

## Cultural Approach to English-Chinese Metaphor Translation

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Received 16 January 2014; accepted 8 April 2014

Published online 26 May 2014

### Abstract

This paper studies the approach to English-Chinese metaphor translation. It introduces two translating approaches, aiming to explore their uses in the metaphor translation. Following an overview of domestication and foreignization, this paper analyzes the guide lines of translating metaphors through a close study of examples. This paper also explores the choices between the two strategies, trying to find the tendency in using the two approaches in cultural aspect.

**Key words:** Metaphor; English-Chinese translation; Culture

Shi, X. D. (2014). Cultural Approach to English-Chinese Metaphor Translation. *Higher Education of Social Science*, 6(3), 49-53. Available from: URL: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/hess/article/view/4528>  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/4528>

### INTRODUCTION

To create the suggestive imagination or heighten the speech effect, we create figures of speech (Richards, 2000). Traditionally, metaphor is thought as a kind of figure of speech, which is similar to other modes such as slang and humor. Ullmann (1979) states that a language cannot be a language without metaphor while it can be a language without ellipsis.

However, it is not always possible to assume correctly, especially when writer and reader come from the different cultural backgrounds and there is a gap between the writer's rang of knowledge and experience and reader's.

For example, "Money is a lens in a camera" is beyond the readers because there no association between money and lens in a camera. It is beyond the readers. But our common sense tells us the lens in a camera can record the world in an objective way. The background knowledge can give us a hint that money can also make people's real characters reveal.

But the question is that just in translation, how we convey the meaning of the SL to TL correctly and vividly? This paper will emphasize on the discussion of metaphor in various language examples and discuss the metaphor translation methods in cultural aspects.

### 1. CULTURAL FACTORS AND METAPHOR TRANSLATION

While he is talking about language and translation, Newmark (2002) defines culture as a kind of living style and expression ways . It is accepted that language is closely associated with the culture. Then how to handle the cultural factors in the translation text is the question when the source culture and target culture are totally different. The reason is that the information sender has a different understanding to the outside world with the information accepter and most of the times these two are not matched. It is the different attitudes to the cultural differences that lead the different methods to translation. Approaches to cultures involved in translation may be divided into two methods: TL culture-oriented and SL culture-oriented. In 1995, the terms of "domestication" and "foreignization" were raised by Venuti (Bassnett & Lefevere, 2002). In China, the celebrated writer and translator Lu Xun once said that the translators have to make a choice before translation—adopt the original language text or to keep the original flavor of the language text (Wang, 1989).

The scholars who support the foreignizing method to maintain the source culture have the following reasons: (a)

It is necessary to keep the target readers informed about the source culture, which is the main purpose to read the translations for the readers. (b) The translators should have the confidence in the target readers' intelligence and imagination to understand the different aspects in the foreign culture. (c) Transplanting the source culture to the target culture can enrich the target culture and target language expressions. (d) The main purpose of the translation is to exchange the different cultures. (e) If the translation could not transform the source concept to the target readers, the translation is not faithful the source text.

At the same time, Nida is the representative of the domesticating method. From the cultural and social aspect, he states that the target readers should be put to the first place and the purpose of the source information should be carefully considered. On many occasions, Nida repeats his view that translation should be the closest natural equivalent to the original text. To him, the purpose of dynamic equivalence is that the expressions in the translations should be natural and the source-language action forms should be adopted to the target- language cultural forms. To be more specific, the relationship between the SL and TL should be the same as that the original message and received message ( Munday, 2001). To this problem, he offers the "functional isomorphs" to deal with it. For instance, the English idiom "to grow like mushrooms" can be translated as *yu hou chun sun* in Chinese.

The people who support the domesticating method states that: (a) Generally speaking, it is unrealistic to enforce the source language standards to the target language and similarly, it is dangerous to enforce the source cultural system to the target cultural system. So the translation should not only overcome the language barriers but also the cultural barriers. (b) Because translation is to communication, one of the translators' responsibilities is to avoid the cultural conflicts which can lead to various misunderstandings. In transforming the source culture to the target culture, the cultural inner meaning should be considered by translators. (c) If the contents and forms of the translations are within the range of the target readers' knowledge in the real world, they can be easily understood. At the same time, the translators are the commuters and it is their responsibility to get rid of the cultural barriers and transform the original meaning to the target readers. (d) The translators should not require the target readers to have the high understanding and imagination to know the real world of the source culture. (e) From the communicative aspect, the effective cultural communication may not be effective in another culture. In translation the target language reader may not have the same understanding even every word is translated to its "equivalent words" because the target readers understand the source text with his own culture. In some sense, the translation is to reach the "cultural equivalence" between the source culture and target culture.

As for the metaphor translation, Fung and Kiu (1995) have reached some conclusions that Chinese readers can accept more western culture than the average western readers. Metaphor is similar to simile while they are different in the implied statement. In fact metaphor is a simile without using like or as, differing from it only in the form and taste. It requires more efforts for the readers to understand the hidden meaning the person and things that are applied. The Random House Unabridged Dictionary (second addition) defines metaphor as "a figure of speech in which a term or phrase is applied to something to which it is not literally applicable in order to suggest a resemblance." Peter Newmark (2002) defines metaphor as a kind of expression both physical and abstract. However, Snell-Hornby (1988) thinks that metaphor is a kind of complexity instead of a single form. Then a metaphor is a kind of condensed simile, in which things or ideas that is implied. We are going to discuss the metaphor in the text which contains idioms, proverbs or sentences and allegory.

To understand a metaphor thoroughly is more difficult than that of a simile. But as a simile, we can find three main uses from the following examples, namely, description, illumination and illustration.

(i) Descriptive: The hallway was zebra-striped with darkness and moonlight. (A description of the bands of light and shade in the hall, like a zebra's stripes.)

(ii) Illuminative: the bubble reputation (bubble used here to imply that the pursuit of reputation is visionary)

(iii) Illustrative: In the ebb and flow of the struggle it was inevitable that one of them would go under. ( the comparison of a man's vicissitudes to the ebb and flow is to illustrate the ups and downs of the man and waves .) In many ways, metonymy and metaphor are quite similar to each other. In fact, the ordinary people are quite confused with them because they are too similar. One of the most effective way to distinguish them is to use the word like. If the sentence makes sense in the form of A is like B, it is a metaphor. At the same time, Newmark (2002) takes another method and he offers some methods for translation: (a) reproduce the same picture in the target language; (b) replace the original picture with another one; (c) replace metaphor by the means of simile; (d) keeping the original metaphor and add something else; (e) changing the metaphor to another sense; (f) omit the metaphor. The methods of metaphor translation proposed by Shan Qichang offers five methods in his book *A Coursebook in Translation Between English and Chinese* (a) explanation and literal translation; (b) literal translation plus meaning; (c) keeping the metaphor; (d) using Chinese counterparts to explain English metaphor; (e) replacing the original image with a target picture. Just according these two strategies of metaphor translation proposed by Newmark and Shan, the common strategies of metaphor translation from English to Chinese are: (A) keeping the

same picture in the TL; (B) Replacing the original picture with the target picture; (C) explaining the sense with the literal translation; (D) changing the metaphor to meaning; (E) using Chinese counterpart to replace the original metaphor.

Here we are going to have some examples to show what methods are domestic and what are foreignizing.

## 2. CASE STUDY AND ANALYSIS

Example 1. Life is a yo-yo. It is a series of ups and downs.

Example 2. Police work on inner-city streets is a domestic Vietnam.

Example 3. There is no rose without thorn.

Example 4. Cast the pearls before swine.

Example 5. It was packed like sardines.

Example 6. As poor as a church mouse.

Example 7. the skeleton in the cupboard

Example 8. as cool as a cucumber

Example 9. He himself was at once noble, romantic and Machiavellian.

Example 10. If a window freezes on your screen, press Ctrl+ Alt+ Del (all three at the same time)

Now we face the question as to whether our function is to record the words of the original or to report on their meaning. Metaphors in examples 1, 2 and 3 are translated literally. The purpose of literal translation is to make the TL readers see the original meaning, characteristics and imagination, which are so helpful to understand the underlined meaning of SL. Though it is not concise enough, it is the mirror the SL. To be more specific, the purpose of the literal transition is to keep the original flavor so as to enrich the TL.

In the example 1, Yo-yo is a kind of toy which goes ups and downs that is very similar to the uncertain life. It is crystal to the Chinese readers to master the original meaning of the metaphor. In the example 2, perhaps the public are not so familiar with the conditions of the police but they are so deeply influenced by the Vietnam War. By translating the metaphor literally, the translator can convey the real meaning of the original sentence to the Chinese readers. The proverb in example 3, the translator just translates it as the original ones which are so vivid and picturesque to Chinese readers and effective. The reason is that both the SL readers and the TL readers share the same personal experience of the roses.

Example 4 and 5 are adopted into Chinese version, replacing the SL image with TL image which is familiar to the Chinese readers. For example 3, the native speakers are so familiar with the tale from the Bible and get the idea of the metaphor. On the contrary, the Chinese readers can picture it by another house-hold proverb in Chinese *dui niu tian qin*. In the example 4, the westerners know the meaning of sardines so they have no difficulty to picture the crowded situation. On the contrary, the Chinese

are so confused about them so the translator put that as *zhi ma jiang* and *jiao zi*. Then it becomes so easy to understand. On the whole, the translators have used the different images in TL to take the place of the images in SL. In other words, a more common method to translate metaphor is to replace the original meaning with the new one (Newmark, 2002). Susan Bassnett's cultural equality theory emphasize that if the different cultures share the equality and there is obstacle to understand the transplanted cultural imagination, the metaphor should be translated literally. On the other hand, if there is a conflict between the SL culture and TL culture, to be more specific, they have the different cultural imaginations, the translator should do put the TL readers' acceptance at the first place to achieve the functional equality. In this point, Susan Bassnett, Nida and Newmark are holding the same opinion.

Metaphors in examples 6, 7 and 8 are converting the metaphor to sense. In example 6, the point is that in the church there is cupboard where so little a mouse could find a crumb. So, a church mouse presumably came to be taken symbolically for extreme poverty because it makes its home where there is no food. However, the Chinese readers are not as interested in church as the native speakers of English are. Understandably, the translation as *yi pin ru xi* is smooth and faithful. To the Chinese reader, the image of "a skeleton in the cupboard", may mean terrible; at the same time, the cucumber is just a kind of vegetable. They cannot understand the hidden meaning in the metaphors. We had better translate the two metaphors as the more general meanings as *zhen jing* and *jiao chou* which are the universal abstract concepts or an abstract concept. To example 8, the SL compares the calmed people as a cucumber which is just a kind of vegetable in the TL Chinese. So the translator has to tell the meaning of the real meaning of the metaphor.

To example 9, the native Chinese readers will be at a loss to understand the meaning of Machiavellian, simply because we do not know who is Machiavellian. Still the translator assumes that it cannot be understood completely, so he is making a note to identify this Italian statesman's main characteristics. However, I have to point that too many footnotes will change the main point of the SL and be boring to read for the TL readers. To the last example, the word "freeze" is so confusing in Chinese, so the translator puts the explanation there.

Then, what are the initial motivation of the translator to adopt the two different strategies?

(I) When the basic metaphorical concepts of SL and TL communities correspond, as in "Yo-yo", "Vietnam war", and "thorn rose", the original image or the flavor is most likely to be retained and to provide the colorful comparisons between the SL and TL. The method can also make the TL readers understand the SL with no difficulty. However, we are not expected to use the typical or local

Chinese idioms to take the place of the English ones. For instance, “Two heads are better than one.” can be translated as *yi ren bu di liang ren zhi* while the latter one is a idiom holding the Chinese culture, our preference is the former.

(II) When they come across the SL pictures about the history such as “Machiavellian”, “freeze”, “cucumber”, the Chinese translator would be very difficult to find the counterpart because they are about the cultural aspects. Or it will make the TL readers feel confused about the SL. The readers in the target language will have a response which is a standard in metaphor translation, for instance, “as poor as a church mouse”, the translator tends to change the metaphor into the TL counterpart.

(III) when the translation standard is still the readers’ response in TL, the relationship of a picture cannot be found in the target language, for example, “as poor as a church mouse”, the translator tends to adopt the metaphor into idiomatic target language expressions. When the translator feels the TL readers will fail to get the SL meaning by just literal translation, he may add something.

(IV) When translating the metaphors in proverbs, such as, “cast the pearls before swine”, the Chinese translator, most of the times, will try to find the counterpart in Chinese to replace the SL images, though sometimes the equivalence cannot be reached. (Shuttleworth & Cowie, 1997). It is practiced by method A (keeping the same picture in the TL) and C (Literal translation and explanation) which are using the foreignizing translation strategies while method B (Replacing the SL image with a standard TL image), D (Converting the metaphor to meaning) and E (Using Chinese couplets to replace the English metaphor) are using the domesticating translation strategies. But this is not my point here. What I mean is to find the cultural equivalence in metaphor translation. For the metaphor translation, we have some cultural levels in equivalents.

(a) The expressions and the meanings are almost the same:

- i) Money is the root of all evil.
- ii) Failure is the mother of success.
- iii) Time is life and when an idle man kills time, he kills himself.
- iv) They were only crying crocodile tears at the old man’s funeral because nobody had really liked him. .

(b) The expressions are similar but the meanings are different. The translators should pay attention to the wrong translation.

- i) We are in the same boat.  
Wrong: *tong zhou gong ji*
- ii) It is no use asking her about her about her about that, she has bone in her throat.  
Wrong: *rug eng zai hou*
- iii) Don’t pull my leg.  
Wrong: *tuo hou tui*

iv) He never eats his words.

Wrong: *shi yan*

(c) The expressions and meanings are different.

Mary is an apple-polisher. She will do everything.

Apple-polisher= *ma pi jing*

From the above examples we can see that the metaphor translation can be divided as the following cultural levels: at the surface level, the cultural equivalence is linguistically oriented. To reach the equivalence is easy if the translator is equipped with the knowledge of the SL and is home at choosing specific words in the dictionary to keep the meaning in the SL. The other level is more sophisticated and more difficult to reach.

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## CONCLUSION

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In translation criticism, the people are often supporting one strategy and against another one. For instance, there has been a heated debate on the problem of foreignization and domestication in China for a long time. Some people even hold that the domestication leads the Chinese translation theory to a dead end. At the same time, Nida’s dynamic equivalence theory is attacked by many Chinese scholars who state that it is the theory that put the negative influence on the Chinese translation study.

But it can be seen that whether the domestication or foreignization strategy has its merits and shortcomings. By adopting the different strategies, the translations will have a different influence on the readers and the readers will have the different response to the different translations. In other words, to adopt the domestication or foreignization strategy is decided by the purpose of translation. As a translator, if the purpose is to introduce the source culture to the target readers who are keen on knowing the source culture, the source culture oriented strategy or the foreignization strategy should be adopted. However, if the purpose of the translation is to please the target readers, the target culture oriented strategy or the domestication strategy should be adopted. To the people who want to learn the source language and understand the source culture, the foreignizing translation is beneficial and practical. On the contrary, the domesticating translation can meet the need to the readers who only want to entertain themselves by reading. Owing to the different translation purpose, readers, the translator should follow the different principles and then the two translations will have the different impacts in the target cultures.

Besides, the types of the texts require the translators to follow the different translation strategies. Reiss holds that the primary function of the source language is the crucial element by which the TT is judged (Munday, 2001). She suggests that different translation methods should be used according to the different text types. (a) The redundant information should not be kept and the translation method should be in a plain way. (b) If aesthetic form should

be transmitted, the translation can adopt the identifying method. (c) If the text is operative and the translation method should be adoptive to create an equivalent effect. On checking the metaphor translation methods, the author has realized that the metaphor translation methods are not fixed but changeable. The way in which a metaphor or can be depended on many factors. It is not only a question of whether a metaphor is available in the target language. Other factors include the significance of the specific lexical items which constitute the metaphors.

How to translate the metaphor relies on the different elements such as the SL text's context factors and importance, the acceptability of the readers, the pragmatic economy and referential accuracy ( Newmark, 2002). There are many considerations in the metaphor translation,

however, the general translation theory consists the metaphor translation practice. To sum up, we cannot translate metaphors with domestication without some degree of foreignization, similarly, we cannot translate metaphors with foreignization without some degree of domestication.

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