

Research on Metaphor Translation from the Perspective of Relevance Theory

Xuemei Li

School of Foreign Languages, Northeast Electric Power University, Jilin, Jilin Province, China

Keywords: Relevance Theory; metaphor; translation

Abstract: This paper firstly introduces the main points of Relevance Theory, then analyzes the characteristics of metaphor, and systematically discusses the powerful interpretive power of Relevance Theory on metaphor translation. Finally, it analyzes the metaphor translation process and translation strategies under the guidance of Relevance Theory. .

1. Introduction

Metaphor, as a linguistic phenomenon, has brought a great challenge to cognition and understanding while enriching our language. Moreover, due to the differences in living habits, ways of thinking, and cultural traditions among various ethnic groups in the world, their understanding of metaphor is sometimes not exactly the same, or even very different. The Relevance Theory proposed by Sperber and Wilson in 1986, as an important theory of cognitive pragmatics, explains the process of generation, understanding and translation of metaphor from a new perspective, and expands the previous theory of metaphor translation. .Because of its guiding role in metaphor understanding and translation, Relevance Theory is increasingly used in the study of metaphor translation.

2. Relevance Theory

Relevance Theory was proposed by Sperber and Wilson in their book *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*. The core problem of Relevance Theory is cognition and communication. It mainly studies the reasoning process of information exchange, especially focusing on the principles of discourse interpretation in communication. Relevance Theory believes that communication is a cognitive process, and that mutual understanding between the two parties is mainly due to an optimal cognitive model--RELEVANCE. In the process of communication, the content, context and various implications of the discourse make it difficult for the interpreter to understand the dialogue, but the interpreter does not necessarily understand the full meaning of the dialogue in all occasions. What he or she uses is a single, ordinary standard, which is enough to make it possible to identify a unique and feasible understanding. This standard is RELEVANCE.

Relevance Theory defines relevance as “a hypothesis that is related to a given context and produces a contextual effect in that context” (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 64). In the process of verbal communication, the strength of relevance depends on contextual effects and reasoning efforts. The better the contextual effects are, the smaller the efforts made by reasoning, and the stronger the correlation is, or otherwise, the weaker it is. When contextual effects and processing efforts reach equilibrium, discourse has the best correlation, and that is exactly what we pursue, the best connection, in the process of communication.

According to Relevance Theory, each ostensive communicative behavior should be envisaged as having the optimal relevance itself. Communication is an ostensive-inferential process, in which the addresser expresses the intention clearly to the addressee, and the addressee chooses the most appropriate context and seeks the optimal relevance between discourse and context, according to the word information, logical information provided by the utterance and the encyclopedia information that people have, through different degrees of efforts. (Sperber & Wilson, 1995).

Relevance Theory is based on the assumption that the discourse has the optimal relevance, while the key to successful communication is whether the two parties can find the optimal relevance. In

order to establish the optimal relevance, first of all, the discourse information must be sufficient for the addressee to identify the meaning that the addresser wants to express; secondly, the meaning that the addresser wants to express must be worthy of the addressee to pay for the efforts, that is, providing sufficient positive contextual effects.

In summary, Relevance Theory is based on the principle of relevance, working with an understanding mode of ostensive-referential reasoning, through which the optimal relevance between discourse and contextual effects is obtained as the purpose of verbal communication activities, that is, to get the best contextual effects through certain cognitive efforts in discourse comprehension.

3. Metaphorical features

Metaphors are omnipresent in human language, and a metaphor appears every three sentences in our oral communication. (Richard, 1965) Humans have been studying metaphor for more than two thousand years. At first, people thought that metaphor was a mutated, rhetorical use of language. Later, with the continuous development of linguistics, semantics, cognitive psychology and other disciplines, we have developed a more systematic and comprehensive understanding of metaphor phenomena. Cognitive school believes that metaphor is the use of one thing to understand another. It is the cognitive movement of human beings to explain or understand the experience of another field. (Lakeoff, 1980) This makes metaphor no longer just a simple means of rhetoric, but a cognitive way and even a way of behavior that is deeply rooted in our minds.

In essence, metaphor is the way or mechanism through which people connect features of different things in minds. People's cognition is always from near to far, from shallow to deep, from known to unknown, from concrete to Abstract, and this process is always accompanied by metaphor, and thus achieves the purpose of understanding and interpreting things. "Metaphor is an indispensable cognitive tool used by humans to organize their conceptual systems. At the very beginning of human thinking and cognition, there is first a specific image (intuitive knowledge), and then through metaphorical processes or metaphorization, the cognitive field of vision expands, and understanding and thinking develops." (Lakeoff, 1980: 122)

The two conceptual domains involved in metaphor are the source domain and the target domain. The former is usually a specific and familiar entity domain. The latter is usually an invisible and unfamiliar Abstract domain. The essence of metaphor is to map from a familiar, easy-to-understand source to a less familiar and difficult-to-understand target area (Lakeoff, 1980). The process of understanding metaphor is the process of finding the similarity between "source" and "object".

4. Metaphor Translation from the Perspective of Relevance Theory

Since the meaning of metaphor is often expressed by the addresser in an indirect way, the addressee cannot directly extract the required information from it. According to the Relevance Theory, its understanding must rely on the context, through association, activation, selection, and reasoning, to find the optimal relevance, and get actual communication intentions. How to accurately translate the meaning of metaphor so that the target reader can understand the meaning of metaphor in the original language has always been one of the focuses of the translation community.

As an important theory of cognitive pragmatics, Relevance Theory does not explain translation, but it can effectively reveal the most complicated phenomenon--translation, and provide a unified theoretical framework for translation (Zhao Yanchun, 1999), and it is "a power explanatory tool in translation studies" (Gutt, 1991). According to the Relevance Theory, "the process of translation is essentially the translator's reasoning process. The translator should aim at achieving the optimal relevance, and strive to make the source language author's intentions match the expectations of the target reader." (Lin, Kenan, 1994).

The translation of metaphor is based on the common cognitive concepts of the source language authors and target reader in the source domain. However, due to the inevitable cultural differences

between the two languages, there is often no shared concept mapping between the same object in the original language and the target language, which leads to translation barriers.

The concept of metaphor translation from the perspective of Relevance Theory is a ternary relationship consisting of the source language author--translator--target reader, including two ostensive--referential processes of communicative behavior which involves two addressers and two addressees. Among them, "the translator takes into account the dual identity of the addresser and the addressee" (Zhang Xinjiang, He Ziran, 2001). On the one hand, the translator understands the meaning of the metaphor in the original language and the author's communicative intention, on the other hand, he or she must pass this intention to the target reader.

The process of understanding the metaphorical meaning in source language is the process of finding the optimal relevance. Based on the source language author's ostensive behaviors, the translator take advantage of his own encyclopedic information, logical information and lexical information to generate a series of contextual hypotheses, and deal with the new information or new hypotheses provided by the addresser's discourse. Then the optimal relevance is sought for, and the translator may obtain the contextual effects of the new information or new hypothesis, from which the cognitive mental schema of the original language is correctly constructed and a consensus on psychological cognition with the source language author is achieved. Thus, the original metaphorical meaning is derived and source language author's communicative intention obtained.

Then, if the translator wants to accurately and completely convey the metaphorical meaning and communicative intention obtained through the processing effort to the target reader, firstly, the reader's cognitive environment and reading expectation should be fully considered, so that the translation should be related to the original text as far as possible. (Sperber & Wilson, 1995) And the translator should adopt flexibly various translation strategies, using the language most suitable for the reader, to express the source language author's intention to the target reader, so that the target reader can reason, obtain the optimal relevance, and realize the understanding of the metaphorical meaning of the translation.

It can be seen that the translation of metaphor is based on the intention of the source language author and the expectation of the target reader. With the goal of seeking for optimal relevance, through two ostensive-inferential processes, the "intention" and "expectation" are matched, and the whole Translation process is completed.

5. Translation strategy

According to the Relevance Theory, in the practice of translation, no matter which translation strategy is adopted, it must conform to the principle of relevance. In order to provide sufficient contextual effects for the target reader, so that they can get the optimal relevance with minimal processing efforts, the translator needs to use the appropriate translation strategies to make the source language author's communicative intentions highly consistent with the target reader's reading expectations. Thereby, the purpose of communication is achieved. The translation of metaphor under the guidance of Relevance Theory can use literal translation, free translation, and the combination of literal translation and free translation.

5.1 Literal translation

In both English and Chinese, some metaphors in the original language can be completely corresponding to the target languages in terms of metaphorical objects and metaphorical meaning. In this circumstance, it is suitable for literal translation. The translator can directly project the corresponding concept of metaphor in the original text into the translation, so that the target reader can spend the least processing efforts to get the optimal relevance. For example: Jane's uncle is an old fox, up to all kinds of evils. It can be translated as "jian de shu shu shi yi ge lao hu li, shen me huai shi dou zuo de chu lai". This translation directly transplants the metaphorical image in the original language and passes it, and at the same time its connotation, accurately into the target language, with the original image and style preserved.

5.2 Free translation

When the shared cultural background knowledge between the source language author and the target reader is missing, and the target reader cannot understand the metaphorical connotation in the original language, the literal translation method may make the target reader confused and it is almost impossible to achieve the purpose of translation. For example: *His theory has thousands of little rooms and long, windy corridors*. The literal translation is translated as “ta de li lun you cheng qian ge xiao fang zi, hai you wan wan qu qu de zou lang”. This sentence retains the metaphorical communication clues of “room” and “corridor” in the original text, and retains the content of the original text to the utmost extent, but there is no relevance between “room”, “corridor” and “theory” in the cultural system of Chinese readers who may feel puzzled to understand the meaning. If the sentence is translated as “ta de li lun you guo duo de zu cheng bu fen, er qie ge bu fen zhi jian de guan xi ye guo yu cuo zong fu za”, You can correctly express the connotation meaning in the original text, so that the target reader can get the optimal relevance with little efforts. .

5.3 Literal translation

It can be seen from the above that both literal translation and free translation have their limitations in metaphor translation: literal translation may not find the corresponding metaphor, and it is difficult to guarantee the complete transfer of stylistic information and contextual effects in the original text. Therefore, the combined use of two translation methods can break through their respective limitations and better achieve translation purposes. For example:... *and now she and her sister lead a cat and dog life together..* Using the combination of literal translation and free translation can be translated as “ru jin ta men jie mei lia guo zhe mao he gou yi yang bu he de sheng huo”. In this way, the metaphorical message “the life of cats and dogs” in the original text is preserved, and the adding of the word “disharmony” solves the problem of the readers' lack of understanding of the original metaphor.

6. Summary

Relevance Theory explains metaphor from the perspective of cognition, provides a new perspective for the understanding of metaphor, expands the previous metaphor theory, and also has a good guiding role in the translation of metaphor. However, Relevance Theory sometimes appears to be too Abstract and generalized to be applied in analyzing specific problems, and there are still limitations. For example, how should the translator choose the optimal relevance according to the context; when measuring the relevance of discourse, how to quantify the two factors of contextual effects and cognitive efforts which are psychological processes; and how to make an appropriate assessment, and so on. Thus, the study of metaphor needs to further integrate various theories, learn from each other's strengths, and develop together.

References

- [1] Gutt, E.A. *Translation and Relevance: Cognition and Context* (2nd edition) [M] Manchester: St Jerome Publishing. 2000.
- [2] Lakoff, G & M. Johnson. *Metaphor We Live by* [M]. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. 1980.
- [3] Richards, I.A. *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* [M], New York OUP, 1965.
- [4] Sperber, D & Wilson. *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* (2nd edition) [M] Oxford: Blackwell. 1995.
- [5] Lin, Kenan, Introduction to Relevance Theory in Translation[J], *Chinese Translation*, 1994(4)
- [6] Zhang Xinjiang, He Ziran. Pragmatic Translation: the Application of Linguistic Theory in Translation [J], *Modern Foreign Language*, 2001(3)
- [7] Zhao Yanchun, Explanatory Power of Relevance Theory to Translation[J], *Modern Foreign Language*, 1999(3)