

Original Paper

A Study on English Translation of Poems and Lyrics by Mao Tse-tung from the Perspective of Metaphor

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Abstract

Mao Tse-tung is a great revolutionist, and his poems have always been praised as “A poem wins a country”. Metaphor is a process to understand and experience one thing through another thing, with its core to create undiscovered connections between ontology and metaphor, it is to combine two dissimilar things together. Poems and Lyrics written by Mao Tse-tung are rich in metaphors, this paper compares and studies four English translations of Mao Tse-tung’s poems(translated by Xu Yuanchong, Foreign Languages Press, Wang Huiming and Gu Zhengkun) from the perspective of metaphor at conceptual level, and discusses how translator deal with verbal metaphors and nominal metaphors. The results find that most of the translators choose to retain metaphors in the target language in order to accurately convey the information of the poems, which is suitable to translate metaphors in the poems.

Keywords

English translation, poems and lyrics by Mao Tse-tung, verbal metaphor, nominal metaphor, literal translation

1. Introduction

Metaphor is a poetic language, and poetry is the refinement and condensation of language. Poetry and metaphor have many similarities. In her detailed discussion of the poetic function of metaphor, ShuDing Fang describes the poeticization of metaphor and explains the estrangement of metaphor and the imagery of poetry. It can be seen that poetry without metaphor is difficult to imagine. Poetry uses metaphorical imagery to achieve the conveying of poetic mood, thus giving poetry the spirituality and

beauty of poetic metaphor. Mao Zedong, as a revolutionary and poet, cannot separate his poetry creation from the Chinese revolution and construction. His poetry is rich in metaphor, with a bias towards verb metaphors and noun metaphors. How can we translate these metaphors to better disseminate Mao Zedong's poetry? The report of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China clearly pointed out in the eighth chapter, "Promoting Cultural Confidence and Striving for a New Brilliant Socialist Culture", the need to enhance the influence of the dissemination of Chinese civilization. Mao Zedong's poetry is an important reflection of the continuation of Chinese poetic traditions in the 20th century and has had a profound impact on contemporary Chinese culture and politics. Translating it into a foreign language is also a need for international cultural exchange. This article starts with language and metaphor, then explains the classification of metaphor based on its syntactic characteristics, and finally interprets the translation strategies used in the translations of Xu Yuanchong, Foreign Language Press, Wang Huiming, and Gu Zhengkun, hoping to provide reference for the translation of metaphors in Mao Zedong's poems.

2. Metaphor

2.1 Language and Metaphor

Today, there are more and more abstract concepts in our daily language and communication, such as structured, virtual reality, artificial intelligence, metaverse etc., even the word "language" itself is an abstract concept. So how do we understand these abstract concepts? Language and cognition are closely related. With the world being so vast, how do people effectively use language to understand the world? "This requires categorization of infinite things based on certain characteristics, namely categorization. But the world is changing, and cognition is deepening. How can certain language symbols express natural categories beyond certain knowledge? How do people use seemingly conventional language expressions for unconventional things? This requires the introduction of metaphor". Metaphor is not only one of the stylistic features of language, but also one of the cognitive features of language. Metaphor combines dissimilar things together, and its core is to create previously undiscovered connections between the tenor and the vehicle, which is the similarity in metaphor. Indrèkaitė believes that similarity is an abstract structure that has no meaning in itself, and it only has meaning when placed in a certain context. He establishes similarities between the source structure and the target domain with different sensory and muscular properties. For example, comparing youth to "the morning sun at eight or nine o'clock" is to compare their age stage with the time period of the earth's rotation in a day; describing a girl who doesn't care about others as "cold as ice" is to compare her attitude with the properties of natural objects.

In 1980, Lakoff and Turner advocated studying metaphor from a cognitive perspective. In their book "Metaphors We Live By", they emphasize the cognitive role of metaphor. The cognitive achievement of metaphor lies in its ability to discover similarities across categories, similarities between things in

different categories. It can enhance people's ability to understand things that have no name or are yet unknown, and it can go beyond the scope of language. This is why the concept and naming of "artificial satellite" preceded its actual production.

2.2 Syntactic and Structural Characteristics of Metaphor

Metaphor is a means of artistic expression in language. A complete metaphor often includes a subject and a vehicle. The subject refers to the thing to be portrayed, which can be directly described. For example, "She is beautiful, elegant, and dignified", where "she" is the subject. But in order to make the sentence more vivid and vivid, we usually use another thing, which is the vehicle. For example, "She is as beautiful as a blooming flower", where the flower is the vehicle. Sometimes, the similarity on which the metaphor is based also appears in the metaphorical sentence, and this similarity is called the ground of the metaphor. In the metaphorical sentence, the components of the subject, vehicle, and ground are reflected in various parts of speech. The subject may be a noun or a verb, and the vehicle may also be a noun or a verb. Depending on the occurrence of these three in the metaphorical sentence, the structure of the metaphor varies. Based on the syntactic structural characteristics of metaphors, Professor Shu Dingfang classified metaphors into types such as noun metaphors, verb metaphors, adverb metaphors, and preposition metaphors. In Mao Zedong's poetry, verb metaphors and noun metaphors appear more frequently. This article will start with verb metaphors and noun metaphors to interpret the translation of different metaphorical types.

3. Translation Research on Metaphor in Mao Zedong's Poetry

3.1 Metaphors and Meanings in Mao Zedong's Poetry

Mao Zedong is a great Marxist and a great proletarian revolutionary. He led the people to complete the tasks of anti-imperialism and anti-feudalism, and established the new China. At the same time, he was also a poet. His poetry is rich in imagery, magnificent, profound in thoughts, and powerful in artistic appeal. Even foreign friends praised him as "a poet who won a new China". Those who have read Chairman Mao's poems know that his poetic creations reflect his revolutionary career and truthfully record the great practice of China's revolution and socialist construction. Mao Zedong's poetry is rich in metaphors, and the poet often uses natural landscapes to express his emotions, such as wind and rain, plum blossoms, flying snow, and the moon. He also uses animals as metaphors for warlord forces and imperialists, such as tigers, leopards, and blue dragons. Some of these metaphors are literal, some are symbolic, but all of them reflect the poet's mood at that time. Regardless of their literal or symbolic meanings, these metaphors embody Chairman Mao's broad mind and lofty sentiments, giving people a beautiful artistic experience.

3.2 English Translation of Metaphors in Mao Zedong's Poetry

3.2.1 Verbal Metaphor: Unconventional Collocation of Verbs and Subjects

In both English and Chinese, verbs are the main part of speech that constructs sentences. Verbal metaphors refer to the metaphor formed by the conflict between the verb used in discourse and the logical subject or object. They can be classified into three categories based on their formation: metaphor formed by the conflict between logical subject and predicate, metaphor formed by the conflict between logical verb and object, and metaphor formed by the conflict between logical subject, predicate, and object. In Mao Zedong's poems, there are quite a few metaphors formed by the conflict between logical subject and predicate, such as "Three million jade dragons soar, chilling the sky", "The seas rage with angry clouds and water", and "Plum blossoms joyfully cover the sky with snow". The following text will analyze and explain two instances of verbal metaphor in Mao Zedong's poems through translation examples.

例 1: 一山飞峙大江边。 --- 《七律·登庐山》

外文社 1998 年版:

Perching as after *flight*, the mountain towers over the Yangtze;

许渊冲 2010 年版:

A mountain *stands* in mid-air by the riverside;

辜正坤 2010 年版:

Towering by the mighty river the mount seems about to *fly*;

As a great proletarian revolutionary, Chairman Mao's poems include those about plants and mountains, love poems, but most of them contain political emotions. This poem was written on July 1, 1959, when the Party led the Chinese people to show a high level of socialist enthusiasm and creativity in economic construction, achieving certain results. The poet brings Lu Mountain to life, comparing the still mountain to a flying life form, vividly displaying the aura of Lu Mountain and expressing the poet's joyful and relaxed mood, showcasing the poet's lofty aspirations. The combination of the verb "fly" and the noun "mountain" forms an unconventional semantic relationship, creating conflict and promoting the verb metaphor of "flying". Foreign Language Press translates it as "perching as after flight", while Gu Zhengkun translates it as "seems about to fly". Both translations adopt the method of retaining the metaphor, with only Foreign Language Press directly translating "flying" as "flight", evoking the image of a "flying" mountain in the reader's mind, making the translation vivid and well preserving the momentum of the original poem. Gu's translation is more subtle, adding "seems about to" without directly stating that the mountain is "flying" and increasing the length of the translation, slightly weakening the momentum. Mr. Xu does not translate this metaphor but directly translates the scene of the mountain standing by the river, rendering it as "stands in mid-air". The author believes that although Mr. Xu Yuanchong's "stands" accurately conveys the meaning of Lu Mountain standing by the river, in doing so, there is no visual sense of conflict brought by the mountain "flying", and the

translation is relatively calm, lacking a dynamic sense of beauty. Therefore, accurately identifying the subject or object of the verb and translating the verb metaphor in a direct manner, based on the principle of preserving the original style, will make the translation more accurate and more acceptable.

例 2：喇叭声咽。 --- 《忆秦娥·娄山关》

外文社 1998 年版：

Bugles sobbing low.

许渊冲 2020 年版：

And bugles blow forlorn.

王慧明 1975 年版：

Bugles wail a mournful tune.

辜正坤 2010 年版：

Bugles sobbing.

This poem vividly depicts a magnificent and vast winter night march. The poet portrays the tense and intense scene of the Red Army's battle at Lou Shanguan during the Long March. Conquering Lou Shanguan was a turning point for the Red Army, as it marked a shift from passivity to initiative. Lou Shanguan was a strategically important and difficult-to-capture fortress that posed a great challenge for the Red Army. After the victory, Mao Zedong stood before Lou Shanguan, gazing at the setting sun and the mountains in the distance, and wrote this poem. The word “咽” originally means a low and muffled sound caused by obstruction, but here it is used to describe the intermittent sounds of bugles heard in the cold wind. In response to this metaphor, the translation by Waiwen She and Mr. Gu preserves the feature by translating it as “sobbing”, which is an on-and-off sobbing sound, while Mr. Wang Huiming translates it as “wail”, which is a mournful wailing sound. Both translations effectively convey the tragic and mournful tone of the bugle sounds in terms of visual and auditory elements, evoking a gloomy and oppressive mood that matches the somber atmosphere of the winter night march. However, Mr. Xu's translation, by opting not to retain the metaphor, translates it as “blow”, focusing on the action of the Red Army blowing bugles. Therefore, visually, there may be a lack of the desolation conveyed by “wail” and “sobbing”. The translations by Waiwen She, Mr. Wang Huiming, and Mr. Gu Zhengkun better capture the somber atmosphere of the original poem, skillfully transferring the metaphor into the translated text and reflecting the style of the original poem and the heavy emotions of the Red Army at that time.

3.2.2 Nominal Metaphor

Nominal metaphor is a metaphor formed by nouns, serving as subject, object, predicate, etc. in a sentence. As most nouns are referential words, for example, “He is a pig”, where “pig” as a noun is the target of metaphor, we all know that pigs are lazy and love eating, so “he” is metaphorically compared to a “pig”, thus, when we see the sentence, we can easily imagine his character. From the above, it can be seen that nominal metaphors are easier to understand and imagine, thus more easily recognizable. In

Mao Zedong's poetry, the poet is adept at using metaphors to enrich his language, such as using wind and rain to metaphorically represent the international situation at that time. The following text will analyze and explain translation examples of two instances of nominal metaphors in Mao Zedong's poetry.

例 4: 五岭逶迤腾细浪, 乌蒙磅礴走泥丸。 --- 《七律·长征》

外文社 1998 年版:

The Five Ridges like gentle ripples

And the majestic Wumeng roll by, globules of clay.

许渊冲 2020 年版:

The five serpentine Ridges outspread like rippling rills;

The pompous Wumeng peaks tower but like mole-hills.

王慧明 1975 年版:

The Wuling ranges ripples like a fine spray,

Majestic Wumeng rolls only a bead of clay.

This Qijue poem was written in October 1935, when Mao Zedong led the Red Army across the Min Mountains, and the Long March was about to end. Looking back at the countless difficulties and dangers overcome during the year-long Long March; now, with the dawn ahead and victory in sight, his heart surged with excitement, and he wrote this magnificent poem with full enthusiasm. The poet compares the undulating Wuling Mountains to small ripples on the water's surface, and the majestic Wumeng Mountains, in the eyes of the Red Army, are just rolling tiny mud balls. The poet uses "ripples" and "mud balls" to highlight the greatness of the revolutionary heroes. Foreign Language Press and Mr. Wang Huiming both translate it as "ripples", which refers to the ripples on the water's surface. The addition of "gentle" by Foreign Language Press evokes the softness associated with a breeze gently brushing the water's surface. Mr. Wang Huiming adds "like a fine spray" to describe ripples, which are like small water droplets. The translated text emphasizes the continuous Wuling Mountains vividly depicted in the original poem. Mr. Xu translates it as "rippling rills", where "rill" refers to very small streams, effectively retaining the metaphor in a concrete and vivid manner. Translations "globules of clay" and "a bead of clay" by Mr. Xu also visually depict the small size and abundance of the mud balls used to metaphorically represent the Wumeng Mountains, reflecting the exquisite craftsmanship of the translation. Mr. Xu's choice of "mole-hills" in the target language, which resembles very small hills like molehills, aptly connects the English and Chinese understanding of this metaphor, cleverly conveying the images of the two mountains in the original work and creating a stark contrast. By preserving the metaphorical connotations of the original poem and finding corresponding imagery in the translation, Xu Yuanchong's translation is more concise and clear. All of the above translations reproduce the exaggerated style of the original poem, bringing a visual sense of impact to the readers and enabling them to experience the revolutionary spirit of the poet (Red Army) who

fearlessly faces difficulties and dangers with optimism.

例 5: 何时缚住苍龙? --- 《清平乐·六盘山》

外文社 1998 年版:

When shall we bind fast the Grey Dragon?

许渊冲 2010 年版:

When shall we bind the Dragon Gray?

王慧明 1975 年版:

When shall we capture the green dragon?

Appreciating Mao Zedong's poetry, one can see a great number of bird (such as kuns and kestrels) and animal (such as tigers and leopards) images, which often appear in a derogatory form, used by the poet to indirectly refer to the hostile forces, opportunists harmful to the revolution, and foreign imperialists of that time. This poem "Six Mountain Ranges" was written in October 1935 when Mao Zedong crossed the Liupan Mountains, expressing his firm determination to completely defeat the reactionary forces of the Kuomintang and conveying his ambitious aspiration to carry the revolution to the end. The term "Cānglóng" is understood as an ominous and evil deity, used by the poet as a metaphor for all reactionary forces including imperialism. Although the specific referent of the metaphor is not mentioned in this particular case, based on the context of the poem, we can understand the specific connotation of the metaphor "Cānglóng". Translators have chosen to retain the metaphor and directly translate it as "the Grey Dragon", "the Dragon Gray", and "the green dragon". However, both the Xu translation and the Wang translation include annotations, with the Xu translation stating, "The Dragon Gray refers to the Japanese aggressors", and the Wang translation stating, "Mao may be alluding here to the invading Japanese, or to other evils in China". Both annotations clarify the intended target of the term "Dragon" for the readers of the target language.

4. Conclusion

As a revolutionary, Mao Zedong is not unfamiliar to those who know him as a poet, but there are not many who truly understand the rich connotations of his poetry. Poetry uses metaphorical images to convey poetic sentiment, and it is hard to imagine a poem without metaphors. The imagery in Mao Zedong's poems is particularly abundant. Through the analysis and interpretation of noun metaphors and verb metaphors in this article, it is found that translators usually choose to preserve the metaphors in order to reproduce the original poem's style. For some lines with rich connotations, translators only translate the metaphorical aspect and may add annotations at the end of the text to help readers further understand the implied metaphors in the poetry.

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