

The Cognitive Process of Chinese-English Metaphor Translation from the Perspective of Cognitive Linguistics

Danyu Yang*

Inner Mongolia University of Technology, Hohhot, 010070, China

*Corresponding author: yangdanyu8@163.com

Abstract: Metaphor transfer is a general problem of cross-cultural communication. Although the previous research has paid more attention to changes in linguistic forms, cognitive linguistics has recently begun to study the phenomenon of metaphor translation. Based on the general theories of cognitive linguistics, this paper will systematically study the cognitive process of Chinese-English metaphor translation and present the dynamic cognitive mechanism translators use to identify source-language metaphors and analyze conceptual structures, cross-linguistically map them, and finally reconstruct them in the target language. Divide the stages of cognitive operation in metaphor translation and then put forward new translation rules based on conceptual integration, cognitive equivalence and cognitive economy, as well as special methods, image retention and image reconstruction. Therefore, the main reason for the poor translation is a lack of cognitive ability in translation. Help people better understand what is meant by metaphor translation in this paper and provide a theoretical basis for applying Chinese-English translation and teaching in other areas.

Keywords: Cognitive Linguistics, Metaphor Translation, Chinese-English Contrast, Cognitive Process, Conceptual Mapping, Translation Strategy

Introduction

Metaphor is a type of rhetoric, but more importantly, it is also how people perceive the world. It is general in language and culture, but also particular. Translation of Chinese-English metaphors is a problem of mapping and reconstruction among different conceptual systems, so it is very difficult. The traditional theory of translation is mainly based on the idea of linguistic equivalence and therefore cannot explain the creative choices and cognitive conflicts in metaphor translation well. Cognitive linguistics believes that language is embodied and conceptual, so it is regarded as a system of concepts and thus provides a foundation for the study of metaphor translation. Therefore, to gain a deeper understanding of what translation is, exploration of the cognitive process of Chinese-English metaphor translation is theoretically necessary; at the same time, it also has practical value in strengthening the ability of translators and improving the quality of cross-cultural communication. The first is to systematically study the theoretical foundation of cognitive linguistics and metaphor translation, then explore the cognitive stages of Chinese-English metaphor translation, and finally, based on these findings, build an effective system of translation strategies.

1. The Theoretical Connection Between Cognitive Linguistics and Metaphor Translation

1.1 Insights from Core Theories of Cognitive Linguistics in Translation Studies

Cognitive Linguistics has provided a new philosophical foundation and theoretical tools for the study of translation. This school of thought no longer believes that language is an independent system of symbols; instead, it is based on the idea of embodiment, and the fundamental view is that linguistic structures do not directly reflect reality but rather show how people think about the world. Therefore, the basic change has moved the focus of translation studies from code-switching to the reconstruction of concepts. According to the category and prototype theories, lexical concepts are not strictly independent but form a radial structure around typical members. This can explain the reasons for the flexibility and motivation behind lexical selection in translation^[1].

Another reason for the pre-conceptual cognitive structures that people have built through bodily experience is schema theory; for instance, the concepts of "path" and "container" are such structures that help us understand abstract ideas and learn new languages. Frame semantics also indicates that the activation of a word's meaning is based on the whole network of concepts behind it. Therefore, the aim of translation is to find or create linguistic expressions in the target language that can present the original ideas in a similar manner. Therefore, the main theories of cognitive linguistics believe that translation activity is a type of conceptual integration based on universal laws of human cognition.

1.2 The Nature and Cognitive Mechanism of Metaphor

Cognitive linguistics believes that metaphor is not merely a kind of figure of speech; rather, it is a fundamental way of knowing for all people that involves grasping an abstract or ill-defined target domain through a concrete and well-organised source domain. Conceptual Metaphor Theory is based on the idea that a metaphor is an organised mapping of one concept onto another. The mapping is not random; it follows the "Invariance Principle", that is to say, the image-schematic structure of the source domain is preserved in the target domain after mapping. The original concept metaphor is "argument is war", so components from the source domain of war, such as attack, defence, victory and retreat, are used to construct specific linguistic expressions in the target domain of argument, for example, "His reasons are without foundation" and "I defended my view".

Metaphor is based on people's bodily experience, and in order to understand it, one needs to create an image-scheme transformation from the concrete to the abstract and engage in mental simulation. Therefore, the construction and application of metaphors are not just changes in words but also changes in underlying concepts and thinking; thus, a system for conceptual transfer and extension is needed to solve the problem of metaphor translation.

1.3 The Cognitive Nature of Translation and the Essence of the Translation Process

In terms of cognition, translation activities have their own cognitive features, and the core of their process is a type of psychological activity in which the translator acts as the subject and actively processes information. Translation is not a one-to-one correspondence between the source language and the target language; rather, it is a process of problem-solving that takes many forms. First, the translator needs to learn the source language well; that is to say, various levels of analysis will be conducted on the linguistic form, semantics, style, etc.

More importantly, the translator should construct a mental model of the situation described in the source text; that is, a situational model based on their bilingual knowledge base and world knowledge. To solve the problem of metaphor translation, the first step is to identify the metaphor in the source language and then to unpack the underlying conceptual mapping relationship it contains. The next stage in the generation of the target text is a cognitive decision-making process, and at this time, the translator will choose a suitable expression scheme from the cognitive system of the target language to reconstruct or reproduce this conceptual relationship. At every stage, the translator will pay attention to, remember, reason about and decide on how to translate; thus, the goal of producing meaning through translation as an active cognitive process can be achieved.

1.4 Theoretical Convergence of Cognitive Linguistics and Metaphor Translation

Significant theoretical convergence has been achieved in the basic theoretical propositions of cognitive linguistics and research on metaphor translation; thus, a solid theoretical foundation has been laid for studying the cognitive process of Chinese-English metaphor translation. The main reason is that both seek "meaning", and meaning is considered to be the result of conceptualisation based on bodily experience. Therefore, the translation of metaphors is no longer only about transferring words; it also needs to match ideas at the level of meaning. The second point of convergence is that both are interdependent in the mechanism of "mapping"; the cross-domain mapping mechanism in Conceptual Metaphor Theory is highly isomorphic with the cross-linguistic and cross-cultural mapping features of the translation activity itself.

To some extent, the act of translation can be regarded as a way to build bridges between the conceptual systems of two languages and cultures. The third point of convergence is the translator's own consciousness of the world. Cognitive linguistics believes that the subject of understanding creates meaning, and translation studies are concerned with both how to understand and how to reproduce that

understanding in translation. Putting the translator's cognitive processing at the centre can help us understand why certain metaphor translation strategies are chosen and explain why the same metaphor results in different translations under different circumstances or is handled differently by various translators. In short, the above theoretical convergences show that it is both feasible and necessary to carry out systematic research on Chinese-English metaphor translation from the perspective of cognitive linguistics.

2. Analysis of the Cognitive Process of Chinese-English Metaphor Translation

2.1 The Identification of Source Language Metaphors and the Analysis of Their Conceptual Structures

The first step in the cognitive process of Chinese-English metaphor translation is to correctly identify the metaphor in the source language and understand its basic conceptual structure. The identification of metaphors is based on formal markers in language, but it is also, and perhaps more so, about how well a translator understands the cultural context and cognitive system of the source language. The purpose of identification is to discover any deviations from normal speech early and to learn how standardised metaphors are used in a particular culture. The first problem a translator needs to solve when facing a metaphor is to determine whether it is a conventional metaphor or a novel one. It will affect the cognitive load and the choice of strategies in the next step^[3].

After successful identification, the core of the cognitive operation is to decompose the basic concept structure. Therefore, one should reduce the specific linguistic expression back to the abstract conceptual metaphor system on which it is based. For example, the linguistic instance "consolidate the foundation of cooperation" can be traced back to the more basic conceptual metaphor "SOCIAL RELATIONS ARE BUILDINGS". Organize the mapping network of the source domain and the target domain for this conceptual metaphor, clarify how the image-schematic structure and its elements in the source domain are mapped onto the target domain, and identify any possibly culturally specific parameters. Based on the detailed analysis of the metaphorical system above, the following cross-linguistic translations will be carried out.

2.2 Cross-Linguistic Conceptual Mapping and Transformation of the Cognitive Context

According to the analysis of the conceptual structure in the source language, the next stage of cognition is cross-linguistic conceptual mapping. At this time, it is not only a substitution of concepts but also an extensive cognitive process to find correspondences among the various cultural cognitive systems of Chinese and English. At the same time, the translator should also activate the corresponding nodes in the conceptual networks of both the source and target languages and determine the degree of overlap and difference between them in terms of conceptual mapping.

Both the Chinese word "骨干" (gǔgàn) and the English word "backbone" refer to the main part or foundation of something, so they are very close in concept and can be translated directly. Conceptual maps can also differ in different cultures; for instance, the Chinese people often use the metaphor of a "dragon" (龙, lóng) to refer to nobility and power, but in Western culture, a "dragon" is frequently associated with bad omens, so direct mapping should be avoided to prevent misunderstandings. At this time, the mechanism of cognitive context change will be triggered. The translator should separate the metaphor in the source language from its original cognitive context, then re-evaluate and recalibrate it according to the cognitive system of the target-language culture, weigh the advantages and disadvantages of keeping the concept from the source area, and align it with the cognitive framework of the target language. This is the reason why the choice of translation method will be different.

2.3 Activation and Selection of Target Language Cognitive Schemas

According to cross-linguistic conceptual mapping, at the time of translation, many relevant cognitive structures in the target language will be used to address the current problem. Cognitive schemas are knowledge structures about certain concepts or situations that people have built through experience. When the concept of the source domain is mapped to the target language system, some corresponding schema options in the mind of the translator are selected automatically or deliberately.

For example, in translating the concept of "the passage of time", many possible metaphorical schemes in the target language may be activated at the same time, such as "TIME IS MONEY", "TIME

IS A RIVER", and "TIME IS A FLYING BIRD". All the active schemas have different pictures, emotions and purposes. Therefore, the translator's cognitive choices are limited by many factors, such as conventional expressions in the culture of the target language, specific demands of the type of text, the functional effect that the translation hopes to achieve, and the translator's own style preferences. In short, among all the choices, we have selected the schema that is most suitable for the current translation conditions, in line with the principles of cognitive economy and optimisation of expressive effect, and are now ready for the final linguistic expression^[4].

2.4 Integration and Reconstruction of the Target Language Metaphor

The last stage of the cognitive process in Chinese-English metaphor translation is the combination and final construction of the target language metaphor. At this time, the translator should integrate all the cognitive results obtained in the previous steps—that is, understanding the conceptual structure of the source language, assessing cross-linguistic mapping, and selecting a suitable target-language cognitive schema—to produce a reasonable and fluent linguistic work that can achieve the original cognitive effect for readers of the target language. It can be in many different forms combined.

When the conceptual structures in Chinese and English are very similar, the type of integration is to find a corresponding expression for a conceptual metaphor in the target language and achieve direct transfer of the concept. If the conceptual structure has only partial alignment or there is a cultural difference, then adaptation of the source domain image is needed for integration, or a substitutive reconstruction based on a metaphor in the target language that originates from a different source domain but achieves the same cognitive function can be employed. In some cases, in order to give more weight to the transmission of the main idea or to avoid cognitive obstacles for readers of the target language, it may be necessary to omit the figure and complete the conceptual reconstruction through free translation or paraphrase. However detailed the plan is, the final translated text will still be the result of conceptual reconstruction at the level of target-language signs, achieved through various internal cognitive operations by the translator. Quality is the degree and result of the above cognitive process.

3. Construction of Chinese-English Metaphor Translation Strategies Based on the Cognitive Process

3.1 General Cognitive Principles of Chinese-English Metaphor Translation

Based on the analysis of the cognitive process in Chinese-English metaphor translation, general cognitive principles that guide the construction of strategies have been summarized. First of all, we will combine the ideas conceptually. Translation should be seen as a form of creation that connects the Chinese and English worlds' worldviews, and only certain parts need to be presented in the other. The aim is to reconstruct the conceptual structure activated by the source-language metaphor in the target language, not to find an exact match in words and grammar^[5].

The other reason is that it is cognitively equivalent. It should have the same cognitive effect on the minds of readers in the target language as in the source language, and thus be able to convey the depth of understanding of the metaphorical image, emotional resonance and inferential orientation. It is no longer just a matter of function; people have begun to give it a deeper meaning. Also, the idea of cognitive economy is employed at all times. At the same time, one should consider the mental effort and the level of communication achieved in selecting a strategy, and choose one that is easy to implement and effective in meeting the demands of the communication purpose. Together, these provide the basis for the mind that will lead us in selecting and employing particular translation strategies.

3.2 Image Retention Strategy under Conceptual Correspondence

If the cognitive models of Chinese and English cultures are the same in some respects, then the strategy of image retention can be employed to achieve cognitive equality. In this way, it is suitable if the source domain image can evoke the same or a very similar conceptual mapping and emotional response in the target language culture. It directly uses the corresponding source-domain image in the target language or makes only minor grammatical modifications within the constraints of the sentence structure.

"Break the deadlock" is another translation for "打破僵局", and "waste time" can be translated as "waste one's time". This is because the conceptual metaphors "obstacles are ice" and "resources are valuable commodities" are frequently used in both Chinese and English. The advantage of this way is that the vividness, cultural connotations and conceptual structure of the original language metaphor can be retained to some extent, and thus readers of the target language can gain a cognitive experience close to that of the original. First of all, the translator needs to be well-versed in the cognitive system of both countries to confirm that the concepts being compared are actually the same and not just similar in form; otherwise, a cognitive mismatch may occur due to different cultural contexts.

3.3 Reconstruction Strategy by Adjustment of Cognitive Model

If there are significant differences in the cultural cognitive models of Chinese and English, and direct retention of the image cannot achieve cognitive equivalence, then image reconstruction will be used to make such adjustments in cognition. There are many other kinds of fluctuating modes. One of the above is image substitution; it is used when the source domain image in the target language is awkward, difficult to understand or negative. In this case, a different source domain image from the target language culture is selected; it can also have the same cognitive effect and carry a similar emotional connotation.

For example, the Chinese word "红眼病" (hóngyǎnbìng), which means "red-eye disease", is used to express jealousy, and it can be translated into English as "green-eyed". Although the pictures are different, both can express the idea of "jealousy" well in the target language. Another way is image explication; that is to keep the original image and add some words to explain or compensate for its metaphorical meaning so that readers of the target language can understand the concept correctly. Third, if a metaphor has such a heavy cultural load that there is no close correspondence between its image and conceptual structure in the target language, then the strategy of image abandonment can be employed. Therefore, we need to ensure that the essential information can be transmitted properly and smoothly in this case. The main purpose of the image reconstruction method is to help people think more easily when direct mapping of concepts is not possible^[6].

3.4 Construction of Translator's Cognitive Competence and Paths for Its Enhancement

The application of the above translation strategies will vary according to how thoroughly and broadly a translator is able to use their own cognitive functions. Cognitive ability of a translator is a composite concept, and its construction and development need to be systemised. First, one should broaden one's own knowledge of the conceptual system and culture in both languages. Therefore, the translator should be proficient in the language and also learn about the basic system of cultural cognition, folk psychology, philosophical ideas, etc., to build a complete knowledge foundation for cross-cultural conceptual metaphors.

Second, we need to cultivate good skills in recognising and interpreting metaphors. By learning from the good translations of classics and conducting comparative textual analysis, translators should be able to quickly break down the conceptual structure of source-language metaphors and predict the cognitive response they will trigger in the target language. Thirdly, we need to develop the ability to think flexibly in making decisions. Therefore, through repeated translation experience, one can learn to consider the cognitive consequences of all kinds of strategies in authentic contexts and develop an internalised cognitive intuition to choose an appropriate strategy flexibly according to the particular circumstances, functions of the text and characteristics of the target readers. In short, the cognitive ability of a translator is their capacity to be an active negotiator of meaning and to achieve effective cross-cultural conceptual reconstruction based on a full consideration of the conceptual connotations in the source language and the cognitive norms of the target language.

Conclusion

Systematically present the cognitive process and strategic system of Chinese-English metaphor translation in the theoretical framework of cognitive linguistics in this paper. Research shows that the goal of metaphor translation is to reconstruct meaning; therefore, it is fundamentally about conceptual mapping and follows certain cognitive rules. The stages of cognition in translation include source-language metaphor identification, conceptual analysis, cross-linguistic mapping, schema selection and target-language integration, etc.; at all times, these choices should comply with the

principles of conceptual integration, cognitive equivalence and cognitive economy. Based on the analysis of the cognitive process, this paper proposes the strategies of image retention and image reconstruction and indicates that the foundation of the translator's cognitive ability lies in this area. This paper will present and explain the cognitive system of Chinese-English metaphor translation, as well as some research directions in cognitive translology. In the future, experiments can be conducted with the help of cognitive science to observe how translators' minds work at any given time. Further studies can be conducted to investigate the cognitive transfer mechanisms of multimodal metaphors and other kinds of texts that are not literary works, thereby expanding the understanding of translation as a cognitive process.

References

- [1] Wang, Ruibiao. "A Cognitive Linguistic Interpretation of Chinese-English Metaphor Translation." *Chongqing Science and Technology News*, 12 June 2025, p. 009, Theory section.
- [2] Zheng, Qingzhu. *Metaphors in Chinese Calligraphy Terminology and a Study of Their English Expressions*. 2025. Qufu Normal University, MA thesis.
- [3] Sang, Wei. "Approaches to English Metaphor Translation from the Perspective of Cognitive Linguistics." *China Multimedia and Network Teaching Journal (Mid-month Issue)*, no. 08, 2025, pp. 204-208.
- [4] Yuchi, Ruochen. "Metaphor Translation and Strategies in Chinese-English Proverbs from the Perspective of Cognitive Linguistics." *Chinese Character Culture*, no. 18, 2024, pp. 160-162.
- [5] Peng, Jia. "An Analysis from the Perspective of Cognitive Linguistics ——The Chinese-English Translation of Metaphors in 2022 Internet Catchphrases." *Chinese Character Culture*, no. 20, 2023, pp. 160-162.
- [6] Zhang, Meng. "Methods for Translating Metaphors from the Perspective of Cognitive Linguistics." *Literary Education (Lower Monthly)*, no. 01, 2021, pp. 152-153.