
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Translation of Metaphors in Classical Chinese Poetry: A Cognitive Approach

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores the translatability of metaphors in classical Chinese poetry. From a cognitive perspective, the recognizing and conceptualizing of metaphors involves the decoding of source domain mapping to the target domain. However, some Chinese metaphors need to be recognized and identified in English by certain translation strategies along with cross-cultural awareness.

KEYWORDS

Translation, Metaphor, Cognition, Chinese poetry.

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1. Introduction

As one of the essential cognitive tools, metaphor has gained great attention in the discipline of Translation Studies(TS). Thoughts channelized through metaphor become a real dilemma for both reception in the source language and perception in the target language. In ancient Chinese poetry, metaphor, as an important rhetorical device, has rich and diverse forms of expression that profoundly reflect the poet's emotional world and aesthetic pursuit. From the perspective of cognition, metaphors are instruments for poets to recognize and conceptualize the world.

The theoretical framework of metaphor translation is the cornerstone for understanding and conveying the deep meaning of classical Chinese poetry. Though translators have made great achievements in decoding and interpreting metaphors in Chinese poetry, some culture-specific terms and strategies should be put into consideration.

2. The Theoretical Framework of Metaphorical Translation

Metaphor is not only a matter of language but, more importantly, a matter of thought(Lakoff and Johnson, 2003:3). So in TS, the transformation of metaphorical expressions involves tasks not only in linguistic elements but also in the conceptualization of abstract categories. The widely discussed issues are the translatability of metaphors and potential translation procedures(Hanic, Pavlovic, etc.,2016).

2.1 Translatability VS Untranslatability

Translatability and untranslatability are two fundamental concepts in translation studies. While translatability emphasizes the feasibility of conveying the essence of a text from one language to another, untranslatability highlights the limitations and challenges in this process.

Metaphors, as already recognized by Black, are "cognitive instruments"(1962:37). When we conceptualize "LIFE IS A JOURNEY", JOURNEY (the familiar and concrete concept) belongs to the so called "source domain"(the concept drawn upon, or used to create

the metaphorical construction), while LIFE(the unfamiliar and abstract concept) is in the “target domain”(the concept to be described by the metaphor). Thus, the process of conceptualization and interpretation of metaphors is illustrated as follows:

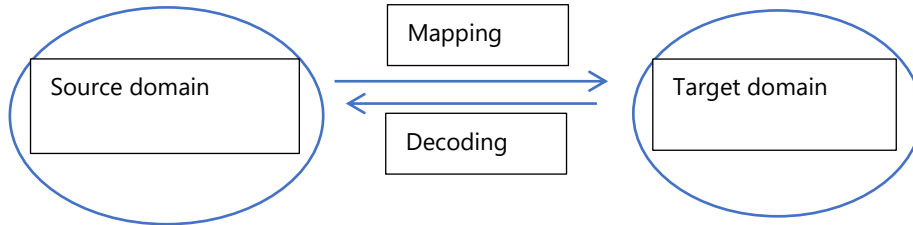


Figure 2.1 The mechanism of metaphors in cognitive perspective

Metaphors are rich in the sense that they do not just link up two isolated items but rather connect multi-faceted categories or cognitive models(Ungere and Schmid:144). Thus, the explanatory and translatability of metaphors caused the attention of the translators. Nida's theory of functional equivalence emphasises the achievement of functional equivalence between source and target languages in the translation process, i.e., the target readers are able to understand and appreciate the target text as much as the readers of the source text. In metaphor translation, this means that the translator needs to find a way of expression that retains the imagery and flavour of the original metaphor while making it easy for the target readers to decode the image and concept.

Just as Kovecses (2010a) points out that universal primary experiences produce universal primary metaphors, there is a large number of non-universal metaphors as well. In TS, the target language may have no direct equivalent for a word that occurs in the source text, which is typically true for metaphors in both Chinese and English. And metaphors are expressions of indirectness. Therefore, attention should be paid to the factors causing non-equivalence in the recognition of metaphors.

From our research, there are some common problems of non-equivalence:

- (a) Culture-specific concepts. The relationship between the two concepts, or domains, from which the metaphor gets its meaning is rooted in the shared cultural values of a particular society. This quality proves to be particularly difficult for the translator because the meaning of the lexical constituents cannot be predicted from its referential meaning (Guzzo and Naranjo, 2010).
- (b) The metaphors in SL are not lexicalized in the TL. A concept expressed metaphorically and naturally in SL can be interpreted in TL but simply not lexicalized. This is quite true concerning some non-conventional metaphors in poems.
- (c) The source-language metaphors are semantically complex. These metaphors, with intricate layers of meaning, can be difficult to unravel and reconstruct in the target language without losing their original depth and nuance. We do not usually realize how semantically complex a metaphor is until we have to translate it into the target language, which does not have an equivalent for it.
- (d) The metaphors in SL and TL have different distinctions in meaning. Even when similar metaphors exist in both languages, they may carry subtly different connotations or associations that make direct translation impossible. Cultural practices, social norms, and personal experiences shape the way individuals perceive and interpret language, creating unique linguistic landscapes that may not have direct parallels in other cultures.

2.2 The Potential Translation Procedures

Translation is a cognition-oriented process. The theoretical framework of metaphorical translation in classical Chinese poetry includes four steps: recognizing, decoding, transforming, and expressing metaphors. In the initial stage, the translator needs to keenly capture the metaphorical elements in the poem, which usually requires an in-depth understanding of ancient culture and language. In the decoding stage, the translator needs to analyse the cultural connotations and symbolism behind the metaphors, which often requires the use of historical documents, cultural studies, and linguistic knowledge. In the transforming stage, a suitable way of expression needs to be found to transform the metaphorical meaning of the source text into a form that is easily understood by the target readers. This may require the use of a variety of translation techniques, such as literal translation, free translation/paraphrasing, omission, and so on. In the expression stage, the fluency and readability of the translation should be achieved to ensure that the translation can convey the flavour and beauty of the original metaphor.

In this framework, we should not only pay attention to the literal meaning of the metaphor itself but also dig deeper into the cultural connotation and symbolic meaning behind it.

3. Cognition and Translation of Metaphors in Poetry in C/E

Translation of metaphors is a task of both linguistic oriented and culture-oriented. A culture uses a set of different source domains for a particular target domain, or conversely, a culture uses a particular source domain for the conceptualization of a set of different target domains (Kovecses, 2010b).

3.1 Literal-translation or Paraphrasing

Metaphors in poetry may be rhetorically significant and thematically important as well. So, in the first situation, the metaphors in the ST can be replaced by other metaphors, or even non-metaphors, to achieve the same or similar effect in TT. Of course, if the metaphor is thematically important, the metaphor should be retained or conveyed to achieve the same or similar poetic effects.

As one of the greatest poets in history, Li Bai's poems are very popular in China. Metaphors can be seen in almost every piece of his poems.

Have you never seen
bright mirrors in high halls, the white-haired ones lamenting,
their black silk of morning by evening turned to snow?
If life is to have meaning, seize every joy you can;
do not let the golden cask sit idle in the moonlight!
---Translated by Burton Watson

The metaphor Li Bai adopted is clear: A LIFETIME IS A DAY. Watson translated the poem literally: during one day's time, the hair is as black as silk in the morning, but in the evening, it gets as white as snow. Such translation of metaphor has achieved the same effect as that in the original poem. A lifetime is short. How time flies!

Many translators have made attempts to translate this poem. The following one is by Chinese translator Xu Yuanchong:

Do you not see the mirrors bright in chambers high
Grieve o'er the snow-white hair though once silk-black?
When hopes are won, O drink your fill in high delight,
And never leave your wine-cup empty in moonlight!

Mr. Xu targeted the simplicity and readability of the poem. To keep the form and the rhyme of the poem, he translated the poem by paraphrasing what the metaphor implied. In a cognitive approach to translation, metaphor in poetry is understood as a cognitive process that conceptualizes the poets' minds and thoughts linguistically in similar or different ways.

However, metaphors are created deliberately by the poets. No matter by what means, they may be of greater value and should not be discarded. The need to recreate a physical experience of some kind demands the vivid imagery of transferring metaphors:

TT 1:
Wind and rain *escorted* Spring's departure,
Flying snow *welcomes* Spring's return.

TT 2:
Then spring depart'd in wind and rain;
With flying snow, it's back again.

Somehow, the deletion of the metaphor or the change of words in the second translation leads to the loss of creativity, originality, and distinction of the original text. Translation is not precisely an explanation for metaphorical conceptualization in poetic texts. Paraphrasing here is, in fact, a kind of 'de-conceptualization' of them.

3.2 Cultural-specific Metaphors

In Chinese culture, there is a large amount of symbolic images with conventionally metaphorical connotations. The application of such cultural-related metaphors in Chinese poems is quite universal. Without the knowledge of Chinese culture, a translator cannot perform the task successfully in the TL. As we saw, "east wind" in Chinese and "west wind" in English share the same references as the "spring breeze or winds which bring warmth".

A typical conceptual metaphor in literature works is related to “willow”:

A morning-rain has settled the dust in Wei-ch'eng;
Willows are green again in the tavern dooryard.
Wait till we empty one more cup -
West of Yang Gate, there'll be no old friends.

(Note: This song is still popular as a song of farewell, and to this day, the expression is often used, “Since we picked willow branches,” meaning: “Since we parted.”)

In Chinese culture, the conventional metaphor is: DEPARTURE IS WILLOW.

Owen Stephen translated Wang Wei’s poem literally. But what he did here is to add a note to interpret what “willow” may convey in the context. This is one of the major translation strategies the English translators may apply in C/E translations.

Another case in point is Owen Stephen’s attempt to translate one of Du Fu’s poems:

Autumn comes, I turn to look at you, still wind-tossed dandelion puff,
not yet having achieved the cinnabar grain, embarrassed before Ge Hong.

(Note: The “cinnabar grain” is the elixir of immortality. Ge Hong (ca. 284–364) was a famous alchemist whose success puts Du Fu and Li Bai to shame.)

---Translated by Stephen Owen

So, the same translation strategy applied above is literal translation plus a note. Owen’s faithfulness to the ST lies in the fact that he succeeded in maintaining the poetic metaphor lexically and stylistically. The readability and understandability are both achieved.

A paraphrasing version by Chinese translator Xu Yuanhong is shown below:

When autumn comes, you’re drifting still like thistledown;
You try to find the way to heaven, but you fail.

In the original poem, DU Fu expressed his disappointment and sadness to himself and his friend Li Bai. Neither of them settled down or were successful as Ge Hong. Without any explanatory note, Mr. Xu decoded the implication of the metaphors entailed in simple words. Given the complexity of Chinese cultural elements in poetry, maybe paraphrasing or free translation is an accessible alternative for translators.

3.3 Metaphors in Different Physical or Interpersonal Experiences

Metaphors and the mental processes entailed are basic to language and cognition (Gotaly, 1997). The cognition and translation of the metaphors in the original text are tied up to the cognitive environment. Since metaphors are used to understand one domain of experience in terms of another, it makes it not only a matter of language but cognition as well (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff, 1987). Translators’ recognizing and conceptualization of the poets’ intention may vary. Just as Jaits Toshika Saeka says(2009a), Intention can be formed through a translator’s personal thoughts on the original text.... Intention can also reflect the social expectation of the translator’s role in a certain communicative situation (Saeka2009b).

Based on their personal experience and emotions, poets may create some novel or non-conventional metaphors in their works. So the cognition and interpretation of such metaphors for the translations vary.

In Chinese poetry, the image of “moon”. The following three versions are the translation texts of Su Shi’s poem from the Song Dynasty.

In Chinese, one of the conceptual metaphors is BEAUTY IS MOON:

People have their griefs and joys, their joining and separations,
The moon its dark and clear times, its roundings and wanings.
As ever in such matters, things are hardly the way we wish.

I only hope we may have long, long lives,
May share the moon's beauty, though a thousand miles apart.

Burton Watson aimed at the faithfulness of the poem and adopted the method of literal translation.

The second version is Lin Yutang's translation from his book *Gay Genius*.

But rare is perfect happiness---
The moon does wax; the moon does wane.
And so men meet and say goodbye,
I only pray our life be long,
And our souls together heavenward fly.

In the book, Lin Yutang introduced the background of why and when Su Shi composed this poem. Once, Su Shi was exiled to a place thousands away from home. On the day of Mid-autumn Day, he missed his younger brother so much. In the original poem, given the fact that Chinese people know well about the metaphor: REUNION IS FULLMOON, Su Shi didn't express his homesickness directly. With his personal interpretation, Lin Yutang paraphrased the entailed information for a better understanding for the English readers.

And there is a popular conceptual metaphor on the moon: LOVE IS MOON.

Oh, moon, if you have a heart,
why perfecting yourself so well when lovers are apart?
Ups and downs, togethers and departures,
never in history have there been answers.
So let's pay for all lovers, sharing the ecstasy
as long as love is in your hearts!

In Western culture, 'moon' has a similar symbolic meaning, but its connotation and association are not the same. Therefore, translators need to find words or expressions in the target language that can convey the same emotions and cultural connotations while retaining the original meaning of the poem.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

In metaphor translation, cultural factors play a crucial role. Due to the richness and complexity of metaphors in classical Chinese poetry, translators must deeply understand and respect the cultural differences between the source and target languages. When translating metaphors literally, translators need to give full consideration to the cultural background, linguistic environment, and readers' acceptance of the original text. Sometimes, in order to maintain the metaphorical imagery and flavour of the original text, paraphrasing or notes may be applied in translation.

In translation practice, translators often adopt the strategy of 'cultural equivalence' to deal with the cultural factors in metaphors. So, the selection and transformation of metaphorical images is an important manifestation of artistry and strategy.

From our research, classical Chinese poetry is translatable. However, Traditional metaphor translation methods are often limited to the two modes of literal translation and free translation, which are difficult to adapt to the translation needs of different cultural backgrounds. In recent years, with the development and innovation of translation technology, the translation of metaphors has also begun to show a diversified trend. Machine translation and artificial intelligence technology, such as big data analysis and natural language processing, have been utilized to assist translation. In addition, some translators have begun to try to use interdisciplinary methods to translate metaphors by combining the theories and methods of literature, art, philosophy, and other fields to enrich and deepen the expression of metaphor translation.

To sum up, the development trend of translation metaphors presents the characteristics of diversification, innovation, and high quality. These trends not only provide new ideas and methods for the research and practice of metaphor translation but also provide a broader space and opportunities for cross-cultural communication and cultural dissemination.

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