

Difficulties and Countermeasures in Metaphor Translation-Taking English-Chinese Metaphor Translation as an Example

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Abstract

In the perspective of translation studies, metaphor translation has always been an important issue that combines theoretical depth and practical complexity. This study specifically takes English-Chinese metaphor translation as the starting point and systematically analyzes the difficulties it faces. Given that English and Chinese belong to different language families, there are significant differences between the two in terms of cultural origins, language forms, and thinking logics. This makes English-Chinese metaphor translation encounter numerous difficulties in practice, which are specifically manifested in aspects such as the appropriate transformation of cultural images, the accurate understanding of metaphorical semantics, and the propriety of translation expressions. In response to the above difficulties, through in-depth theoretical sorting and case analysis, this paper puts forward targeted and feasible countermeasures, with the expectation of optimizing the effect of English-Chinese metaphor translation to a certain extent, enhancing the effectiveness of the translation in conveying the metaphorical connotations of the original text, and further making modest contributions to the theoretical expansion and practical improvement in the field of metaphor translation. Meanwhile, it is also hoped that this paper can provide valuable references for the vast number of professionals engaged in English-Chinese translation work.

Keywords

Metaphor translation; English-Chinese metaphors; Translation difficulties; Translation strategie

1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of globalization, the cross-cultural dissemination and translation of literary works are increasingly valued. Metaphorical elements in literary works, due to their cultural specificity and expressive depth, have become critical in the translation process. Metaphor is not merely a linguistic embellishment but also a carrier of cultural transmission and modes of thinking. The understanding and translation processing of metaphors across different cultural backgrounds are of

significant importance for promoting cultural exchange, enhancing mutual understanding, and respect between cultures[1].

Metaphor involves using familiar concepts to express abstract ones. Lakoff and Johnson, in their 1980 book *Metaphors We Live By*, proposed the Conceptual Metaphor Theory, asserting that metaphor is "the foundation for the generation and development of language and socio-culture, a primary and fundamental way of human existence." This sparked a "metaphor revolution." Metaphor is no longer confined to a lexical issue within traditional rhetoric but is recognized as an essential means of human thought and cognition [2]. As a linguistic art form, metaphor possesses profound cultural underpinnings. Metaphors across different languages often reflect diverse social concepts, cultural backgrounds, and living habits. Therefore, metaphor translation is not merely a linguistic conversion but also a recreation of culture and emotion.

Due to significant differences between English and Chinese in linguistic structure, modes of thinking, and cultural backgrounds, metaphor translation faces numerous challenges. This paper aims to explore the difficulties and corresponding solutions in metaphor translation by analyzing English metaphorical cases and examining the strategies that should be adopted when translating them.

2. Analysis of Difficulties in Metaphor Translation

Metaphor translation is not just a problem of linguistic conversion; it involves challenges across multiple levels, including linguistic structure, contextual understanding, cultural differences, and the polysemy of metaphor. The difficulties in metaphor translation will be analyzed from these perspectives below.

2.1 Differences in Linguistic Structure

In English, the use of metaphorical rhetoric tends towards directness and explicitness. Specifically, within English culture, metaphorical rhetoric often relies on specific vocabulary, phrases, and sentence structures to present metaphorical meaning straightforwardly. This approach typically demands grammatical clarity and logical rigor [3].

In contrast, metaphorical expression in Chinese leans towards indirectness and implicitness. Within Chinese culture, metaphorical rhetoric often favors conveying meaning by creating profound artistic conception and rich emotion, without over-emphasizing grammatical rigor [3].

Furthermore, significant structural differences exist between English and Chinese, making direct equivalence difficult for some metaphors during translation. For example, certain English metaphorical structures rely on the simple "X is Y" pattern, while Chinese metaphors often require other rhetorical devices such as verbal phrases, idioms, or alternative expressions. English metaphorical structures frequently use the verb "is" to connect two nouns, whereas Chinese metaphors tend to

use verb phrases, idioms, or other rhetorical forms.

Case Analysis 1: The world is a stage.

When translating this English proverb into Chinese, conveying only its literal meaning allows reader comprehension but fails to fully convey the symbolic significance of the original. The proverb originates from Shakespeare's play *As You Like It*, and its intended meaning is "We should view our own and others' life journeys with a broader, more dramatic perspective, understanding role changes, the vicissitudes of life, and the transience and performative nature of life itself." Therefore, it can be translated as "Life is like a play". This translation not only conforms to Chinese idiomatic expression but also conveys the idea that "life is full of change," aligning with the meaning intended by the English original.

Case Analysis 2: He is the light of my life.

A literal translation of this English sentence would feel rather stiff in Chinese. The original meaning is "He brings me warmth and makes my life more wonderful." Therefore, it can be translated as "He is the sunshine of my life". This translation better aligns with Chinese rhetorical habits and more effectively conveys the sense of warmth, dependence, and affection.

In summary, English and Chinese expressions of metaphor often face a conflict between "literal meaning" and "contextual intent." Therefore, translation requires transcending the literal level to achieve cultural and emotional adaptation.

2.2 Cultural Differences

Metaphor is a crucial manifestation of a nation's cultural language and the linguistic element most closely tied to culture. It genuinely reflects the similarities and differences in national thought patterns [4].

Within the pluralistic landscape of world cultures, English and Chinese cultures have developed along distinct trajectories, rooted in different historical backgrounds and geographical environments. This has shaped their unique cultural traditions and distinctive characteristics. English culture has been profoundly influenced by Greco-Roman culture, Christian culture, and modern industrial civilization: Greco-Roman culture laid its foundation for rational thinking, Christian culture infused it with specific values and spiritual connotations, and modern industrial civilization further reinforced its pursuit of science and rationality. Nourished by such deep and diverse cultural influences, English culture places great emphasis on rational thinking, logical analysis, and scientific empiricism. Against this cultural backdrop, English metaphors in expression often focus on highlighting the essential characteristics and internal relationships of objective things, striving for precision and clarity, and aiming to convey information in a rigorous and unambiguous manner.

Conversely, Chinese culture has been deeply influenced by Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhist thought. Confucianism advocates active engagement in society, em-

phasizes the connection between the individual and society, and underscores responsibilities within social networks. Taoism upholds the principle of conforming to nature and pursuing harmony between humanity and the natural world. Buddhist thought focuses on guiding individuals to comprehend the phenomena of the world from within, achieving spiritual transcendence. Under the combined influence of these philosophies, Chinese culture highly emphasizes the harmonious unity of humanity and nature, as well as the interdependence between the individual and society. Based on these cultural traits, Chinese metaphors tend to focus more on symbolic relationships, associative meanings, and emotional experiences between things, conveying rich connotations through implicit and evocative means, showcasing the unique expressive charm of Chinese culture.

Case Analysis 3: Time is money.

A literal translation of this proverb achieves smoothness at the lexical level. However, the metaphor in this English sentence reflects the cultural emphasis in Western commercial culture on the relationship between time and money. Such a direct metaphorical form often fails to elicit equivalent cultural resonance within a Chinese context. Considering cultural dissemination and the enhancement of translation quality, to convey the metaphorical meaning in the source text more accurately and effectively, a translation strategy more aligned with Chinese cultural habits can be adopted: translating it as "Time is life". This expression aligns well with the Chinese cultural attitude of valuing time. Compared to a literal translation of the original metaphor, "Time is life" carries a stronger philosophical connotation, is more readily accepted and understood by Chinese readers, and thus facilitates the effective transmission of metaphorical meaning in cross-cultural communication.

Case Analysis 4: A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.

For this proverb, a literal translation would not conform to Chinese idiomatic expression. The more common corresponding expression in the Chinese context is "One in the hand is better than two in the forest". Adopting this translation has several advantages: firstly, it accurately conveys the metaphorical meaning contained in the original, ensuring the core meaning is preserved during cross-linguistic transfer; secondly, it conforms to Chinese idiomatic usage, adhering to the norms and habits of Chinese expression, making the translation linguistically more natural and fluent. Crucially, this idiomatically appropriate translation helps target language (Chinese) readers better grasp the profound wisdom embedded in the proverb, achieving effective transmission of information and cultural connotation in cross-cultural exchange.

Cultural difference constitutes a major difficulty in metaphor translation. Translators need to consider similar concepts and expressions within the target culture to ensure the translated text retains the original connotation while resonating with the target audience.

2.3 Polysemy and Ambiguity of Metaphor

Metaphors often carry multiple meanings, leading to different interpretations in different contexts. During translation, the translator must fully consider the context to avoid understanding deviations caused by literal translation. The polysemy of metaphor requires the translator not only to understand the metaphor in the source text but also to determine the most appropriate translation based on the specific context [5].

Case Analysis 5: He has a heart of stone.

The literal meaning of this English metaphor is rather stiff, and a direct translation into Chinese might make it difficult for readers to immediately grasp its figurative meaning. To better convey the original emotion, it can be translated as "His heart is like iron/stone" or "He is cold-hearted and unfeeling". These translations accurately convey the cold and unfeeling emotion implied in the English original while conforming to Chinese idiomatic expression.

Case Analysis 6: The river of life flows swiftly.

The literal meaning of this sentence is "The river of life flows swiftly", but it can have multiple interpretations. It could express the passage of time or symbolize the transience of life. When translating, the translator needs to choose the most suitable rendering based on the context. For example, it could be translated as "Life is like flowing water", which preserves the metaphorical imagery while conveying the sense of life's brevity and swift passage.

In conclusion, the polysemy of metaphor makes its translation more complex. Metaphors often possess rich and multifaceted meanings, rather than being straightforward and fixed. This means translators cannot simply resort to conventional literal translation methods. Instead, they must adopt a meticulous and rigorous approach, delving deeply into the metaphor. A purely literal translation may only scratch the surface, failing to accurately capture the deeper, intended meaning behind the metaphor. Consequently, the translation can easily become disconnected from the source text in terms of semantics, emotional expression, and cultural connotations. Therefore, translators must skillfully utilize context as a powerful tool to determine the specific meaning of a metaphor. Context encompasses the logical connections within the text's surrounding sentences and paragraphs, as well as external factors such as cultural background and social environment. By comprehensively considering and analyzing these elements, the translator can accurately grasp the precise meaning the metaphor carries in a specific situation. Only then can they select an appropriate expression in the target language for translation, ensuring the target text faithfully reflects the rich connotations of the source metaphor while conforming to the target language's expressive habits. This facilitates the effective transmission and accurate interpretation of metaphor in cross-cultural communication.

3. Strategies for Metaphor Translation

Given the inherent difficulties in metaphor translation, translators need to employ diverse strategies to address them effectively. Specifically, the formulation and implementation of these strategies require comprehensive consideration of several key factors: the adaptability of linguistic structure, the constraining influence of context on metaphorical meaning, and, crucially, a deep understanding of the cultural differences between the source and target languages. Only then can metaphor translation achieve the desired effects in terms of accuracy and naturalness, enabling precise transmission of metaphorical meaning and fluent expression in cross-cultural communication.

3.1 Context-Oriented Translation Approach

From the perspective of translation studies, metaphor translation, as a key research area, is closely and indispensably dependent on the accurate grasp of context. As a core element influencing linguistic expression and comprehension, context plays a fundamental and decisive role in metaphor translation practice. High-quality metaphor translation is unattainable without precise understanding of context. The context-oriented translation approach, as a scientifically sound and feasible method in the field of metaphor translation, adheres to specific theoretical logic and operational principles. Specifically, this method emphasizes comprehensive, meticulous, and in-depth analysis of the context. It aims to deeply explore and accurately define the specific meaning conveyed by the metaphor by examining the overall structure of the text and the internal relationships between sentences [6]. This process requires the translator, with a rigorous academic attitude, to systematically map out the logical progression within the text, such as causal links, parallel comparisons, and progressive developments. Simultaneously, the translator should carefully consider the semantic interconnections, complementarities, and limitations between different sentences, thereby laying a solid foundation for accurately grasping the connotations of the metaphor.

By emphasizing context and selecting translation strategies accordingly, the context-oriented approach ensures that translations align with the expressive habits of the target language and fit naturally and fluently into its cultural background. This facilitates high-quality, precise, and culturally appropriate conversion of metaphors from the source to the target language, demonstrating its significant value and positive impact in metaphor translation practice.

Case Analysis 7: His words were a knife to my heart.

A literal translation of this sentence can convey the literal meaning of the English original but sounds unnatural in Chinese. Considering the context, translating it as "His words cut my heart like a knife / pierced my heart like a knife" is more aligned with Chinese emotional expression. It conveys the meaning of pain while conforming to Chinese linguistic habits.

3.2 Cultural Adaptation Strategy

Against the backdrop of increasingly frequent cross-cultural exchange, the field of translation has shown growing interest in metaphor translation. Significant differences in metaphors across cultures pose numerous challenges, making the cultural adaptation strategy widely applicable in metaphor translation. The theory of cultural adaptation was proposed by scholars like Andreas Ulf. This theory emphasizes the need to adapt and adjust to the differences between source and target cultures during translation. Cultural adaptation theory posits that translation is not merely a linguistic conversion but also a cultural interface [7]. For metaphor translation, the application of cultural adaptation strategies is crucial. It ensures accurate and smooth translation of metaphors in cross-cultural communication.

Case Analysis 8: He's a fish out of water.

The intended meaning of this English sentence is "feeling confused and uncomfortable in an unfamiliar environment." A literal translation into Chinese would not accurately convey this meaning. Applying the cultural adaptation strategy, it could be translated as "He is like a runaway wild horse". This translation not only conforms to Chinese cultural and linguistic expression habits but also effectively conveys the original meaning of "being ill at ease in a new environment."

4. Conclusion

In the context of advancing globalization, cross-linguistic and cross-cultural communication is becoming increasingly frequent. Metaphor translation, as a highly complex task within this landscape, is gaining prominence. Especially in the specific practice of English-Chinese metaphor translation, the translator bears significant responsibility and faces numerous considerations.

The translator must never confine themselves to the faithful transmission of the source text's literal meaning alone. Instead, they need to comprehensively consider multiple dimensions: linguistic structure, cultural background, context, and emotional tone. Linguistically, the unique grammatical rules, lexical collocations, and syntactic features of English and Chinese directly impact metaphor translation. Culturally, the different historical traditions, values, and customs of East and West mean that the same metaphor often carries distinct connotations and implications within the two cultural contexts. Context is equally critical, as the meaning of a metaphor changes depending on the surrounding text and specific usage scenario; only by accurately grasping the context can the translator precisely determine the metaphor's true intended meaning. Furthermore, emotional tone cannot be ignored; if the affective quality carried by the metaphor is lost or distorted in translation, it will greatly diminish the quality and expressive effect of the target text.

Through in-depth analysis of diverse metaphor translation cases and systematic organization of various translation strategies, this paper has focused on the field of metaphor translation. It has detailed common difficulties, such as comprehension ambiguities caused by cultural differences, meaning deviations resulting from inac-

curate contextual grasp, and awkward expressions due to differing linguistic structures. Addressing these difficulties, the paper has proposed practical strategies such as context-oriented and cultural adaptation approaches. These strategies aim to assist translators from different angles in skillfully tackling the various challenges encountered during the translation process, enabling them to perform English-Chinese metaphor translation more accurately, naturally, and effectively, thereby achieving high-quality transmission of metaphorical information in cross-cultural exchange.

As the process of globalization deepens, the importance of metaphor translation in cross-cultural communication continues to grow. Looking ahead, future translation research could delve deeper into the intricate interplay between context, culture, and emotion in metaphor translation. Such in-depth research holds the promise of providing more solid and rich theoretical support for cross-cultural communication. Simultaneously, it can offer translators more targeted, practical guidance at the operational level. This will continuously elevate the overall standard of metaphor translation in cross-cultural communication, propelling exchange and integration between different languages and cultures to new heights.

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