

A Case Study on the Translation of Metaphors in *Red Sorghum*

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Abstract

Mo Yan's novel *Red Sorghum* is well known for its creative and initiative usage of metaphors. When it is translated into English, the translator has to evaluate the cultural differences between Chinese and English. The current study takes the translation of metaphors in *Red Sorghum* as an example to illustrate how cultural elements influence translation. The representative examples selected hereby were analyzed on the basis of the Relevance Theory and at the same time different cultural elements were taken into account to provide solid evidence. This essay proposes that translations of metaphors in *Red Sorghum* can be divided into four types: from metaphor to simile, from metaphor to metaphor with the tenor and vehicle unchanged, replacing the vehicle, deleting the vehicle. In order to facilitate target readers's inferential process and help them establish the optimal relevance, the translator has to deliberate the disparities of the cultures in the source language and target language and then demonstrate the appropriate ostensive stimuli. No matter what measures the translator takes, it can not be separated from the corresponding cultural elements.

Keywords: metaphor, translation, *Red Sorghum*, Howard Goldblatt

1. Introduction

1.1 Definition of Metaphor and its Functions

A metaphor is a figure of speech that refers to one thing by mentioning another thing with the purpose to achieve rhetorical effects. Theoretically speaking, receptors of metaphors can feel, experience, imagine, comprehend and discuss the tenor with reference to the implied meaning of the vehicle. The usage of metaphors can be regarded as a linguistic behavior, as well as psychological and cognitive behaviours. Unlike a simile which compares two similar things, a metaphor compares two things that appear to be very different. It is usually asserted that the two objects compared are similar only on the point of the current comparison. In doing so, metaphor can simplify the things that are difficult to understand, and familiarize those that are unfamiliar to receptors.

From the linguistic viewpoint, metaphor functions as a dynamic mechanism promoting the development and changes of a language, broadening the meanings of a word in particular. From the cognitive viewpoint, it reflects how human beings view the world. From the rhetoric viewpoint, it is the functional tool to express complex, abstract ideas.

The current case study focuses on the translation of metaphors in *Red Sorghum* from the rhetoric and cognitive viewpoints, for metaphor, as a promoter of language development, influences only the internal system of a language, regardless of those cultural elements outside of the linguistic system.

Metaphors play an important role to help human beings to view the world. This role implies that the usage of metaphors involves various cultural elements. On the one hand, metaphor is universal in almost all languages. Human beings, no matter what nationality they belong to, take metaphors as a tool to feel and understand the world. On the other hand, people of different nationalities have divergent understandings of the world due to their varied cultural backgrounds. Accordingly, diversified cultural elements contribute to the various usages of metaphors by people with different cultural backgrounds.

Mo Yan's novel *Red Sorghum* is well known for its creative and initiative usage of metaphors. When it is translated into English, the translator, American sinologist Howard Goldblatt, has to evaluate the cultural disparities between Chinese and English. Therefore, it is a tough work to translate into English the metaphors abundant in Chinese cultural elements. Goldblatt is forced to select appropriate translation methods to

accomplish this tough work.

1.2 Significance of the Current Study

On October 11, 2012, Mo Yan won the Nobel Prize in literature for his work that “with hallucinatory realism merges folk tales, history and the contemporary”. Mo Yan becomes the first Chinese writer who won this world-class honor. Goran Malmqvist, the only judge in the Nobel Committee who understands Chinese, suggests that capable and responsible translators are in urgent need to help Chinese literary works comprehended and appreciated in the world by those who do not speak Chinese.

Mo Yan's winning the Nobel Prize can be partially attributed to the translator—Howard Goldblatt, who has translated Mo Yan's representative novel *Red Sorghum* into English. Nowadays, not many Chinese literary works have been introduced into western market. If some, most of them are Chinese literary classics, for example, *The Journey to the West*, *The Dream of Red Mansions*. Modern and contemporary Chinese literary works are scarcely known to westerners. With the deepening of globalization, cultural communication becomes increasingly important. Chinese people would like to introduce Chinese literary works to the western world, hoping that they can facilitate westerners' understanding of Chinese culture. Nowadays, as China has become an important economic community, westerners would also like to read Chinese literary works to enhance their communications with Chinese people. The success of the English version of *Red Sorghum* may bring practical experiences for the communication between Chinese people and the western world. Therefore, the current case study takes the translation of metaphors in *Red Sorghum* as an example to illustrate how cultural elements can influence translation.

1.3 Literature Review

Some scholars have studied the translation methods and the effects of figures of speech in *Red Sorghum*, with metaphor being one of them (Zhao, 2014). Based on the Relevance Theory, Li (2013) has conducted a comparatively exhaustive study on the translation of metaphors in *Red Sorghum*. He categorizes the translation methods of metaphors into two major types: from metaphor to metaphor, from metaphor to non-metaphor. If the translator translates the Chinese metaphor into English metaphor, he can maintain the tenor and vehicle, for he predicts that target readers may not feel difficult to understand the similarities between the tenor and vehicle. If cultural elements may intervene target readers' understanding, the translator is forced either to maintain the tenor while making the ground explicit, or to replace the original vehicle with a new one. If the cultural elements involved are likely to hinder target readers' understanding, the translator may abandon the tenor as well as the vehicle, and he either paraphrases the metaphor or even deletes it. Li attempts to explore whether the metaphors in the English version have reached optimal relevance or not. He holds that when the transliteration of metaphors in *Red Sorghum* does not achieve optimal relevance, subtle complementary information will be provided by the translator to help target readers to understand the similarities between the tenor and vehicle and subsequently establish the optimal relevance (Li, 2013, pp. 36-40).

The translation of metaphor is not only a linguistic behavior, but also psychological and cognitive behaviors, which involve various cultural elements. Li studies the translation of metaphor from linguistic perspective, ignoring the inherent and intrinsic psychological and cognitive characters of metaphors, which have a close relationship with cultural elements. The current study conducts a tentative research on the translation effects of metaphors in *Red Sorghum* by taking account into both the Relevance Theory and cultural elements.

1.4 Theoretical Bases

The Relevance Theory put forward by Sperber and Wilson holds that communicative act is made up of two elements: ostension and inference. On the part of the initiator, communication can be considered as an ostensive process, in which the initiator makes manifest to the receptor his intention in the ways of ostensive stimuli and the initiator presumes that his stimuli are relevant to the receptor. On the part of the receptor, communication can be considered as an inferential process, in which the receptor makes inference of the initiator's intention by combining the ostensive stimuli and the context. From both initiator's and receptor's viewpoints, communication is a psychological behavior, as well as a cognitive one, which inevitably involve cultural elements.

Translation is a type of cross-cultural communication, which includes two ostensive-inferential processes. In the first ostensive-inferential process, the initiator is the original author, the receptor being the translator. It is the translator's duty to establish the optimal relevance with reference to the ostensions manifested by the original author, that is, to have a deep comprehension of the source text. In the second ostensive-inferential process, the initiator changes to the translator, the receptor being target readers. The translator, who is expected to predict the expectations of target readers, shoulders the obligation to make ostentions to target readers. He seeks to achieve

the optimal relevance between his own understanding of the source text and his translation.

Translator is an expert of both the source language and target language, as well as an expert of both the source culture and the target culture. Accordingly, the present study combines the Relevance Theory and cultural elements together to analyze the translation effects of metaphors in *Red Sorghum*.

2. Method

2.1 Identifying the Source Text and the Target Text

This study selected all the metaphors in the source text and their corresponding translations in the target text at first. Since Howard Goldblatt has confirmed that it is the Taiwanese Version of *Red Sorghum* that he selects to translate into English, all the metaphors in this study were selected from the Taiwanese Version published by Hongfan Book Store in 2007. Because the Chinese mainland version and the Taiwanese version differ slightly, to ensure the accuracy of data, the Taiwanese version was preferred as the source text. The target text was the one published by Arrow Books in 2003.

2.2 Categorizing the Data

The translations of metaphors were divided into four types: from metaphor to simile, from metaphor to metaphor with the tenor and vehicle unchanged, replacing the vehicle, and deleting the vehicle. Limited by the length of this essay, each type was analyzed and illustrated with an example.

2.3 Conducting Cases Analysis

Limited by the length, this essay selects only a few representative examples to conduct a case study, which were done under the guidance of the Relevance Theory and took into consideration the various cultural elements hidden deeply and implicitly in both Chinese language and English language.

3. Cases Analysis

Mo Yan, the original author, prefers to express his emotions with metaphors, a unique and attracting style of his novels. So, there are a great number of metaphors, making it impossible to analyze all the cases. Only one representative example was selected from each translation type of metaphors to conduct a case study, which focuses on in what situations translator determines to alter the ostensive stimuli to help target readers establish the optimal relevance.

3.1 From Metaphor to Simile

Example 1:

Chinese: 无边无际的高粱红成洸洋的血海。

English: Vast stretches of red sorghum shimmered like a sea of blood.

In example 1, Goldblatt translates the metaphor into a simile. Both the tenor and vehicle remain in the target text. The only difference lies in that the target text adds a marker of simile.

There are two metaphors in the source text, one represented by “血 (blood)”, the other represented by “海 (sea)”. In both Chinese and western cultures, “blood” refers to the fluid consisting of plasma, blood cells, and platelets that is circulated by the heart through the vertebrate vascular system, carrying oxygen and nutrients to and waste materials away from all body tissues. Since blood is red, in Chinese culture it is often employed to describe the red color. In example 1, the tenor is sorghum, which becomes red after ripening. The author compares sorghum to blood, making the description terse and succinct. Because sorghum is widely planted in China, Chinese readers are familiar with the cultural information and feel easy to understand the similarities between sorghum and blood. However, sorghum is sparsely planted in English-speaking countries. Most target readers have never seen sorghum and thus have no knowledge about what color the sorghum is after ripening. In order to help target readers establish the optimal relevance and find out the similarities between sorghum and blood, Goldblatt takes two measures: one is to insert an ostensive stimulus, that is a piece of cultural information—the color word “red”, to facilitate the inferential process; the other is to add a marker of simile, which shows directly to target readers that tenor and vehicle share some similarities. In metaphor, the similarities between tenor and vehicle are implicit, forcing receptors to find out the similarities with reference to cultural information. While in simile, the similarities between tenor and vehicle are explicit. After the initiator has established their similarities, what the receptor needs to do is to accept them. Thus, it can be said that in simile, receptor’s inferential process is slightly easier. On the part of receptor, the inserted additional cultural information—red, and the marker of simile, facilitate target readers’ inferential process and help them comprehend the similarities between tenor and vehicle.

On the contrary, both Chinese people and westerners tend to use “sea” to describe something that is limitless and boundless. Even if the translator does not make any ostensive stimulus, target readers can easily make correct inference and establish the optimal relevance.

3.2 From Metaphor to Metaphor with Tenor and Vehicle Unchanged

Example 2:

Chinese: 众人在汽车周围狼吞虎咽，没有筷子，一律用手抓。

English: The laborers stood around the truck, wolfing down their food, bare hands serving as chopsticks.

In example 2, “狼吞虎咽 (literally translated into “to wolf down food and tiger down food”)” describes vividly a person urgently devouring his food very fast, just like a wolf and a tiger devouring their prey. In this metaphor, human beings are the tenor, wolf and tiger being the vehicle. The English version keeps the metaphor, but makes a few slight changes. On the one hand, in Chinese, “狼吞 (literally translated into “to wolf down food”)” and “虎咽 (literally translated into “to tiger down food”)” refer to the same action. Because Chinese language prefers to idiomatic expressions with four Chinese characters, they are parallelly put together. But repetition should be avoided in English. Therefore, the translator only translates “狼吞”, leaving “虎咽” untranslated. Both the tenor and vehicle remain in the target language. On the other hand, Chinese language is paratactic, whereas English is hypertactic. Grammatical rules in English control the sentence in a stricter way than in Chinese. Thus, the translator inserts the object—food, after the transitive verbal phrase “wolf down”, and changes the part of speech of the word “wolf” from a noun into a verb. The main action described in this sentence has been indicated by the predicate “stand”, leaving the verb “wolf” in a gerund form.

The similarities between the tenor and vehicle are the same in both the Chinese culture and western culture, which makes the ostensive-inferential process easily accepted by both Chinese and western readers. Even if the translator provides no additional cultural information, target readers can still understand this metaphor and establish the optimal relevance without any difficulties. But the translator can not transliterate the metaphor word by word. He has to make some slight changes in order to follow the grammatical rules of the target language.

3.3 Replacing the Vehicle

Example 3:

Chinese: 小黑马直竖着鬃毛，挖撑着尾巴，驮着曹县长，一溜烟跑了。

English: The colt, its mane standing straight up, its tail bristling, ran like the wind with the county magistrate in the saddle.

In the above example, the translator changes the vehicle. In the source text, “一溜烟 (like a smoke)” is a metaphor describing that the colt runs very fast. In Chinese culture, “like a smoke” can be used to describe that human beings or other living creatures run at a high speed, just like a wisp of smoke disappearing in a long distance. This metaphor has been frequently employed by other authors in Chinese community. Chinese readers can easily achieve the optimal relevance through the ostensive-inferential process. But the translator changes the vehicle—smoke, into wind. “Run like the wind” is an idiom in English. Barbara Dickson, a famous Scotland singer, has sung a song entitled “Run like the Wind”. With the aim to help target readers to establish the optimal relevance between the tenor and vehicle, Goldblatt replaces “smoke” with “wind”. It is the different cultural backgrounds that force him to make such an adjustment. In this way, receptors can make the rational and correct inference with the help of the new stimuli created by the translator and establish the optimal relevance.

3.4 Deleting the Vehicle

Example 4:

Chinese: 我爷爷说：“老爹，你这是给我吃宽心顺气丸。”

English: “Old uncle, you’re just saying that to make me feel good.”

In Chinese culture, “丸 (pellet)” usually refers to one type of Chinese medicine, which looks like a tiny ball. In the above example, the tenor is words told to make people relax, with one type of Chinese medicine being the vehicle. “宽心丸 (literally translated into heart-broadening pellet)” and “顺气丸 (literally translated into anger-dying-down pellet)” actually mean words told to make people relax. In fact, there are not such medicines in the real world. The two Chinese words are used metaphorically here. With the cultural background information of traditional Chinese medicine, Chinese readers can appreciate the metaphor. They can infer that the similarity between the pellet and the words told to make people relax is that they both provide a kind of relief for human beings. That is to say, it is easy for Chinese readers to establish the optimal relevance on the basis of

the ostensive stimuli provided by the cultural information closely related to Chinese traditional medicine.

If the translator keeps the vehicle in the English version, western readers may come across certain difficulties to find out the similarities between the tenor and vehicle, resulting in their failing to establish the optimal relevance with reference to the ostensive stimuli. Or the translator is forced to insert a footnote providing the corresponding cultural information, which may destroy the fluency and readability of the target text. In the light of western readers' reading habits, the translator abandons the vehicle and paraphrases the meaning of the metaphor in the source text. In doing so, the translator eases the burden of target readers' making inference with reference to the ostensive stimuli.

4. Discussion

The translation of metaphors is a tough responsibility for the translator, because the process involves a lot of cultural elements. In order to facilitate target readers's inferential process, the translator has to deliberate the cultural disparities in the source language and target language and then demonstrate the appropriate ostensive stimuli.

In order to help target readers establish the optimal relevance, the translator takes different measures. When he predicts that target readers may be familiar with the relevant cultural information, he keeps both the tenor and vehicle intact. Sometimes in order to transmit the cultural information of the source language, he even has to disobey some grammatical rules in the target language. When he predicts that target readers might lack knowledge about the relevant cultural information, he may insert the corresponding background knowledge, or replace the vehicle or even delete it. These measures can ease target readers' burden of making inference and help them establish the optimal relevance with reference to the ostensive stimuli suggested by the cultural information they have already known.

All in all, the translator is expected to predict the cultural disparities at first. Then, he can take the appropriate measures to make ostensive stimuli. Finally, receptors triggered by the ostensive stimuli can conduct perfect inference. Each of the above processes can not be separated from the corresponding cultural elements.

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