syntactic, and readability dimensions, and a monolingual comparable corpus was constructed accordingly. Two complementary analytical tools were employed: WordSmith Tools and Readability Studio 2021. WordSmith Tools is well-suited for monolingual corpus analysis, offering global statistics on lexical and syntactic dimensions. Readability Studio 2021 provides multidimensional metrics to assess sentence length, lexical complexity, and established readability formulas, enabling evaluation of stylistic accessibility and comprehensibility. Together, these tools support a systematic, replicable, and comprehensive examination of translation style, revealing both linguistic patterns and the impact of translators' stylistic choices on the target texts.

## 4. Results and Analysis

### 4.1. Lexical Diversity in the Eight English Translations of *Mencius*

Lexical diversity, or lexical richness (Daller et al., 2003), refers to statistical measures that capture the variety of vocabulary in a text. It serves as a style marker, revealing the degree of repetition in words or structures and thereby reflecting a translator's lexical habits, whether conscious or subconscious. In this study, lexical diversity is measured using TTR and STTR, widely employed in both language research and translation studies as key indicators of vocabulary variation. TTR calculates the ratio of distinct words (types) to total running words (tokens) in a text (Olohan, 2004). Higher TTR values indicate greater lexical diversity and complexity, whereas lower values reflect more repetitive vocabulary (McEnery & Hardie, 2012). Because TTR is sensitive to text length, STTR is employed to normalize measurements per 1,000 words, allowing consistent comparison across translations of varying lengths. This standardization ensures a fair assessment of lexical richness among the eight English translations of the *Mencius*.

The corpus analysis reveals an average token count of 52,235 (SD = 4,296), with Legge's translation being the most extensive and Lyall's the shortest, differing by 13,659 tokens. The average number of unique word types is 4,406 (SD = 386), with Zhao et al.'s translation exhibiting the richest vocabulary (4,919 types) and Lyall's the most limited (3,596 types).

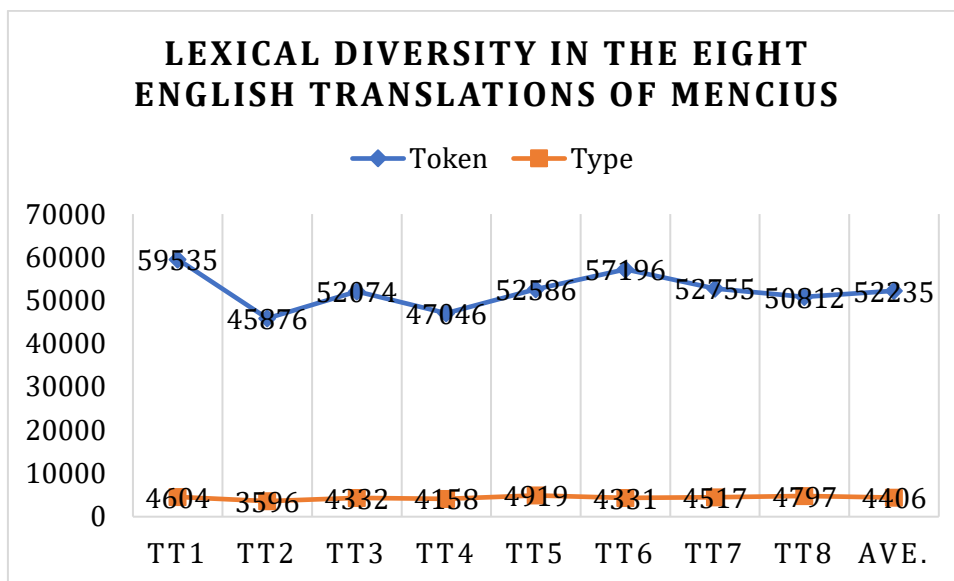
The mean STTR across the eight translations is 36.06%. Hinton's translation demonstrates the highest STTR at 38.04%, indicating substantial lexical diversity within a relatively brief text. Eno, Zhao et al., and Lau also exceed the average STTR, whereas Legge, Bloom, and Van Norden cluster around 35%, and Lyall shows the lowest STTR at 34.16%, highlighting a more repetitive lexical pattern. Despite similar token counts, Hinton's and Lyall's STTRs reveal stark contrasts in lexical variety. Overall, these findings provide an initial quantitative overview of translation style across the selected English translations of the *Mencius*.

The findings on lexical diversity in Table 2 and Figure 1 provide more than descriptive statistics; they also reveal meaningful insights into translation style and translator choices. Li (2016) posits that the crux of corpus-based translation studies lies in the interpretation and explanation of data, uncovering the motivations underlying the linguistic choices. Hinton's high STTR despite a relatively short text suggests a deliberate use of varied vocabulary, reflecting a translator who prioritizes lexical richness, possibly to capture the philosophical and literary depth of the *Mencius*. In contrast, Lyall's lower STTR indicates a more repetitive or conservative lexical approach, emphasizing simplicity or readability over stylistic variation. The differences between translators, particularly when token counts are similar, highlight that translation style is not merely a function of text length but reflects conscious and culturally informed lexical decisions.

Table 2: Lexical Diversity in the Eight English Translations of *Mencius*

<b>TTs</b>	<b>TT1 Legge</b>	<b>TT2 Lyall</b>	<b>TT3 Lau</b>	<b>TT4 Hinton</b>	<b>TT5 Zhao et al.</b>	<b>TT6 Van Norden</b>	<b>TT7 Bloom</b>	<b>TT8 Eno</b>	<b>AVE.</b>	<b>Std. Dev</b>
Token	59535	45876	52074	47046	52586	57196	52755	50812	52235	4296
Type	4604	3596	4332	4158	4919	4331	4517	4797	4406	386
STTR (%)	35.54	34.16	36.14	38.04	36.5	35.04	35.38	37.7	36.06	1.23

Figure 2: Lexical Diversity in the Eight English Translations of *Mencius*



#### 4.2. Sentence Length in the Eight English Translations of *Mencius*

Apart from lexical diversity, sentence length is another key statistical indicator of style in stylometry (Baker, 2000; Burrows, 2002; Li, 20176; Aldawsari, 2019). Average sentence length calculates the mean number of words per sentence in a text or corpus. Longer average sentences generally indicate more complex or formal language, whereas shorter sentences reflect simpler or more informal expression (Bell, 1992). ASL also provides insight into readability, with longer sentences typically reducing ease of comprehension (Youdale, 2019). According to Kincaid and Delionbach (1973), English sentences with an ASL of fewer than 14 words are considered fairly easy to read; 15–21 words are standard; 22–30 words are fairly difficult; 31–40 words are significantly long and challenging; and averages above 40 words are extremely long and difficult. Table 3 and Figure 3 present the ASL across the eight English translations of the *Mencius*, providing a quantitative foundation for comparing syntactic complexity and stylistic tendencies among the translators.

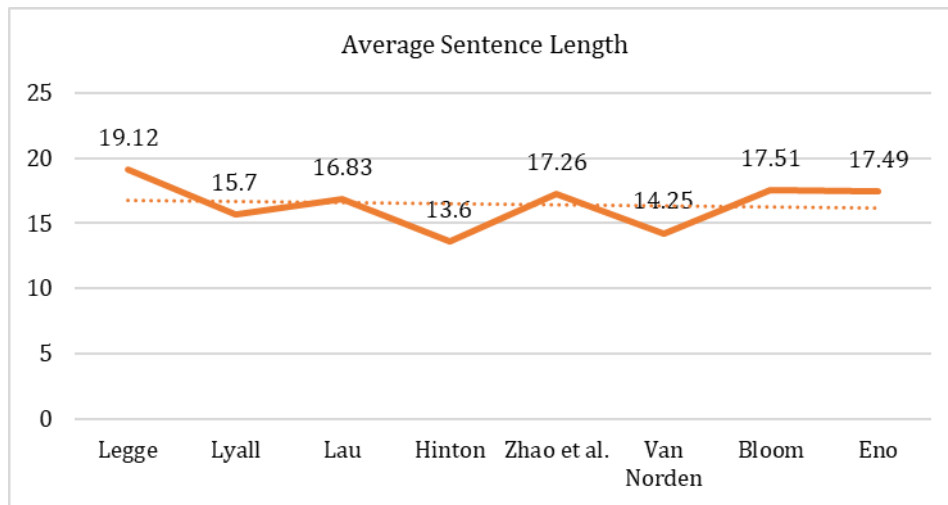
Table 3: Average Sentence Length in the English Translations of *Mencius*

TTs	TT1	TT2	TT3	TT4	TT5	TT6	TT7	TT8	AVE.
ASL	19.12	15.70	16.83	13.60	17.26	14.25	17.51	17.49	16.47

Tables 3 and Figure 3 present the ASL across the eight English translations of the *Mencius*. The overall ASL is 16.47 words. Legge’s translation has the longest sentences, followed by Bloom, Eno, and Zhao et al., all exceeding 17 words. Lau’s translation has an ASL of 16.83, also above the average. Lyall’s and Van Norden’s translations are shorter, at 15.70 and 14.25 words, respectively, while Hinton’s translation has the shortest ASL at 13.6 words. The 5.52-word disparity between Legge and Hinton reflects substantial stylistic variation, with longer sentences indicating complex, formal structures and shorter sentences reflecting a simpler, more readable style. These patterns provide

empirical evidence of differing stylistic strategies: longer sentences correlate with density and formality, whereas shorter sentences enhance clarity and ease of reading.

Figure 3: Average Sentence Length in Eight English Translations of *Mencius*



Sentence length was calculated by dividing the total number of tokens by the number of sentence boundary markers (periods, question marks, exclamation points, semicolons, and colons). Sentence lengths were then cross-tabulated following Kincaid and Delionbach's (1973) categories. Table 4 exhibit the distribution and percentage of sentences across these translations.

Table 4: The Sentence Length Distribution across Eight Translations

	TT1	TT2	TT3	TT4	TT5	TT6	TT7	TT8	AVE.
Total Number of Sentences	3135	2888	3073	3372	3049	3644	3019	2911	3136
Number of Sentences below 22 words	2242	2352	2398	2989	2373	3184	2294	2185	2502
Number of Sentences between 23-30 words	485	321	368	276	388	329	449	436	381
Number of Sentences between 31-40 words	257	139	193	85	187	95	193	204	169
Number of Sentences above 40 words	151	76	114	22	101	36	83	86	84

The overall average number of sentences is 3,136. Van Norden's translation contains the most sentences (3,644), followed closely by Hinton, both exceeding the average. Legge, Lau, Zhao et al., and Bloom cluster around the mean, while Eno and Lyall contain fewer than 3,000 sentences, with Lyall having the fewest. Hinton's translation has the highest proportion of sentences under 22 words (88.64%), followed by Van Norden (87.38%)

and Lyall (81.44%), whereas Legge exhibits the lowest percentage in this category. Conversely, Legge has the highest proportion of longer sentences (23–30, 31–40, and above 40 words), surpassing all other translations, highlighting his preference for complex syntactic structures.

Average sentence length and sentence-length distribution provide valuable insights into both grammatical complexity and stylistic preferences (Youdale, 2019). Longer sentences are more likely to contain complex structures with multiple clauses and sub-clauses, whereas shorter sentences generally indicate simpler syntactic constructions. Thus, a higher ASL and a greater proportion of long, complex sentences suggest intricate grammatical structures, while lower ASL reflects more straightforward sentence patterns. Sentence length and structure are therefore important indicators of translation style.

Classical Chinese, characterized as a topic-prominent language (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014), emphasizes the discourse topic over syntactic subordination and often relies on loose syntactic patterns rather than conjunctions. Its compact and succinct style frequently employs poetic and rhetorical devices, including parallelism, alliteration, metaphor, and allegory. These features shape translators' syntactic and stylistic choices, influencing sentence length, structure, and overall readability in English translations.

The variation in ASL and sentence-length distribution reflects distinct translator strategies and stylistic fingerprints. Legge's longer, complex sentences indicate a formal and interpretive approach, whereas Hinton's shorter, more frequent sentences enhance readability and accessibility. These patterns demonstrate that sentence structure functions as a key stylistic marker, revealing how translators mediate the source text and adapt classical Chinese syntax and rhetorical features to English, thereby influencing reader experience.

### **4.3. Readability in the Eight English Translations of *Mencius***

Readability is an important indicator of translation style, reflecting both semantic and syntactic factors and closely linked to the acceptability of a translation in the target language (Calderón et al., 2006; Huang, 2015; Aldawsari, 2019). Following Toury (1995), the acceptability and accuracy of a translation are influenced by the translator's strategies and underlying ideological approach. To assess readability, this study employs Readability Studio, which incorporates eleven established readability tests (Table 5). To standardize results, the Average Grade Level score is used, calibrated to the U.S. educational system and indicating the number of years of education typically required to comprehend a text (Kincaid et al., 1973).

Scores on the Flesch Reading Ease indicate the overall readability of the text, while the corresponding values represent the educational grade level required for comprehension.

Results indicate consistent trends across the translations. Legge's translation registers the highest grade levels across multiple tests, including Bormuth Grade Placement, Gunning Fog, and SMOG, while also recording the lowest Flesch Reading Ease score, suggesting it is the least accessible translation. Zhao et al.'s and Bloom's translations follow, with grade levels of 7.7 and 7.6, respectively. Eno, Lau, and Hinton cluster around the seventh-grade range, while Van Norden is slightly lower at 6.8. Lyall's translation is the most readable, at grade level 5.8. The 2.3-grade disparity between Legge and Lyall

can be attributed to differences in lexical diversity (STTR), ASL, and the proportion of complex sentences.

Table 5: Readability Scores and Grade Level

Test	TT1	TT2	TT3	TT4	TT5	TT6	TT7	TT8
Bormuth Grade Placement	9.1	8.2	8.7	8.7	8.9	8.7	8.9	8.9
Coleman-Liau	7.7	5.6	6.7	7.9	7.5	7.2	7.5	7.3
Flesch Reading Ease	71	86	75	73	71	76	72	74
Fry	8	6	7	7	7	7	7	7
Gunning Fog	9.3	6.1	8.7	6.9	9.2	8.1	8.9	8.4
Harris-Jacobson Wide Range Formula	5.4	4.3	5	4.3	5.4	4.3	5.2	5.4
Läsbarhetsindex (Lix)	8	5	7	7	7	6	7	7
New Dale-Chall	7-8	4	7-8	5-6	7-8	5-6	7-8	7-8
Rate Index (Rix)	7	5	6	6	7	6	7	6
Raygor Estimate	8	6	7	7	7	6	7	7
SMOG	10.8	7.5	9.8	9.5	10.4	9.1	10.1	9.9
Average Grade Level (Mean)	8.1	5.8	7.3	7	7.7	6.8	7.6	7.4

Table 6: Readability Scores, Lexical, and Syntactic Statistics

	TT1	TT2	TT3	TT4	TT5	TT6	TT7	TT8
STTR(%)	35.54	34.16	36.14	38.04	36.5	35.04	35.38	37.7
ASL	19.12	15.70	16.83	13.60	17.26	14.25	17.51	17.49
Proportion of Difficult Sentences (%)	29.48	18.56	21.97	11.36	22.17	12.62	24.01	24.94
Readability	71	86	75	73	71	76	72	74
Average Grade Level	8.1	5.8	7.3	7	7.7	6.8	7.6	7.4

Minimal differences in ASL and complex sentence proportion do not always correspond with higher readability as shown in Table 6. For example, Hinton's and Van Norden's translations, despite shorter sentences and fewer complex structures, exhibit lower readability than Lyall's, likely due to Hinton's higher lexical diversity. Similarly, Lau's slightly lower STTR and simpler sentences contribute to higher readability relative to Zhao et al. Overall, these findings partially support the general trend: longer sentences, higher proportions of complex structures, and greater lexical diversity correlate with lower readability and higher grade-level scores (Aldawsari, 2019). However, exceptions highlight that readability is influenced by the interplay of multiple linguistic factors, including sentence length, lexical complexity, and lexical variation, emphasizing the nuanced nature of stylistic evaluation in translation.

## 5. Discussion

The stylistic differences identified across the eight English translations of the *Mencius* can be discussed in broader historical, linguistic, cultural, and translational contexts. The statistical findings indicate that variations in lexical diversity, sentence length, and readability are not random linguistic phenomena but reflect translators' differing linguistic norms, translational purposes, ideological orientations, and target readerships. These findings further demonstrate that translation style is influenced by the interaction

between individual translator agency and the sociohistorical conditions in which translations are produced.

Legge's preference for formal and complex sentence structures can be attributed partly to the internalized linguistic norms of Victorian English, which was characterized by formality, elaborate syntax, and rich vocabulary throughout the nineteenth century. Victorian prose was strongly influenced by philological scholarship, historical approaches to language, and the standardization of English through projects such as the *Oxford English Dictionary*. As Tyler (2022) observes, Victorian English was renowned for its intricate and highly elaborated sentence constructions, reflecting the intellectual and literary conventions of the period. The literary norms of the nineteenth century, informed by earlier movements such as Romanticism and Gothic literature, also valued expressive and ornate language (Tyler, 2022). Furthermore, the codification of English through influential works such as Samuel Johnson's *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) promoted increasingly formalized and sophisticated linguistic expression. Victorian social conventions similarly favoured politeness, rhetorical refinement, and elaborate prose, often resulting in lengthy and syntactically complex sentence structures. Victorian writing was marked by a high degree of formality and syntactic complexity in order to convey intellectual sophistication (Frawley, 2017). These linguistic and cultural factors help explain why Legge's translation records the longest average sentence length, the highest proportion of complex sentences, and the lowest readability among the translations examined.

In response to the need for a new translation that would be both accessible and pertinent to contemporary readers, Lyall adopted the "word-for-word" translation methods to reproduce the ST language style. Lyall's translation appears to have been influenced by the literary and linguistic norms of the early twentieth century, a period characterized by significant socio-cultural and aesthetic transformations (Pym, 2001). Emerging literary movements increasingly advocated clarity, simplicity, and directness in writing, particularly under the influence of literary modernism. The modernist preference for concise and accessible language is reflected in Lyall's translation style, which prioritizes readability and accessibility for contemporary readers. This stylistic orientation corresponds closely with the statistical findings showing shorter sentence structures and higher readability in his translation.

Lau's translation style was significantly influenced by his interdisciplinary academic background in philosophy, Chinese studies, philology, history, and literature. Lau's scholarly expertise enabled him to engage effectively with the intellectual traditions of ancient China in ways that were simultaneously literary, historical, and philosophical (Baker, 2010). His bicultural background, grounded in both Chinese and Western intellectual traditions, further shaped his translation strategies and interpretive choices. Additionally, the ordinary language movement of the mid-twentieth century, which emphasized the philosophical significance of everyday language, likely contributed to Lau's preference for relatively clear and accessible prose. Lau was also highly conscious of the translation commission he received from Penguin Classics, whose editorial objective was to produce authoritative yet readable translations that avoided the archaic diction and foreignized idiom characteristic of many earlier translations. Consequently, Lau's translation occupies a stylistic middle ground between scholarly precision and readability.

The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries witnessed broader linguistic shifts in English toward clarity, accessibility, and reader engagement in both literary and academic discourse (Leech et al., 2012). These developments strongly influenced later translators of the *Mencius*. Hinton's translation style, for instance, reflects contemporary linguistic preferences through its informal and conversational tone. His use of modern English syntax and idiomatic expression makes classical Chinese philosophy more approachable for contemporary readers. As both a poet-translator and sinological interpreter, Hinton adopts a stylistic approach that seeks to balance readability with fidelity to the philosophical spirit of the source text. This stylistic orientation is reflected in the statistical findings, which show that Hinton's translation combines the shortest ASL and the smallest proportion of complex sentences with the highest standardized type-token ratio, thereby balancing lexical richness with accessibility. Similarly, Van Norden's translation exhibits the second-shortest ASL and the second-highest readability score, features that are closely associated with late twentieth-century linguistic norms emphasizing clarity and accessibility, as well as with the pedagogical *skopos* of his translation.

Meanwhile, the translations Bloom and Eno display relatively minor differences in sentence length and readability, suggesting broadly similar stylistic orientations. These translations generally balance accessibility with scholarly interpretation, reflecting contemporary expectations for translations that are both academically informative and reader-friendly. Their stylistic features are informed not only by prevailing linguistic norms but also by their translational purposes, whether to promote Chinese culture to Anglophone audiences or to facilitate the teaching and learning of Chinese philosophy in academic settings. Although each translator adopts distinct interpretive strategies and paratextual approaches, their statistical similarities indicate a shared tendency toward moderate syntactic complexity and accessible prose suitable for both academic and general readerships. Notably, Zhao et al.'s translation of *Mencius* represents a government-sponsored initiative aimed at promoting Chinese culture in the 21st century. This project is part of the Chinese government's broader strategy to enhance cultural diplomacy and foster a deeper understanding of Chinese philosophy and traditions among global audiences. Despite being produced by non-native English speakers, its high degree of similarity in lexical and syntactic patterns indicates a strong adherence to target language norms.

## 6. Conclusion

The analysis uncovers several key findings regarding the stylistic characteristics of the eight English translations of the *Mencius*. Statistically, Legge's translation has the highest total number of tokens, the longest average ASL, the largest proportion of complex sentences, and the lowest readability score. Lyall's translation, by contrast, achieves the highest readability, while Hinton's translation features the shortest ASL and the smallest proportion of complex sentences, yet the highest STTR. Zhao et al.'s translation ranks highest in the number of unique word types. Van Norden's translation exhibits the second-lowest ASL and the second-smallest proportion of complex sentences, resulting in the second-highest readability among the translations examined. In contrast, the translations by Lau, Zhao et al., Bloom, and Eno display only minimal differences in ASL and in the proportion of difficult sentences, indicating relatively similar levels of syntactic complexity and readability. Collectively, these quantitative results define each translation style and illuminate the factors contributing to stylistic differences.

Legge's scholarly diligence and "quaint Victorian earnestness" have established his translations as enduring classics (Jiao & Ren, 2025). As the first sinologist to systematically translate Chinese classics into English, he played a crucial role in influencing the reception of Chinese literature and philosophy in the West (Girardot, 2002). His translation subsequently influenced later translators. In response to the perceived linguistic archaism and complexity of Legge's version, Lyall sought to make the *Mencius* more accessible and relevant to modern readers by adopting a "word-for-word" literal translation method (Lyall, 1932) and reader-oriented translation style that prioritizes accessibility over extensive interpretive depth.

The findings of this study are expected to offer valuable implications for intercultural communication and translation pedagogy. For general readers interested in Chinese culture and the aesthetic qualities of the *Mencius*, Hinton's colloquial and less formal translation is recommended. For students and scholars of Chinese philosophy, translations with detailed annotations—such as those by Legge, Lau, Norden, Bloom, and Eno—are most suitable and should be used complementarily. The methodological framework developed in this study demonstrates considerable transferability and may be applied to the investigation of other classical Chinese texts characterised by multiple translations and complex philosophical content, such as the *Analects*, *Doctrine of the Mean*, *Dao De Jing*, and *Zhuangzi*. The corpus-assisted approach adopted in this study may also provide a useful model for future research on diachronic translation stylistic variations in translated philosophical and literary works.

This study aligns with prior corpus-based translation research in investigating translation style (Bosseaux, 2004; Winters, 2004; Li, 2016; Aldawsari, 2019), while extending the literature in three respects. First, it adopts a diachronic perspective, tracing the evolution of translation styles across three centuries of the same ST. Second, by examining multiple translations of the same source text, it highlights how stylistic variation is influenced by both individual translator choices and broader historical, cultural, and social changes. However, this research is not without limitations. Third, the study broadens the scope of existing research by incorporating relatively underexplored contemporary translations alongside canonical versions, thereby offering a more comprehensive understanding of translational stylistics in the English translation history of the *Mencius*. Nevertheless, this study is not without limitations. First, the research primarily employs a diachronic quantitative approach to the analysis of translation style and therefore pays comparatively limited attention to textual stylistic interpretation. While statistical analysis provides systematic and empirical insights into stylistic variation, it may not fully capture the ideological, cultural, and interpretive dimensions embedded in translators' linguistic choices. Second, due to limitations in textual accessibility, the corpus includes only one pre-twentieth-century translation (i.e., Legge, 1895). This constraint inevitably narrows the diachronic scope of the study and may underrepresent earlier phases in the English translation history of the *Mencius*. Future research could address these limitations by constructing larger diachronic corpora of classical Chinese translations that incorporate a wider range of historical translations and genres. Such studies may further explore the interaction between translation style and evolving linguistic, cultural, and ideological contexts over time. In addition, integrating quantitative corpus analysis with qualitative textual analysis would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how translators mediate style with meaning and reader reception across different historical periods.

## Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This study employed empirical corpus analysis and did not involve human participants or personal data. Therefore, ethics approval and informed consent were not required.

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## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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