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SEMANTIC AND PRAGMATIC TRANSFORMATION OF METAPHORS IN LITERARY TRANSLATION

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Abstract: This article examines how metaphors change in literary translation at two levels: the semantic level, where the tenor, vehicle and connotative range of an image may be altered, and the pragmatic level, where the effect that the metaphor produces on the reader and the inferences the reader is invited to draw may differ from the original. Drawing on recent studies in translation studies and cognitive linguistics, the article reviews the main approaches to the translation of metaphor and compares the procedures that translators use to deal with it, including retention, substitution, paraphrase and deletion. The analysis shows that partial transfer is the most frequent outcome, and that the loss of a metaphor often reduces the pragmatic equivalence of the text even when its literal meaning is preserved. On this basis, the article proposes a three-stage analytical procedure for evaluating metaphor transformation in literary texts, which begins with the identification of the metaphor, continues with the comparison of its semantic and pragmatic content, and ends with an assessment of its functional effect in the target text.

Keywords: metaphor, literary translation, semantic transformation, pragmatic transformation, pragmatic equivalence, translation procedures, conceptual metaphor, relevance.

INTRODUCTION

Metaphor is one of the most demanding problems in literary translation. A metaphor is not simply a decorative device: it organizes the reader's perception of a character, a situation or a theme, and it often carries emotional and evaluative content that cannot be stated literally without loss. When a translator renders a metaphor, the choice of expression affects both what the text means and what it does to the reader. The translator must therefore decide not only which words express the source image, but which functions of the image must be preserved.

The problem has been approached from several directions. Earlier work treated metaphor mainly as a question of lexical equivalence, asking whether a figurative expression in the source language had an established counterpart in the target language. Later studies, influenced by cognitive linguistics, argued that metaphor is a matter of conceptual structure rather than of words, and that a translator must reconstruct the underlying correspondence between two domains of experience. Pragmatic approaches have added a further dimension by asking how the metaphor is interpreted in context, and which inferences the reader is expected to make. The present article brings these perspectives together in order to describe the semantic and pragmatic transformations that occur when metaphors are translated in literary texts.

The aim of the study is to identify the main types of semantic and pragmatic transformation of metaphor in literary translation and to propose a procedure for analysing them. The research

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addresses three questions. First, what kinds of semantic change affect metaphors in translation? Second, how do such changes alter the pragmatic effect of the text on the reader? Third, how can the analysis of these changes be organized so that it is systematic and reproducible rather than impressionistic? The answers are relevant both to translation theory and to the training of translators, who need explicit criteria for judging the quality of their renderings.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

Recent research on metaphor translation has increasingly moved from the analysis of isolated examples to the analysis of metaphor in complete texts. Rizzato [1] proposes a conceptual analysis that applies the model of conceptual conflicts in metaphor to the pragmatic demands of translation. The author treats translation as a practice that is goal-oriented and context-dependent, and argues that the strategies chosen for a metaphor must be justified by the communicative purpose of the target text. The argument is illustrated with three short literary excerpts in English and their Italian translations. Its main contribution is to show that a metaphor's conceptual conflict, meaning the tension between the image and its literal sense, is itself a pragmatic resource, and that translators who understand this resource can choose strategies that preserve the effect rather than only the content.

A second group of studies has examined the structure of metaphor itself as a basis for translation analysis. Denisenko and Vered [2] describe metaphor through a three-part model that covers its linguistic, mental and communicative aspects, and identify the tenor, the vehicle and the ground of an image on the basis of the principle of similarity. Their method assesses equivalence through componential analysis, which shows whether the implicit reasoning of the original metaphor is retained in the translation and whether the same meanings are activated for the reader. Using this method, the authors report that partial transfer is the most common outcome when a metaphorical expression is translated, and that the absence of the metaphor in the target text reduces the pragmatic equivalence of the text. A closely related study [3] uses the same three-component structure to compare English metaphors with their Russian equivalents in literary material, and tests semantic equivalence in the same way.

The pragmatic dimension of translation shifts has been addressed most directly through relevance theory. Moruwawon [4] uses relevance theory to examine the translation of metaphors from French texts into English. Her material consists of three metaphors and their translations, which are classified according to the procedures proposed by Vinay and Darbelnet and by a later framework. The author concedes that no single theory can explain the translation of metaphor completely, and proposes relevance theory as a means of assessing whether a metaphor in a literary text can be transferred without changing the inferences that the reader is led to draw. The conclusion is important for the present study, because it suggests that the evaluation of metaphor translation should be based on the reader's inferential process rather than on the dictionary meaning of the words used.

Studies of individual literary works provide concrete evidence of these tendencies. A study of Stephen King's novel The Green Mile and of two Russian translations of it [5] examines how the translators preserved the author's imagery in the Russian versions. Research on the English translation of Tolstoy's Anna Karenina by Constance Garnett [6] examines the figurative and

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aesthetic functions of the novel's metaphors in that translation. Taken together, these studies indicate that the problem of metaphor translation is not solved by equivalence of content alone.

Cognitive-linguistic approaches have been applied to literary translation in recent years. A 2026 study [7] examines the combination of interpretive and cognitive-linguistic analyses in the translation of literary texts. This combined perspective is consistent with the position taken in the present article, namely that a metaphor must be analysed both as a conceptual structure and as an act of communication with a particular effect on the reader.

The present study uses a qualitative, literature-based method. The sources were selected from peer-reviewed journals, conference proceedings and academic publications that appeared in 2016 or later and that address metaphor translation in literary texts directly. The analysis proceeded in three steps. First, the literature was reviewed in order to identify the main categories of semantic change and the main pragmatic functions of metaphor in literary discourse. Second, the procedures reported in the sources were compared in terms of their effect on the tenor, the vehicle and the connotative range of the metaphor. Third, an analytical procedure was constructed from the categories that recur across the studies. The article does not present a new corpus. Its examples are constructed for illustration, and the proposed procedure requires testing on a corpus of published translations.

SEMANTIC TRANSFORMATION OF METAPHOR

Semantic transformation refers to change in the meaning of a metaphor during translation. In analysing it, the present study distinguishes three components of a metaphorical expression. The tenor is the subject to which the metaphor applies. The vehicle is the image that is borrowed to describe the tenor. The ground is the set of properties that the two share and that make the comparison meaningful. Denisenko and Vered [2] treat these components as the basis of equivalence assessment, and this study follows the same principle. A translation may change one or more of the components, and each change has a different consequence for meaning.

The first type of semantic change is the retention of the vehicle and the ground. Here the translator reproduces the image in the target language, so that the reader receives the same comparison. The retention of the image is the most faithful procedure, but it is available only when the target language permits the same combination of tenor and vehicle. When the image is conventional in the target culture, retention normally preserves the meaning. When it is unconventional, retention may produce an expression that is understood but that sounds artificial, which can weaken the effect of the original. The studies reviewed here treat the cultural conventionality of the image as a key condition for retention [2], [5].

The second type is substitution. The translator replaces the source vehicle with a different vehicle that is conventional in the target language and that is judged to express a similar ground. Substitution can preserve the emotional force of the metaphor, but it changes the image, and this change may alter the associations that the reader brings to the tenor. For example, an English expression that describes a person as a rock conveys stability and dependability. A translator who replaces this image with an expression drawn from a different domain of experience preserves the evaluation but changes the imagery, which in a novel can affect the portrait of the character. The

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analysis of the Green Mile translations [5] makes clear that the choice between retaining and replacing an image is a central decision for the translator.

The third type is paraphrase. The metaphor is reduced to its sense, and the image disappears. Paraphrase is the most reliable procedure for conveying the literal meaning of a metaphor, but it is also the one that most clearly removes the figurative dimension of the text. The sense of the expression is preserved, while its conceptual structure, which in Rizzato's terms is the tension between image and literal meaning [1], is lost. In literary translation this loss is particularly serious when the metaphor recurs throughout a work and contributes to its coherence.

The fourth type is deletion, in which the metaphor is not rendered at all. Deletion is usually the result of a judgement that the metaphor is not necessary for the understanding of the passage, or of pressure from the target language's norms. The study by Denisenko and Vered [2] identifies the absence of the metaphor as a factor that reduces the pragmatic equivalence of the text. In the terms of the present analysis, deletion removes both the semantic content of the image and its pragmatic function, and it is therefore the procedure with the greatest potential for loss.

Semantic transformation is also affected by the connotative range of the vehicle. Two expressions may denote the same property and yet differ in their associations, so that one evokes warmth or intimacy while the other evokes distance or coldness. Figurative and aesthetic functions of metaphor depend on such connotations [6], so a translation may be accurate in denotation while changing the emotional colour of a passage. For this reason, the evaluation of semantic transformation must consider connotation as well as reference.

PRAGMATIC TRANSFORMATION OF METAPHOR

Pragmatic transformation concerns the effect of the translated metaphor on the reader and the inferences that the reader is led to make. A metaphor does not communicate only through its content; it also signals that the author is making a choice, invites the reader to search for a relationship between the domains of the image, and often contributes to the characterization of the speaker. Relevance theory, which Moruwawon [4] applies to metaphor, describes these functions as a balance between the cognitive effort required to process the metaphor and the cognitive effects it produces. A metaphor is relevant when the effects it generates are worth the effort of processing it. Translation can change this balance, and the change may be either an increase or a decrease in the effort the reader must expend, or in the effects that the reader obtains.

A translation that replaces an unconventional metaphor with a conventional expression often reduces the processing effort, but it may also reduce the effects, because the reader no longer has to construct the link between the two domains. The reader of the translation understands the passage more easily, but receives less from it. Conversely, a translation that retains an unfamiliar image may increase the processing effort, and if the reader cannot recover the intended relationship, the effect of the metaphor is lost altogether. This is the central pragmatic problem in literary translation: the translator must decide whether the target reader is expected to make the same inferential effort as the source reader, and must adjust the expression accordingly.

The pragmatic evaluation of metaphor also depends on the position of the metaphor within the text. A metaphor that occurs once in a passage has a different function from one that recurs in a novel as part of a network of images. In the second case, the recurrence builds a pattern that

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guides the reader's interpretation of the work as a whole. When a translator alters individual instances of such a pattern, even where each instance is acceptable in isolation, the pattern may be weakened or broken. The studies reviewed here support the view that the pragmatic effect of a metaphor is a property of the text as a whole rather than of the individual expression, and that the analysis must therefore consider the context in which each metaphor appears [1], [6].

Pragmatic transformation is also linked to the character of the narrator and of the characters. When a metaphor is part of the speech of a particular character, it indicates that character's education, background or emotional state. A translation that normalizes such expressions into standard language removes information about the speaker, and therefore changes the pragmatic function of the passage. This kind of loss is less visible than the loss of a single image, but it is often more consequential for the reader's understanding of the characters.

ILLUSTRATIVE ANALYSIS AND PROPOSED PROCEDURE

To show how the two levels of transformation interact, consider a constructed example. Suppose the source text describes a long-serving official as a candle that has burned down to the end of its wick, and suppose that the translation renders the image as a plain statement that the official is nearing retirement. The semantic content is largely preserved, since the reader learns that the official is close to leaving office. However, three elements are lost: the image of gradual consumption, the suggestion of quiet exhaustion, and the emotional tone of the passage. The pragmatic effect changes accordingly. The source invites the reader to sympathize with the official and to see the situation as a natural end, whereas the paraphrase presents an administrative fact. The example is illustrative and is not drawn from a published translation, but it reflects the pattern described in the sources reviewed above.

On the basis of this analysis, the study proposes a three-stage procedure for evaluating metaphor transformation in literary translation. The procedure is intended to make the analysis explicit and repeatable, so that different evaluators can reach comparable conclusions about the same passage.

1. Identification. The analyst identifies the metaphors in the source text and determines their tenor, vehicle and ground. Metaphors that recur in the text are marked as parts of a pattern, and their position in the text is recorded. This stage establishes the inventory against which the translation will be assessed.

2. Comparison of semantic and pragmatic content. For each metaphor, the analyst records the procedure used in the translation, whether retention, substitution, paraphrase or deletion, and determines whether the tenor, vehicle and connotative range have been preserved. The analyst then considers the inferences that the source metaphor invites and determines whether the translation invites the same inferences with a comparable processing effort.

3. Assessment of functional effect. The analyst evaluates the overall effect of the translated metaphor within the text, including its contribution to the characterization of the speaker, to the coherence of recurring patterns and to the emotional tone of the passage. The assessment concludes with a judgement about whether the translation preserves the functions of the metaphor, and if not, which functions are lost and at what cost to the reader's experience.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

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The review of the literature supports three main conclusions. The first is that partial transfer is the most common outcome in the translation of metaphor. Denisenko and Vered [2] report this as a general tendency, which means that translators usually keep some elements of the source image while changing others. Partial transfer is not in itself a failure. It becomes a problem only when the elements that are lost are those on which the pragmatic function of the metaphor depends.

The second conclusion is that the loss of a metaphor reduces pragmatic equivalence even when the literal meaning of the passage is preserved. This finding is consistent across the sources reviewed here. The studies of literary translation [6], [5] show that the figurative functions of metaphor can be lost in translations that are accurate in content. The reader of such a translation receives the information but not the experience that the author intended, and the difference between information and experience is precisely the difference between semantic and pragmatic equivalence.

The third conclusion is that metaphor translation requires the integration of semantic and cognitive analysis with pragmatic analysis. The studies that rely on a single approach tend to find either that a translation is faithful to the content of the metaphor or that it is effective for the reader, but rarely both. The analysis of Rizzato [1], the componential method of Denisenko and Vered [2] and the relevance-theoretic approach of Moruwawon [4] each capture part of the problem. The three-stage procedure proposed in this article combines them in a single sequence.

The procedure has several practical implications for translators and for teachers of translation. Translators can use it to make their decisions explicit, by recording the procedure chosen for each metaphor and the reason for choosing it. Teachers can use it to structure the evaluation of student translations, so that the assessment does not depend only on the impression that a translation makes. Editors and reviewers can use it to identify passages where metaphors have been lost, and to decide whether the loss affects the function of the text.

The study has limitations. It is based on a literature review and on constructed examples, not on a systematic corpus of published translations. Most of the reviewed studies concern a small number of texts or language pairs, and the results may not apply to other genres, such as poetry or drama, where the role of metaphor is different. The procedure has not been tested by independent evaluators. Future research should apply it to a corpus of literary translations from English into several languages, measure the agreement between evaluators, and examine how the frequency of each procedure varies across genres and periods.

CONCLUSION

The translation of metaphor in literary texts involves both semantic and pragmatic transformation. Semantic transformation concerns the tenor, the vehicle and the connotative range of the image, and it may take the form of retention, substitution, paraphrase or deletion. Pragmatic transformation concerns the effect of the metaphor on the reader and the inferences the reader is invited to make, and it depends on the balance between processing effort and the effects the reader obtains. The loss of a metaphor often reduces pragmatic equivalence even when the literal content of the passage is preserved, which means that the quality of a literary translation cannot be judged by semantic accuracy alone.

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The three-stage procedure proposed in this article gives translators, teachers and reviewers a systematic way to analyse these transformations. It begins with the identification of metaphors, continues with the comparison of their semantic and pragmatic content, and concludes with an assessment of their functional effect in the target text. Further empirical work is needed to test the procedure on larger corpora and to establish its reliability across evaluators. Until then, the procedure offers a structured basis for discussing the choices that translators make when they face one of the most demanding problems in literary translation.

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