

# Metaphor in Literary Translation——A Case Study of Chinese

## Classics

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**Abstract:** The study of metaphor has a long history, and it has gradually been taken seriously from the very beginning of Aristotle of ancient Greek. In 1980, American scholars George Lakoff and Mark Johnson published the book *Metaphor We Lived By* jointly, from which metaphor began to be known as a way of cognition. The differences in languages and cultures, together with the complicated working mechanism of metaphor, post a great challenge in translating metaphor in literary work. This paper analyzes example sentences taken from Chinese classical works. By comparing these sentences with their English translations, we can have a glimpse of the translation strategies often used in rendering metaphor.

**Keywords:** Metaphor; Literary Translation; Translation Strategy

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## 1. Introduction

Metaphor is a linguistic phenomenon in most people's minds and is categorized as a rhetorical device in language learning. Previously, many people even thought that metaphor is a unique phenomenon in the world of literature, which is seldom involved in daily life. In 1980, American scholars George Lakoff and Mark Johnson published a book named *Metaphor We Live By*, from which metaphor finally jumped out of the framework of "linguistic phenomenon" and gradually came into the public's view as a "cognitive tool". It is written in this book: "We have found, on the contrary, that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature." (Lakoff & Johnson 1980:1)

With careful observation, it is not difficult to find that we always use metaphors to express ourselves in our lives consciously or unconsciously. For example, some expressions like *spindrift*, *getting into trouble*, *falling in love*, etc, are actually using metaphor. We compare waves to flowers in Chinese because they are similar in shape; we compare difficulties to getting into trouble because they are like swamps in which people are trapped but can do nothing about them; we compare the magic of love to "falling in love" because both are irresistible. These metaphors are so classic that they have become commonplace in our everyday life. Most people use them without necessarily realizing that they are using metaphors to express their ideas.

Metaphor is essentially the use of one concept to express another. Only when there is similarity between things in different conceptual domains can people's analogical associations be aroused, thus juxtaposing two things that originally belong to different conceptual domains and generating metaphors. Therefore, we can learn that similarity is the basis for the generation of metaphor, and it is also an important factor that distinguishes metaphor from other linguistic phenomena (Wang Tianran 2018:51). The similarity between the entity and the metaphorical vehicle is both the essence of metaphor and can then be used as a criterion for dividing metaphors. For example, In *Metaphor and Cognition* written by Indoukia, metaphor is divided into two kinds from the point of view of similarity: metaphors based on similarity and metaphors that create similarity.

The world of literature is the world of metaphor. The purpose of using metaphors in literary texts is to convey an abstract or intentional idea of thought, consciousness or spirit through aesthetic and artistic language. As a literary text, without metaphor, it cannot fulfill its narrative function (Zhang Xiong 2005:105). Then, how are different forms of metaphors represented in literary works?

When facing the translation of different types of metaphors, do we need to adopt different translation strategies and means? How can the metaphorical expressions in the source language be better converted into the target language that is fluent, authentic and easy to be accepted by readers? These are the questions that need to be discussed in this paper.

## 2. The Application of Two Metaphors in Literary Works

### 2.1 Metaphor based on similarity

Metaphor based on similarity means that there is a recognized, objective and concrete similarity between the entity and the metaphorical vehicle. The concrete similarity between two things refers to the physical and chemical characteristics that they share, such as shape, color, space, time, form of movement, functional characteristics, structural characteristics, and their interrelationships, etc. (Ma Xiaoling 2010:59). Such metaphors based on similarity abound in classic Chinese literature, and the language of classic literature becomes vivid and more readable because of the use of metaphorical language, for example:

(1) 牛王嘻嘻地笑了一笑，现出原身——一只大白牛。头如峻岭，眼若闪光。两只角，似两只铁塔。（吴承恩《西游记》）

(2) 黛玉略换了几件新鲜衣服，打扮得宛如嫦娥下界，含羞带笑的出来见了众人。（曹雪芹《红楼梦》）

(3) 鸿渐想上海不愧是文明先进之区，中学女孩子已经把门面油漆粉刷，招徕男人了，这是外国也少有的。（钱钟书《围城》）

(4) 我很悚然，一见她的眼钉着我的，背上也就遭了芒刺一般，比在学校里遇到不及豫防的临时考，教师又偏是站在身旁的时候，惶急得多了。（鲁迅《祝福》）

In Example (1), the Bull King transforms into a big white bull, and there is an objective similarity between the size and shape of “牛头” and “峻岭”. Moreover, an objective similarity lies between “两只角”, which are sharp, hard and big, and “两只铁塔”. By using two metaphors in a row, this sentence brings to life the stout and ferocious appearance of the Bull King, and makes it easier to stimulate the reader’s imagination.

In Example (2), Lin Daiyu in *A Dream in Red Mansions* is a transcendent, immortal beauty, so her face has an objective similarity with that of the fairy Chang’e, and when Daiyu puts on her new clothes, she looks like the fairy Chang’e coming down to the earth and captivating the crowd.

In Example (3), since the human face has an objective similarity with the “门面”, and the girl’s action of applying cosmetics has an objective similarity with “油漆粉刷”, the author used the “门面” as a metaphor for the face of a middle school girl in Shanghai, and “油漆粉刷” as a metaphor for the girl’s behavior of applying cosmetics.

In Example (4), “I” felt uncomfortable when I met Xianglin and was stared at by her. This uncomfortable feeling is objectively similar to the feeling of “背上遭了芒刺”, so the author used it as a metaphor to express a sense of uneasiness.

### 2.2 Metaphors that Create Similarity

Cognitive linguists have argued that “although metaphors can be partially based on individual similarities, we find that many important similarities are created via metaphors” (Wei Jianhua 2008:138). Metaphor that creates similarity means that there is no natural similarity between the entity and the metaphorical vehicle. The so-called similarity is the result of the listener’s own cognitive activity after the speaker juxtaposes two entities that are far apart. Shu Dingfang(2000:24) has pointed out that “metaphors that create similarity have more cognitive value than metaphors based on similarity”. This is because metaphors that create similarity utilize the subjective initiative of the cognitive subject more than metaphors based on similarity. There are a large number of metaphors that create similarity in literary texts, and they tend to test a writer’s writing skills and thinking ability more, bringing unexpected literary effects to the article and making readers applaud. For example:

(5) 李氏道：“什么钥匙？……你就是你奶奶的一把总钥匙，还要这钥匙作什么。”（曹雪芹《红楼梦》）

(6) 忠厚老实人的恶毒，像饭里的砂砾或者出骨鱼片里未净的刺，会给人一种不期待的伤痛。（钱钟书《围城》）

(7) 呆子闻言，就吓得矮了三寸道：“爷爷呀！我睡他怎么晓得？”（吴承恩《西游记》）

In Example (5), “一把总钥匙” vividly illustrates the importance of Ping’er to Wang Xifeng. Wang is the housekeeper of the Rongguo Mansion in charge of the real power. Her management of a large family in order not only owns to her outstanding ability, but also because of Ping’er, her most competent assistant. From Cao Xueqin’s writing, Ping’er’s role as the “总钥匙” is mainly reflected in assisting Wang in controlling her possessions, supervising her subordinates, and coordinating her interpersonal relationships (Li

Xuechen & Han Wei 2021:325). Although there is no objective similarity in appearance between Ping'er and “总钥匙”, they both have the intrinsic significance of “solving problems” and “being important” to Wang. The reader is able to create the functional similarity between the two by association.

In Example (6), “饭里的砂砾”, “出骨鱼片里未净的刺” and “忠厚老实人的恶毒” are very far from each other in terms of their image, but “饭”, “出骨鱼片” and “忠厚老实人” all give a sense of harmlessness and gentleness, while “砂砾”, “未净的刺” and “恶毒” can cause unexpected harm.

In Example (7), “矮了三寸” is not objectively related to being frightened, but when a person is frightened, his body will always be weak, so he cannot stand up straight and appears to be shorter. Therefore, “矮了三寸” is associated with being frightened through human cognitive processing.

The entities and the metaphorical vehicles in these three examples are very far from each other, but when the listener or the reader hears or sees such an utterance, our cognitive mechanisms and associations will link the entities with the metaphorical vehicles, and then the similarity is created and born in this way, which forms the basis of the metaphor.

### 3. Translating the Two Kinds of Metaphors in Translation

As mentioned above, although the essence of metaphor is the similarity between the entity and the metaphorical vehicle, this similarity can either be an objective similarity at physical level or a result from human cognitive activities.

Sun Guiying (2010) found that the key to the translation of metaphor lies in the retention of imagery. In the process of translating metaphors, we should pay attention to whether the images produced when using metaphors in the source language and the culture attached to the metaphors can be preserved after translation. Successful translation of metaphors requires equivalence—that is, the literary effect of the metaphor in the source language on the readers of the source language needs to be the same as the literary effect on the readers of the target language in the target language. And this is by no means an easy task.

#### 3.1 The Translation of Metaphors Based on Similarity in Literary Works

The entity and metaphorical vehicle have objective and concrete similarities and shared rationalization features in metaphors based on similarity, which can be easily detected even in cross-cultural communication. Therefore, literal translation becomes the most appropriate way to translate this kind of metaphor. For example:

(8) 那人绰彩袖，春笋纤长；擎玉盏，传茶上奉。（吴承恩《西游记》）

Translation: Her sleeves were wide, and with her fingers as slender as bamboo shoots in spring she handed each of them a jade bowl and bowed.

(9) 行者道：“是老孙一棍子打出豆腐来了。”八戒道：“人头上又有豆腐？”行者道：“打出脑子来了！”（吴承恩《西游记》）

Translation: “It’s because I smashed the beancurd out of them with my cudgel,” said Monkey. “But people don’t have beancurd in their heads,” said Pig. “I beat their brains out,” said Monkey.

(10) 云雾里露出一线月亮，宛如一只挤着的近视眼睛。（钱钟书《围城》）

Translation: A ray of moonlight showed through the clouds like a squinting, nearsighted eye.

(11) 说着，便顺着游廊到门前，往外一瞧，只见宝玉淋的雨打鸡一般。袭人见了又是着忙又是可笑。（曹雪芹《红楼梦》）

Translation: The sight of Bao-yu standing there like a bedraggled hen with the water running off him in streamlets was both alarming and—she could not help but feel very funny.

Example (8) uses the metaphor “春笋纤长” as a direct substitute for the maid’s delicate fingers; Example (9) uses “豆腐” as a direct substitute for the human brain; Example (10) compares “一线月光” to “一只挤着的近视眼睛”; Example (11) compares Bao Yu, drenched in rain, to “雨打鸡”. In these four examples, no matter whether the entity is present or not, there is an objective similarity in appearance between the entity and the metaphorical vehicle, and this similarity is easy to be understood by the target language readers even through the translation.

As a result, this kind of metaphor in the source language is usually literally translated into the same metaphors in the target language.

## 3.2 The Translation of Metaphors that Create Similarity in Literary Works

Metaphor, as a cognitive phenomenon, is closely related to the way of human thinking and the process of thinking development (Shuang Dingfang 2000:23). We often say: “One side of the water and soil raises one side of the people”. A nation’s natural environment, historical origin, local customs, traditional habits and so on shape its cultural mentality, language habits, ways of thinking and values. Humboldt, a German linguist, pointed out that language is an expression of self and a reflection of culture (Chen Dehong 2000:157). No language in the world can leave a particular culture, and any language is full of traces of human cultural activities (Guo Yingzhen 2004:59). The metaphor that creates similarity is highly dependent on the cognitive process of human beings. Since the way of cognition of different peoples varies from culture to culture, metaphors rooted in different cultures carry the cultural imprints of different peoples. The differences between the East and the West in terms of culture, language, customs and habits also imply that the metaphor that creates similarity cannot be simply copied in translation, which may not only affect the reading experience of the target language readers, but also cause comprehension bias and misunderstanding due to cultural differences. As a result, it is necessary to make adaptations to retain the metaphor by using a combination of various strategies and techniques.

### 3.2.1 Replace Metaphors in the Source Language with Appropriate Metaphors in the Target Language

(12) 贾瑞如听纶音佛语一般，忙往后退。（曹雪芹《红楼梦》）

Translation: Obedient to his goddess’s command, Jia Rui quickly drew back again.

(13) “凤丫头就是楚霸王，也得这两只膀子好举千斤鼎。她不是这丫头，就得这么周到了！”（曹雪芹《红楼梦》）

Translation: Even though she’s a regular Tyrant King, she still needs her Patience in order to be so efficient, just as much as the real Tyrant King needed his two strong arms in order to be able to lift up those hundredweight tripods.’

The words “纶音佛语” in Example (12) and “楚霸王” in Example (13) are rich in religious and historical colors and Chinese culture. If translated directly, western readers may not be able to understand the contents of the original metaphors. And adding annotations would be cumbersome and reduce the reading experience. The translator chooses the appropriate metaphors “goddess’s command” and “a regular Tyrant King” in the target language on the basis of a comprehensive understanding of the content of the original metaphor, which enables readers to have a clearer understanding of the content of the reference and improve the reading experience.

### 3.2.2 Replace Metaphors with Simile

(14) 那公主花容月貌。（吴承恩《西游记》）

Translation: She is as lovely as flowers or the moon and brilliant as well.

(15) 这猪八戒一口一碗，就是风卷残云。（吴承恩《西游记》）

Translation: Pig was finishing up bowls in single mouthfuls, like a gale blowing the clouds away.

The words “花容月貌” in Example (14) and “风卷残云” in Example (15) are typical four-character structures in Chinese. The translator here used the strategy of replacing metaphors with simile to reduce “花容月貌” and “风卷云残” to their original meanings—“as lovely as flowers or the moon and brilliant” and “like a gale blowing the clouds away”, which vividly show the princess’s beauty and Zhu Bajie’s fast eating speed.

### 3.2.3 Combine Simile with the Real Meaning of the Metaphor

(16) 他那天晚上的睡眠，宛如粳米粉的线条，没有粘性，拉不长。（钱钟书《围城》）

Translation: That night Fang’s sleep was fitful, like rice-flour noodles without elasticity or stretchability.

In Example (16), “rice-flour noodles without elasticity or stretchability” is used as a metaphor for “sleep” because of their similarity—“they don’t stretch long”. Here, the translator combined simile with the real meaning of the metaphor, used “rice-flour noodles”, and adding the explanations “without elasticity or stretchability” and “fitful”, so that the readers can guess the meaning of the sentence and reach the conclusion that “he did not sleep well that night”.

### 3.2.4 Make the Metaphors Explicit

(17) 鸿渐道：“我今年反正是倒霉年，准备到处碰钉子的。”（钱钟书《围城》）

Translation: Hung-chien said, "This is my unlucky year in any case. I'm prepared to be disappointed wherever I go.

(18) 平儿忙笑道：“那是他们瞅着大奶奶是个菩萨，姑娘又是个腼腆小姐，固然是拖懒来混。”（曹雪芹《红楼梦》）

Translation: They think that because Mrs Zhu is such a kind, saintly person and you are such a quiet, shy young lady they can get away with anything.’

(19) 辛楣一肚皮的酒，几乎全成醋酸。（钱钟书《围城》）

Translation: The wine in Hsin-mei's stomach turned to sour vinegar in his jealousy.

(20) 他说这冒昧话，准备碰个软钉子。（钱钟书《围城》）

Translation: Having made this rash remark, he braced himself for a polite rebuff.

In Example (17), “碰钉子” is a metaphor for frustration, and they are similar in that they both make people feel disappointed and despondent; in Example (18), “活菩萨” is a metaphor for the great grandmother, and they are similar in that they are both kind-hearted; in Example (19), “醋酸” is a metaphor for the wine that Xinmei drank into her belly, while its actual meaning is a kind of jealousy; in Example (20), the metaphor “软钉子” is a metaphor for “polite refusal”, and their similarity lies in the fact that they are soft on the surface, but hard on the inside. In the translation of these sentences, the translators have adopted the method of making the metaphors explicit—for example, the phrase “碰钉子” in Example (17) is summarized by “be disappointed” skillfully; “活菩萨” in Example (18) is directly translated into “a kind, saintly person”; “醋酸” in Example (19) is directly translated into “jealousy” to show the meaning of the original text; in Example (20), “软钉子” was skillfully summarized as “polite rebuff”.

### 3.2.5 Omit the Metaphors

(21) 黛玉便说：“兔死狐悲，物伤其类，”不免感叹起来。湘云听了却动了气。（曹雪芹《红楼梦》）

Translation: Dai-yu, exclaimed in distress and sympathy, but Xiangyun grew most indignant.

In Example (21), “兔死狐悲，物伤其类” is Daiyu's lament, but the translator directly omitted it and only translated the word “感叹”.

This strategy is generally adopted when the mapping of the conceptual domains in the source language does not achieve cognitive equivalence in the target language culture, and it is also impossible to find metaphors for the conceptual domains in the target language (Wang Xin 2007:58). The method of omitting metaphors is not a superior approach, which tends to lead to the absence of metaphors and the loss of culture, as well as the loss of the linguistic beauty of the original text (Wang Rong and Cai Zhongyuan 2010:79). However, sometimes for special considerations, discarding the metaphors of the original text facilitates the simplicity and fluency of the translation instead.

From the above examples, we can find various strategies to translate metaphors in literary works—literal translation, replacing metaphors in the source language with appropriate metaphors in the target language, replacing metaphors with simile, combining simile with the real meaning of metaphor, making the metaphors explicit and omitting the metaphors. Through these methods, the meaning behind the metaphors can be well preserved in the translation, and the reader's reading experience can be enhanced as well.

## 4. Conclusion

Metaphor is a complex multidimensional structure, an extraordinary linguistic phenomenon, and an unusual collocation of words in a specific linguistic context (Yu Gaofeng 2011:164). Moreover, metaphor is also a special and universal means of cognition. We can better understand the world and transform the world with the help of metaphor.

Sun Jihong (2011) points out that there is both correspondence and heterogeneity in both Chinese and English metaphors. How to reproduce the metaphors from the source language to the target language in literary translation to bring the best reading experience to the readers has always been the direction of translators' pursuit and efforts. This paper summarizes the different strategies for translating metaphors in two types—metaphors based on similarity and metaphors that create similarity.

There is no single strategy for translating metaphors. In literary translation, we should take the readers' reading needs into consideration, trying to retain the cultural connotations of the source language metaphors as much as possible, which requires us to adopt flexible translation strategies. Only in this way can we translate metaphors in literature fully, increase the readability of Chinese and foreign readers, and help Chinese culture go global.

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