

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

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Abstract: Metaphor translation is a core issue in cross-cultural communication. While traditional studies have predominantly focused on the transformation of linguistic forms, cognitive linguistics offers a new theoretical perspective for exploring metaphor translation. Based on the core theories of cognitive linguistics, this paper systematically analyzes the cognitive process of Chinese-English metaphor translation, revealing the dynamic cognitive mechanism by which the translator progresses from source language metaphor identification and conceptual structure analysis to cross-linguistic mapping and target language reconstruction. By dissecting the cognitive operational steps involved in metaphor translation, this paper further proposes translation principles centered on conceptual integration, cognitive equivalence, and cognitive economy, and constructs specific strategies such as image retention and image reconstruction. The study emphasizes that the translator's cognitive competence is the key determinant of translation effectiveness. This research not only deepens the cognitive understanding of the essence of metaphor translation but also provides a theoretical reference for Chinese-English translation practice and pedagogy.

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

Introduction

Metaphor is not only a rhetorical device but also a fundamental way for humans to cognize the world. It possesses both universality and particularity in language and culture. Chinese-English metaphor translation involves mapping and reconstruction between different conceptual systems, making it a highly complex cognitive activity. Traditional translation theories, mostly proceeding from the perspective of superficial linguistic equivalence, struggle to adequately explain the creative choices and cognitive conflicts inherent in metaphor translation. Cognitive linguistics emphasizes the experiential and conceptual nature of language, viewing translation as a process of conceptual integration, thereby providing profound theoretical support for the study of metaphor translation. From this perspective, exploring the cognitive process of Chinese-English metaphor translation is not only theoretically necessary, as it can deepen the understanding of the essence of translation, but also holds significant practical importance for enhancing translator competence and the quality of cross-cultural communication. This paper aims to systematically elucidate the theoretical connection between cognitive linguistics and metaphor translation, progressively analyze the cognitive stages of Chinese-English metaphor translation, and, on this basis, construct an operable system of translation strategies.

1. The Theoretical Connection between Cognitive Linguistics and Metaphor Translation

1.1 The Insights of Core Theories of Cognitive Linguistics for Translation Studies

Cognitive linguistics provides translation studies with a new philosophical foundation and a theoretical toolbox. This school of thought abandons the traditional view that regards language as a self-contained symbolic system and establishes the fundamental stance of embodied philosophy, asserting that linguistic structures do not directly correspond to the objective world but rather reflect the ways in which humans conceptualize the world. This fundamental shift deepens the focus of translation studies from the level of code-switching to the level of conceptual reconstruction.

Categorization and prototype theory reveal that lexical concepts are not clearly demarcated but form radial structures centered around typical members. This provides an explanatory basis for the flexibility and motivation behind lexical choices in translation^[1].

Image schema theory further elucidates the pre-conceptual cognitive structures formed by humans based on bodily experiences, such as "path" and "container." These structures serve as the underlying cognitive foundation for understanding abstract concepts and achieving cross-linguistic transmission. Frame semantics further emphasizes that the activation of any word's meaning relies on the entire conceptual system network behind it. This implies that the essence of translation is to find or construct linguistic expressions in the target language that can evoke an equivalent conceptual framework. Therefore, the core theories of cognitive linguistics collectively define translation activity as a conceptual integration process rooted in the universal laws of human cognition.

1.2 The Nature and Cognitive Mechanism of Metaphor

From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, the essence of metaphor transcends the traditional category of rhetorical devices and is defined as a fundamental cognitive mode of humankind, that is, understanding an abstract and structurally vague target domain through a concrete and clearly structured source domain. Conceptual Metaphor Theory points out that the core of metaphor lies in the systematic mapping across conceptual domains. This mapping is not arbitrary but follows the "Invariance Principle," meaning that the image-schematic structure of the source domain is preserved in the target domain during the mapping process. Taking the classic conceptual metaphor "ARGUMENT IS WAR" as an example, elements from the source domain of "war," such as attack, defense, victory, and retreat, are systematically mapped onto the target domain of "argument." This gives rise to specific linguistic expressions such as "His arguments are indefensible" and "I defended my position."

The operating mechanism of metaphor profoundly depends on human bodily experience, and its comprehension process involves image-schematic transformation from the concrete to the abstract, as well as mental simulation. This indicates that the understanding and generation of metaphorical language are not merely linguistic substitutions but rather a deep-level process of conceptual activation and reasoning, which lays a theoretical foundation for the complexity and creativity inherent in metaphor translation.

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

Examined from a cognitive perspective, translation activities possess inherent cognitive attributes, and the essence of its process is a complex psychological activity in which the translator as a subject actively processes information. Translation is not a direct linear correspondence between the source language and the target language but rather a dynamic problem-solving process comprising multiple stages. The translator must first deeply decode the source text, a process that involves a multi-level analysis of the linguistic form, semantic content, and even the stylistic features^[2].

More critically, the translator needs to construct a mental model of the situation described by the source text — namely, a situational model — based on their bilingual knowledge base and world knowledge. In the specific task of metaphor translation, the core of this stage lies in identifying the source language metaphor and deconstructing the implicit conceptual mapping relationship behind it. The subsequent stage of target text generation is a cognitive decision-making process in which the translator seeks the optimal expression scheme within the target language's cognitive system to reconstruct or reproduce this conceptual relationship. The entire process is permeated by the translator's attention, memory, reasoning, and decision-making, which fully embodies the essence of translation as a process of meaning construction characterized by the active participation of a cognitive subject.

1.4 The Theoretical Convergence between Cognitive Linguistics and Metaphor Translation

A profound theoretical convergence exists between the fundamental theoretical propositions of cognitive linguistics and the study of metaphor translation, providing a powerful theoretical framework for analyzing the cognitive process of Chinese-English metaphor translation. The primary point of convergence between the two lies in their shared focus on "meaning" — meaning is regarded as the result of conceptualization based on bodily experience. This directly elevates metaphor translation from a task of superficial linguistic conversion to a task of alignment at the conceptual level. The second

critical point of convergence is reflected in their mutual dependence on the mechanism of "mapping." The cross-domain mapping mechanism in Conceptual Metaphor Theory is highly isomorphic with the cross-linguistic and cross-cultural mapping characteristics inherent in the translation activity itself.

To a certain extent, the act of translation can be understood as a mapping process that establishes correspondences between the conceptual systems of two languages and cultures. The third point of convergence lies in the emphasis on the translator's subjective cognition. Cognitive linguistics highlights the role of the understanding subject in meaning construction, while translation studies similarly focus on the translator as the subject of both understanding and re-expression. Placing the translator's cognitive processing at the core can effectively reveal the cognitive motivations behind the choice of metaphor translation strategies and explain why the same metaphor may yield different translations in different contexts or when handled by different translators. These points of theoretical convergence collectively establish the feasibility and necessity of systematically studying Chinese-English metaphor translation from the perspective of cognitive linguistics.

2. An 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 cognitive process of Chinese-English metaphor translation originates from the precise identification of the source language metaphor and the in-depth analysis of its intrinsic conceptual structure. Metaphor identification relies not only on formal markers at the linguistic surface but also, and more crucially, on the translator's keen insight into the cultural context and cognitive models of the source language. This identification mechanism involves the sensitive detection of linguistic deviations from conventional usage, as well as an accurate judgment of the degree of conventionalization of metaphors within a specific cultural framework. When confronted with a metaphorical expression, the translator's cognitive system must first determine whether it is a conventional metaphor or a novel metaphor. This judgment directly impacts the cognitive load and the selection of strategies in the subsequent processing^[3].

Following successful identification, the core of the cognitive operation shifts to deconstructing its underlying conceptual structure. This process involves reducing the specific linguistic expression back to the abstract conceptual metaphor system upon which it depends. For example, the linguistic instance "consolidate the foundation of cooperation" can be traced back to the deeper conceptual metaphor "SOCIAL RELATIONS ARE BUILDINGS." The translator needs to systematically analyze the mapping network from the source domain to the target domain within this conceptual metaphor, clarify how the image-schematic structure and its elements of the source domain are projected onto the target domain, and identify any potentially culturally specific parameters. This thorough deconstruction of the metaphorical conceptual architecture lays the necessary cognitive foundation for the subsequent cross-linguistic conversion.

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

Following the analysis of the source language's conceptual structure, the cognitive process proceeds to the critical stage of cross-linguistic conceptual mapping. This stage is not a simple conceptual substitution but rather a complex cognitive operation that seeks correspondences between the different cultural cognitive models underlying the Chinese and English languages. The translator's mind needs to simultaneously activate relevant nodes within the conceptual networks of both the source and target languages, assessing the degree of overlap and difference between the two in terms of conceptual mapping.

When the Chinese term "骨干" (gǔgàn) and the English term "backbone" both refer to a core force, their conceptual mappings highly overlap, thus potentially allowing for direct conversion. However, when conceptual mappings exhibit cultural specificity—for example, Chinese often uses "龙" (lóng, dragon) to metaphorically represent nobility and power, whereas the "dragon" in English culture tends to connote a negative, fierce image—direct mapping would lead to cognitive conflict. At this juncture, the mechanism for cognitive context transformation is activated. The translator needs to detach the source language metaphor from its original cognitive context and re-evaluate and calibrate it within the cognitive context of the target language culture, weighing the gains and losses between retaining the source domain concept and conforming to the cognitive model of the target language. This process

constitutes the core decision-making in the selection of translation strategies.

2.3 Activation and Selection of Target Language Cognitive Schemas

Based on cross-linguistic conceptual mapping, the translator's cognitive system will activate multiple possible target language cognitive schemas in parallel to address the current task. Cognitive schemas are knowledge structures about specific concepts or situations that people form based on past experience. When the source domain concept is projected into the target language system, it automatically or controlledly activates several related schema options in the translator's mind.

For example, when translating the concept of "the passage of time," multiple potential metaphorical schemas in the target language, such as "TIME IS MONEY," "TIME IS A RIVER," and "TIME IS A FLYING BIRD," may be activated simultaneously. Each activated schema carries with it different imagery, emotional connotations, and pragmatic force. The translator's cognitive choice is then constrained by multiple factors, including conventional expressions within the target language culture, the specific requirements of the text type, the functional effect the translation aims to achieve, and the translator's own stylistic preferences. This selection process is essentially one of screening the most suitable schema for the current translation situation from several competing schemas, based on the principles of cognitive economy and the optimization of expressive effect, thereby preparing for the final linguistic realization^[4].

2.4 Integration and Reconstruction of the Target Language Metaphor

The terminal stage of the cognitive process in Chinese-English metaphor translation is the integration and final reconstruction of the target language metaphor. This stage requires the translator to synthesize the cognitive outcomes from all previous stages—including the understanding of the source language's conceptual structure, the assessment of cross-linguistic mapping, and the selected target language cognitive schema—into a coherent and natural linguistic expression capable of evoking the intended cognitive effect in the target language readership. The integration process may manifest in different forms.

When the conceptual structures in Chinese and English are highly corresponding, integration manifests as finding an equivalent conceptual metaphor expression in the target language, thereby achieving the direct transfer of the concept. When the conceptual structures partially correspond or when a cultural gap exists, integration may involve the adaptive adjustment of the source domain image, or the adoption of a substitutive reconstruction using a metaphor in the target language that originates from a different source domain but can fulfill a similar cognitive function. In certain cases, to prioritize the transmission of the core meaning or to avoid cognitive obstacles for the target language readers, it may even be necessary to abandon the image and complete the conceptual reconstruction through free translation or paraphrase. Regardless of the specific strategy adopted, the final translated text is a product of conceptual reconstruction at the level of target language signs, achieved by the translator through a series of internal cognitive operations. Its quality directly reflects the depth and efficiency of the aforementioned cognitive process.

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

3.1 General Cognitive Principles for Chinese-English Metaphor Translation

Based on the analysis of the cognitive process of Chinese-English metaphor translation, general cognitive principles that guide strategy construction can be summarized. The principle of conceptual integration is the primary consideration. It requires the translator to regard translation as a creative activity of establishing connectivity between the Chinese and English conceptual spaces and performing selective projection. Its core objective is to reconstruct the conceptual structure activated by the source language metaphor within the target language, rather than pursuing a word-for-word correspondence in linguistic form^[5].

The principle of cognitive equivalence constitutes another key guideline. It emphasizes that the translation should strive to evoke in the target language readers' minds cognitive effects similar to those experienced by the source language readers, including the depth of understanding of the metaphorical image, emotional resonance, and inferential orientation. This principle transcends superficial functional equivalence, delving into the level of cognitive construction within the readers' minds. Furthermore, the

principle of cognitive economy runs throughout the entire process. It requires the translator to weigh cognitive effort against communicative gain when selecting strategies, prioritizing expressions that can achieve maximum communicative effectiveness with minimal cognitive load, thereby ensuring the acceptability and fluency of the translated text. Together, these principles form an interrelated cognitive framework, providing a theoretical basis for the selection and application of specific translation strategies.

3.2 Image Retention Strategy under Conceptual Correspondence

When the cognitive models of Chinese and English cultures exhibit a high degree of overlap regarding a specific conceptual metaphor, adopting an image retention strategy serves as an ideal approach to achieve cognitive equivalence. This strategy is applicable when the source domain image can activate identical or highly similar conceptual mappings and emotional associations within the target language culture. Its implementation involves directly adopting the corresponding source domain image in the target language or making minimal grammatical adjustments within the constraints of the sentence structure.

For example, translating "打破僵局" (dǎpò jiāngjú) as "break the ice," or "浪费时间" (làngfèi shíjiān) as "waste time," finds its cognitive motivation in the universality of conceptual metaphors such as "OBSTACLES ARE ICE" and "RESOURCES ARE VALUABLE COMMODITIES" across both cultures. The advantage of this strategy lies in its ability to preserve, to the greatest extent, the vividness, cultural characteristics, and conceptual structural integrity of the source language metaphor, thereby allowing target language readers to obtain a cognitive experience nearly equivalent to the original. The key to executing this strategy lies in the translator's precise grasp of the cognitive models in both bilingual cultures, confirming the authenticity of the conceptual correspondence and avoiding cognitive deviations that may arise from superficial similarities in imagery while neglecting deeper differences in cultural connotation.

3.3 Image Reconstruction Strategy through Cognitive Model Adjustment

In cases where significant differences exist between Chinese and English cultural cognitive models, rendering the direct retention of the image unable to achieve cognitive equivalence, the image reconstruction strategy becomes a necessary means of cognitive adjustment. This strategy encompasses a range of dynamic solutions. One of these is image substitution, which is employed when the source domain image in the target language evokes awkward, incomprehensible, or negative associations. In such instances, a different source domain image from the target language culture is activated—one that can fulfill a similar cognitive function and carry comparable emotional value.

For example, the Chinese term "红眼病" (hóngyǎnbìng, literally "red-eye disease"), used to describe jealousy, can be reconstructed in English as "green-eyed." Although the imagery differs, both effectively map onto the target domain of "jealousy." A second approach is image explication, which involves preserving the core image while using moderate linguistic means to explicate or compensate for the metaphorical meaning, thereby assisting target language readers in establishing the correct conceptual connection. Third, when a metaphor carries such a heavy cultural load that its image and conceptual structure find no approximate correspondence in the target language, a strategy of image abandonment may be adopted. In this case, the core conceptual meaning is directly elucidated to prioritize the accurate and fluent transmission of the basic information. The essence of the image reconstruction strategy is a creative compromise made to maintain cognitive effectiveness when equivalent conceptual mapping cannot be achieved^[6].

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

The effective application of the aforementioned translation strategies fundamentally depends on the depth and breadth of the translator's own cognitive competence. The translator's cognitive competence is a multifaceted construct, and its construction and enhancement require systematic pathways. The primary task is to deepen the knowledge of the conceptual systems of both languages and their cultures. This demands that the translator not only master the languages themselves but also delve into the underlying cultural cognitive models, folk psychology, and philosophical concepts, thereby forming a systematic cross-cultural conceptual metaphor knowledge base.

Secondly, it is essential to cultivate keen abilities in metaphor identification and analysis. By

extensively studying classic translations and conducting comparative textual analyses, translators must train themselves to rapidly deconstruct the conceptual structure of source language metaphors and anticipate the cognitive responses they might evoke in the target language. Thirdly, it is necessary to develop dynamic cognitive decision-making abilities. This requires sustained translation practice, through which translators repeatedly weigh the cognitive consequences of different strategies in authentic contexts, thereby internalizing a cognitive intuition that enables the flexible selection of the most appropriate strategy based on the specific context, textual function, and target readership. Ultimately, the translator's cognitive competence is reflected in their ability to act as an active negotiator of meaning, successfully completing effective cross-cultural conceptual reconstruction under the premise of fully respecting the conceptual connotations of the source language and the cognitive norms of the target language.

Conclusion

This paper systematically elaborates on the cognitive process and strategic system of Chinese-English metaphor translation within the theoretical framework of cognitive linguistics. The research indicates that metaphor translation is essentially an activity of meaning reconstruction, with conceptual mapping at its core and guided by cognitive principles. The translator must undergo a series of cognitive stages, including source language metaphor identification, conceptual analysis, cross-linguistic mapping, schema selection, and target language integration, with decisions being comprehensively constrained by the principles of conceptual integration, cognitive equivalence, and cognitive economy. Based on the analysis of the cognitive process, this paper proposes strategies such as image retention and image reconstruction, and highlights the fundamental role of the translator's cognitive competence. This study not only provides a describable and explainable cognitive model for Chinese-English metaphor translation but also expands the research pathways for cognitive translatology. Further empirical research could be conducted in the future, by employing experimental methods from cognitive science to trace the translator's real-time cognitive processing. Investigations could also be extended to explore the cognitive translation mechanisms in multimodal metaphors and text types beyond literary works, thereby deepening the understanding of translation as a cognitive activity.

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