

# Translation of Metaphors in Business English from a Cognitive Perspective

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## Abstract

Metaphor has long been treated as a figure of speech whose function is to embellish the style of the text in translation studies. However, a cognitive approach has recently been applied to metaphor translation studies which views metaphors as basic resources for thought processes in human society. As a powerful cognitive tool of man to understand abstract concepts by way of more concrete ones, metaphor is ubiquitous in business English.

This paper reviews main arguments of the cognitive approach to metaphor studies as well as introduces the major forms of metaphors in business English. Following the analysis of metaphor identification and factors that influence the comprehension of metaphorical meaning, the paper discusses methods of translating metaphors in business English from the perspective of cognitive linguistics.

**Keywords:** metaphor translation, conceptual metaphor, business English, English-Chinese translation

## 1. Introduction

Metaphor is ubiquitous in everyday language. The well-known British rhetorician I. A. Richards (1965) claims that there will appear a metaphor in every three sentences in our daily speech. Newmark (2001) even believes that three-fourth of the English language is metaphorical. However, the translatability of metaphors and the potential procedures of metaphor translation have been challenges for translation studies for a long time. Metaphor has long been treated as a figure of speech in traditional translation studies. After a rhetorical analysis of the metaphor in the source language, a translator either tries to find an equivalent metaphor in the target language or represent the metaphorical meaning in the target language. In the eyes of Liu (1999), influenced by the methodology of traditional literary criticism and traditional aesthetics of literature and art in particular, traditional translation theories lack a scientific and systematic method to demonstrate the translation and translation process, which results in a speculative tendency in metaphor translation studies.

In their book *Metaphors we live by*, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) put forward the concept of conceptual metaphor and point out that metaphors are not merely stylistic, but that they are cognitively important as well. They argue that metaphors are pervasive in everyday life, not only in language but also in thought and action. In essence, metaphors are a conceptual construction, which are central to the development of thought. The cognitive approach to metaphor contributes new insights to translation studies. Translatability is no longer a question of the individual metaphorical expression, as identified in the source text, but it becomes linked to the level of conceptual systems in source and target culture (Schäffner, 2004).

As a means of cognition, metaphors are used widely in English for Specialized Purpose (ESP). Explanations for professional jargons are full of metaphors, reflecting the richness of language. As one of the most prosperous branch of ESP, business English takes advantage of metaphors constantly to make abstract and complex economic and business concepts as well as phenomena vivid and easy to understand. In today's globalized world, a highly qualified translation of metaphors in business English could facilitate business communication greatly.

## 2. The Cognitive Theory of Metaphor

Different from traditional metaphor theory that emphasizes the description of the sentence itself and the use of language, the cognitive theory of metaphor holds that metaphorical mapping permits people to understand one domain of experience in terms of another more concrete domain.

## 2.1 Conceptual Metaphor

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that the human conceptual system is metaphorically structured and defined. According to them, conceptual metaphor is a system of metaphor that lies behind much of everyday language and forms everyday conceptual system, including most abstract concepts. Metaphor is a way of “understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The metaphorical linguistic expression is a surface manifestation of conceptual metaphor. Metaphor is primarily conceptual in nature, allowing mankind to understand a relatively abstract or inherently unstructured subject matter in terms of a more concrete or more highly structured subject matter. One cannot think abstractly without thinking metaphorically.

## 2.2 The Cognitive Mechanism of Metaphor

The conceptual metaphor theory explains the mechanism of metaphor, i.e. how metaphorical meaning is created. Lakoff holds that in a metaphor, there are two domains—the source domain and the target domain. The source domain is the conceptual domain from which metaphorical expressions are drawn. The target domain is the conceptual domain which people try to understand. The two domains are operative simultaneously. A mapping is the systematic set of correspondences that exist between constituent elements of the source and the target domain. In order to talk and think about some domains (target domains), people use the structure of other domains (source domains) and the corresponding vocabulary. To know a conceptual metaphor is to know the set of mapping that applies to a given source-target pairing.

The mapping from the source domain to the target domain is partial and optional. To make people focus on one aspect of the concept, a metaphorical concept hides other aspects that are inconsistent with the metaphor.

## 2.3 Classification of Conceptual Metaphor

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) classify conceptual metaphor into three types, namely orientational metaphor, ontological metaphor and structural metaphor.

Oriental metaphors are not metaphors which “structure one concept in terms of another but instead organize a whole system of concepts with respect to one another” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 14). Most of them have to do with spatial orientation: up- down, in- out, front- back, on- off, deep- shallow, central- peripheral. Oriental metaphors usually have a basis in people’s physical and cultural experiences. Psychological studies have found that orientation perception is one of man’s fundamental abilities. Spatial experience could be gained in the early stage of individual growth. Therefore, it’s natural for people to understand abstract concepts such as mood and feeling with the help of their experience of perceiving orientation and space. For example,

More is up; Less is down.

High status is up; Low status is down.

Rational is up; Emotional is down.

Ontological metaphors are based on people’s experience of physical objects and substances. Their formation enables mankind to view non-physical entities such as events, activities, emotions, ideas and the like, as physical entities and substances. For example, people can identify their experience of inflation as an entity and say “Inflation is lowering our standard of living”.

As the most frequently used metaphors of the three categories, the structural metaphors refer to those in which one concept is metaphorically structured in another one. For instance, in “Time is money” metaphor, time is understood with some of the properties of money structurally mapped onto the corresponding properties of time. Through this metaphor, people understand that time is useful and precious.

## 3. Metaphors in Business English

Business English is a manifestation of how people perceive and understand concepts and phenomena in economic and business field. MacCloskey (1983) points out that economics works with metaphors. To make common readers better understand abstract economic concepts and unfamiliar business activities, business English employs large amount of metaphors that are based on people’s common sense and experience. Ming Li (2005) believes that metaphors in business English have rhetoric, linguistic, cognitive, social and aesthetic functions.

In business English, nominal metaphors and verbal metaphors are the commonest types.

### 3.1 Nominal Metaphors in Business English

Nominal metaphors in Business English help readers infer unknown concepts with familiar experience or get accurate concepts with jargons in another field. For example,

The book's approach is broadly linear, from the building of the first motorways in the 1950s to the anti-road protests of the 1990s and the paralysis of today.

Chinese translation: 从上世纪50年代建成第一条高速公路, 到90年代民众抗议修建公路, 再到如今的公路瘫痪问题, 该书总体上按时间顺序介绍了英国公路的发展历史。(Note 1)

In the example, "paralysis" which means a person's loss of the ability to move a body part is used to indicate the status of road transport in the Great Britain.

In business English, many nominal metaphors such as "white collar" and "economic bubble" have become deep-rooted metaphorical concepts in people's mind due to their high frequency of use.

### *3.2 Verbal Metaphors in Business English*

Business English uses verbal metaphors to describe and explain abstract and complex economic trends or business activities. For example,

For much of this summer, a recovery has shimmered on the horizon only to turn out to be a mirage.

Chinese translation: 这个夏天的大部分时候, 经济复苏的希望一直在天边闪烁, 最终却证明不过是空欢喜一场。

"Shimmer" means to shine with a weak light. Readers know how something shimmers and their experience of shimmering things can make them understand the present status of economy—recovery is quite uncertain.

## **4. Chinese Translation of Metaphors in Business English**

From a cognitive point of view, metaphor is not just the semantic extension of one isolated category to another category in a different field, but a way of thinking. As a result, metaphors can't be treated simply as ornamental devices used in rhetorical style in translation studies. Instead, the conceptualization on which the metaphorical expression is based should be referred to when establishing a specific translation strategy.

### *4.1 Identification of Metaphor*

There are many abnormal collocations in a language which combine meanings of different categories and deviate from normal meanings. In the view of modern metaphor theory, linguistic collocations that are abnormal in form and conflict in semantic meaning are metaphors. However, the significance of metaphor is "not the semantic conflicts themselves but the cognitive response to such conflicts" (Shu, 2002).

It is possible to divide metaphors into two categories: conventional metaphors and novel metaphors (Littlemore, 2001; Bowdle & Gentner, 2005). Conventional metaphors which are also called dead or lexicalized metaphors refer to those which are invoked so frequently that native speakers consider their linguistic expressions to be institutionalized linguistic units. Lakoff (1993) says that "each conventional metaphor, that is, each mapping, is a fixed pattern of conceptual correspondence across conceptual domains." Conventional metaphors not only enrich languages but also serve as a way of connecting different categories. As the metaphorical meaning of conventional metaphors is included in dictionaries, translators can refer to dictionaries when translating them.

Unlike conventional metaphors, novel metaphors involve new or unusual mappings between two conceptual domains. Novel metaphors have literal meanings, but their metaphorical meanings are not the result of a fixed mapping. Consequently, a translator has to identify and understand novel metaphors by themselves. When the literal meaning can't be applied to the context, a translator must reason a novel metaphor's meaning on the basis of similarities between two different categories.

### *4.2 Factors Influencing the Comprehension of Metaphorical Meaning*

Comprehension of the metaphorical meaning is in essence a conceptual process of a translator where he or she maps the main properties of the source domain to the target domain and forms a new understanding of the target domain. Such a conceptual process is restrained by the cognitive structure of a translator, the specific culture and context in which metaphors are used.

Cognitive linguistics holds that man's experience and knowledge are stored in brains as concepts. Each concept is an abstraction of the knowledge acquired from past experience. These concepts are interrelated with each other and serve as the basis for people to process new information, making it possible for mapping one conceptual domain to another. Therefore, a translator's comprehension of the metaphorical meaning depends first on his or her own cognitive structure.

Cultural differences between the source language and the target language, and between the source culture and the target culture, could be problems for the translation of metaphors. To translate a metaphor, a translator should

know the specific society, culture and industry where it is used well. However, even with regard to culture specificity, the cognitive approach to metaphor can give some explanation. Stienstra (1993) argues that a large amount of human experience is universal, or at least shared by several cultures; thus, it is not the conceptual metaphor that is culture-dependent, but its linguistic realization.

When one's cognitive structure can't establish a relationship between two controversial concepts, his brain will process the chaotic information input into meaningful information units. In terms of language use, human brain will search and process various information in a discourse to eliminate the controversial information of the metaphor.

#### *4.3 Translation of Metaphors in Business English from a Cognitive Perspective*

In view of cognitive metaphor theory, translation is a translator's active cognitive activity. Translation has two potential procedures—comprehension and expression (Liu, 1999). In the stage of comprehension, a translator restores the subject referred by the source language with reference to linguistic signs and contexts. In the stage of expression, a translator expresses the referential meaning as well as relevant information that he or she gets from understanding the metaphor. In the translation, a translator has to screen varied properties in the source category and choose a category from the target language to correspond to them.

Translation methods can be reduced to literal translation and free translation. When translating metaphors in business English, a translator has to choose a proper method with consideration of the mapping from the source domain to the target domain.

##### *4.3.1 Same or Similar Mapping and Literal Translation*

A large amount of human experience is universal due to the same physiology and psychology such as synaesthesia. The common psychological basis for cognition makes it possible for languages of different cultures to be converted into each other. Jiaxuan Shen (1998) makes that people from different countries or even in different ages feel and reason the same way about some phenomena, therefore, people speaking different languages adopt the same metaphor as a result of identical mapping from the source domain to the target domain. For example, the metaphorical concepts like "Time is money", "Market movement is physical movement" and "a backward market is a disaster" exist in both English and Chinese. Metaphors with the same mapping from source domain to target domain can be translated literally. For example,

(1) Asia's emerging economies are bouncing back much more strongly than any others.

Chinese translation: 时下, 亚洲新兴经济体复苏得比其他任何国家都要迅猛。

In terms of cognitive structure, both English and Chinese readers share the common metaphorical concept "Economy is an organism". Therefore, expressions such as economic growth (经济增长) and economic recovery (经济复苏) are common in both English and Chinese. Like an organism, economy can grow, decay or pick up, etc. Therefore, literal translation of "bounce" into "复苏" could show the Chinese readers the current economic condition of Asia's emerging economies.

(2) The surge in food and energy prices in the first half of 2008 squeezed profits and spending power. Tighter monetary policy aimed at curbing inflation then further choked domestic demand.

Chinese translation: 食品和能源价格在 2008 年上半年暴涨, 削减了企业盈利和消费者的消费能力。当时的紧缩货币政策目的是遏制通货膨胀, 却进一步抑制了国内需求。

Similar with the above example, the translation of this sentence is based on the shared conceptual metaphor "price/policy is an organism" in English and Chinese. The following are other examples of literal translation of metaphors on the basis of common mode of cognition.

(3) But Frederic Neumann, an economist at HSBC, sees tentative signs that spending is picking up.

Chinese translation: 但是, 汇丰银行 (HSBC) 的经济学家弗雷德里希·纽曼 (Frederic Neumann) 认为, 当下消费止跌上升的趋势已初现端倪。

(4) Bidding wars are even breaking out.

Chinese translation: 竞标的战争甚至一触即发。

(5) Those who did turn out rejected all measures except one that freezes legislators' pay during budget-deficit years—a ritualised form of venting general anger.

Chinese translation: 那些投了票的选民只赞成一项, 即在预算赤字期间冻结议员工资, 这也是发泄公愤的惯常做法。

Since readers of both the source language and the target language share the common mode of cognition, literal translation can cause the same target language readers' response to the metaphor as the source language readers'. Under this circumstance, literal translation is an ideal choice as it not only conveys the metaphorical meaning but also keeps the image of the metaphor. It is easy to operate for a translator as he needs simply identify the metaphor, find the likeness of the two categories and express the metaphorical meaning in target language accurately and smoothly.

#### 4.3.2 Different Mapping and Free Translation

Due to cultural and social differences, the mapping from the source domain to the target domain in the two languages is different or even controversial in many cases. Therefore, a translator must analyze the associations caused by the metaphor to readers prudently and make a free translation. He or she can either select a source domain that is consistent with target readers' way of cognition to map the abstract concept contained in the metaphor so as to represent the metaphorical meaning and the way of metaphor simultaneously or express the metaphorical meaning only without following the way of metaphor. For example,

(1) For example, companies do not need to venture abroad to feel the bracing sting of international competition.

Chinese translation: 举例来说, 不是只有开展海外业务的公司才会遭受激烈国际竞争带来的痛楚。

In the above example, "sting" is mapped to the influence of international competition, which is not shared by the Chinese readers. Therefore, the translator can only translate its metaphorical meaning.

(2) But Mr. Parsons, who has watched her career closely, admits that Ms Moore is now operating in troubled waters, as she tries to cope with a recession in addition to the rise of the internet.

Chinese translation: 但是, 一直密切关注穆尔女士职业发展情况的帕森斯先生承认, 因为一边要应对经济衰退, 一边还得应对如日中天的互联网给出版业带来的压力, 所以目前穆尔女士的经营水深火热。

In the above example, "troubled waters" is a metaphor for the hardship of business operation. Its literal meaning makes no sense to Chinese readers. However, the translator can adopt a similar metaphor "水深火热" in Chinese to express the metaphorical meaning while maintaining the style of metaphor.

(3) In February Time ran a cover story entitled "How to Save Your Newspaper" which crystallised a growing belief within the industry that providing articles to readers free online is not sustainable, and that a switch to paid access will be necessary.

Chinese translation: 今年二月出版的《时代》杂志, 封面文章为“如何保住你的报纸”。文章明确表达了出版业日益提高的共识: 在互联网上向读者提供免费文章的做法无法实现行业的可持续发展, 向付费电子期刊阅读的转变是必要的。

The above example uses "crystallize" to describe that the idea is becoming clear. But in Chinese, there's no such a metaphor. As a result, the translator has to express its metaphorical meaning directly. The following are more examples.

(4) This dramatic resurgence of unemployment is unwinding the clock.

Chinese translation: 失业率大幅反弹使得先前的努力付诸东流。

(5) The link between poor skills and joblessness also casts a harsh light on the government's record in education.

Chinese translation: 没有技能就找不到工作, 这一点也无情地揭露了英国在教育领域的失败。

#### 4.3.3 Translation of Conventional Metaphor

If a certain mode of cognition doesn't exist in the target language, but the cognition of both source language and target language readers tends to be identical or similar, a translator can adopt literal translation, too. In business English, translate novel metaphors literally can make target readers feel refreshing.

(1) Aware that the crisis is moving into a new phase, with the emphasis shifting from firefighting to working out how supervision should be restructured, America's treasury secretary wants to seize the moment.

Chinese translation: 美国财政部已从专注灭火转而重视如何重构监管体制。在意识到经济危机正朝新阶段发展后, 美国财政部想要抓住这一时机。

Firefighting is mapped to eliminating the negative effects of economic crisis in the above example. Chinese readers have a similar cognition to the activity of firefighting; therefore, a literal translation can be made to vividly show readers the treasury's reaction to the crisis.

(2) True, bankers are still licking their wounds after the recent passage of draconian credit-card reforms.

Chinese translation: 的确, 在经历了最近针对信用卡的严酷改革后银行还处在舔舐伤口的阶段。

In the metaphor, “lick one’s wounds” is mapped to the recovering status of banks after reforms. Chinese readers have similar understanding of the source domain and can understand the metaphor easily.

(3) Sally Bramall of Willis, an insurance broker, says that big insurers are no longer assumed to be safest or best, and that clients are prepared to put their eggs in more baskets.

Chinese translation: 韦莱保险经纪有限公司的保险经纪人萨莉·布拉莫尔说, 客户不再认为大保险公司是最安全或最好的, 而是打算把鸡蛋放到更多的篮子里去。

“To put one’s eggs in more baskets” arouse similar association in Chinese readers. A literal translation not only conveys the metaphorical meaning clearly while maintaining the style of metaphor, but also gives readers a refreshing feeling.

(4) Over the past six months the government in Beijing has introduced a host of incentives to encourage households to open their wallets.

Chinese translation: 在过去的六个月里, 中国政府采取了一系列政策鼓励老百姓打开自己的钱袋子。

“To open one’s wallet” makes both Chinese and English readers think of spending money. A literal translation is understandable.

## 5. Conclusion

As a mode of thinking, metaphor is pervasive in business English. Translation of metaphors in business English is not only a conversion of languages but also a conversion of different cognitive models. When translating metaphors in business English, a translator should consider the cognitive structure of readers as well as the culture and context where the metaphor is used to decide whether to translate it literally or freely. With the deepening of globalization and the convenience of information exchange, people’s model of cognition tends to converge, which makes it possible to literally translate numerous novel metaphors to enrich target readers’ cognition.

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### Note

Note 1. In the translation, “介绍了英国公路的发展历史” is information added by the author with reference to the context of the article. Similar information is added to other examples in the paper. Besides, all examples are quoted from articles in different volumes of *The Economist* magazine in 2009.

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