

A Study on the Chinese Translation of English Metaphors from an Aesthetic Perspective

Rongxiang Sun

College of Foreign Languages, Shandong University of Science and Technology, Qingdao, Shandong, China

Abstract: Metaphor, as a highly condensed and aesthetically rich mode of expression in language, carries abundant imagery, emotion and cultural connotations in literary texts. The translation of metaphor is not merely a transformation of meaning, but a process of aesthetic re-creation. For a long time, research on metaphor translation has mainly been conducted from the perspectives of cognitive linguistics or functional equivalence, while systematic exploration of its aesthetic value remains relatively insufficient. Taking translation aesthetics as its theoretical framework and integrating conceptual metaphor theory, this study conducts a comparative analysis of English metaphors and their Chinese translations in literary texts, with a particular focus on the reproduction of imagistic beauty, formal beauty and emotional beauty in the process of metaphor translation. The findings suggest that, on the basis of fidelity to the original meaning, translators should give full play to their subjectivity and achieve aesthetic reconstruction in the target text through strategies such as image retention, image transformation and aesthetic adjustment. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the aesthetic dimension of metaphor translation and offers valuable implications for literary translation practice and translation pedagogy.

Key words: translation aesthetics; English metaphor; Metaphor translation; Aesthetic re-creation; English–Chinese comparison

Introduction

Research Background

Metaphor is one of the most universal and expressive rhetorical devices in human language and thought. With the development of cognitive linguistics, metaphor is no longer regarded merely as a rhetorical ornament but is understood as a fundamental means by which humans perceive the world and construct meaning ^[1]. In literary texts, metaphors often encapsulate complex ideas and emotional experiences in highly condensed forms, exhibiting distinctive aesthetic qualities. Consequently, metaphor translation has long been regarded as both a focal point and a challenge in translation studies.

In English–Chinese translation practice, significant differences in linguistic structure, cultural background, and aesthetic tradition often give rise to problems such as image dislocation, cultural gaps and aesthetic attenuation in the translation of English metaphors. If translators confine themselves to semantic correspondence alone, the translated text may lose both form and spirit, thereby weakening the aesthetic value of the original. Therefore, reexamining the Chinese translation of English metaphors from the perspective of translation aesthetics is of considerable theoretical significance and practical value.

Research Significance

From a theoretical perspective, metaphor, as a crucial cognitive mechanism of language and thought, has long been a central topic in linguistics, cognitive science, and translation studies. Conceptual metaphor theory, represented by Lakoff and Johnson emphasizes the foundational role of metaphor in conceptual construction, while studies on metaphor translation have mainly focused on semantic transfer, functional equivalence, or communicative effectiveness^[2]. In comparison, systematic attention to the aesthetic value of metaphor translation remains limited. Translation aesthetics, which highlights the aesthetic reproduction of imagery, form, and emotion in translated texts, provides an important theoretical supplement to metaphor translation studies^[3-4].

By integrating translation aesthetics with metaphor translation research, this study seeks to address the tendency of existing research to privilege cognitive explanation or functional realization at the expense of aesthetic dimensions. In doing so, it aims to expand the theoretical perspective of metaphor translation studies and deepen the understanding of the relationship between meaning, form, and aesthetics in literary translation.

From a practical perspective, metaphors in literary texts often carry highly condensed aesthetic information and thus constitute one of the most challenging aspects of literary translation. How to convey both the conceptual meaning and the aesthetic value of metaphors in cross-linguistic transfer is a pressing issue for translators and translation pedagogy alike. Through a comparative analysis of metaphors in classic English literary texts and their Chinese translations, this study summarizes concrete strategies concerning image selection, formal adjustment, and emotional modulation, with the aim of identifying practicable aesthetic approaches to metaphor translation and providing reference for literary translation practice and metaphor instruction in translation classrooms.

Research Approach and Structure

This study is grounded in translation aesthetics and conceptual metaphor theory, and adopts a comparative textual analysis method. By systematically examining typical metaphors in English literary works and their Chinese translations, the study focuses not on evaluating translational quality per se, but on revealing the aesthetic orientations underlying different translation strategies and their effects on the translated text. The structure of the paper is as follows: Section One introduces the research background, significance, and framework; Section Two presents the theoretical foundations; Section Three describes the research methodology and data sources; Section Four offers a text-based aesthetic analysis of English metaphors in Chinese translation; Section Five provides a comprehensive discussion; and Section Six concludes the study, outlining its implications and limitations.

1. Theoretical Foundations

1.1 Metaphor Theory from a Cognitive Linguistic Perspective

For a long time, metaphor was regarded primarily as a rhetorical device used for figurative expression in literary language. However, with the rise of cognitive linguistics, metaphor studies have moved beyond the traditional rhetorical framework and acquired deeper cognitive significance. In *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson systematically propose conceptual metaphor theory, arguing that metaphor is not a superficial linguistic ornament but a fundamental cognitive mechanism through which humans understand and organize abstract concepts by means of concrete experience^[1]. Within this theoretical framework, metaphor is defined as a systematic mapping from a source domain to a target domain, enabling cognitive construction through familiar experiential structures.

For example, the conceptual metaphor *TIME IS MONEY* is manifested in English through expressions such as *save time*, *waste time*, and *invest time*. These expressions are not isolated phenomena but reflect a cognitive pattern in which time is conceptualized as a manageable resource. This illustrates the systematic and conceptual nature of metaphor, whose essence lies in cognitive mapping rather than simple linguistic substitution.

In translation contexts, the cognitive models and cultural experiences underlying metaphors are often language- and culture-specific. When discrepancies exist between the source and target languages in experiential structures or conceptual systems, metaphor comprehension and reproduction become particularly challenging. Consequently,

metaphor translation involves not only lexical or syntactic transformation but also the successful reconstruction of the original metaphorical cognition in the target language. The effectiveness of this cognitive transfer directly affects the translated text's comprehensibility, naturalness and aesthetic impact.

1.2 Translation Aesthetics

Translation aesthetics, as an important branch of translation studies, has developed in close connection with the evolution of contemporary Chinese translation theory. Liu is widely recognized as a pioneering scholar who systematized translation aesthetics and promoted its disciplinary development^[3]. In *An Outline of Translation Aesthetics*, Liu formally incorporated translation aesthetics into modern translation theory, arguing that translation studies should not be confined to linguistic transformation but should address the aesthetic attributes manifested in translation activities^[3]. He further distinguished between traditional and modern translation aesthetics: the former focuses on the relationship between classical translation theories and traditional literary aesthetics, often relying on experiential summaries and aesthetic intuition; the latter seeks to overcome the lack of theoretical rigor and systematicity by exploring the nature, aesthetic principles and expressive forms of translation art with particular attention to translation style, genre, rhetoric and literary translation^[5]. In the same year, Liu's *A Basic Theoretical Framework of Translation Aesthetics* elaborated on research objects, tasks, aesthetic subjects, objects and general laws of translational aesthetic experience, laying the foundation for the theoretical construction of translation aesthetics^[6].

As research progressed, translation aesthetics gradually emerged as an influential paradigm in translation studies. Fan and Yu argue that the introduction of aesthetic perspectives provides a new theoretical pathway for understanding the artistic attributes of translation activities^[7]. In *A Dictionary of Translation Studies*, edited by Fang, translation aesthetics is defined as "the application of aesthetic principles to establish aesthetic standards for different types of texts, analyze and interpret aesthetic problems in interlingual transfer, and provide categories and means for aesthetic reproduction in translation, thereby guiding translation practice"^[8]. This definition encapsulates the dual orientation of translation aesthetics toward both theoretical construction and practical guidance.

In terms of specific theoretical propositions, translation aesthetics emphasizes the aesthetic nature of translation activities, viewing translation not merely as meaning transmission but as an artistic re-creation aimed at aesthetic reproduction. Fu argues that translation should prioritize "the reproduction of beauty," achieving harmony among meaning, form, style and overall aesthetic effect on the basis of fidelity to the original^[3]. This view extends the traditional criteria of "faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance" by incorporating aesthetic value into translation evaluation.

Building on this foundation, Liu further refined the aesthetic framework of translation by proposing a multidimensional evaluation encompassing imagistic beauty, formal beauty and emotional beauty^[4]. Imagistic beauty concerns the reproduction of images and artistic conception; formal beauty focuses on rhythm, syntax and rhetorical features; and emotional beauty emphasizes the transmission of emotional atmosphere and aesthetic appeal. This multidimensional approach provides a systematic analytical perspective for literary translation and offers essential theoretical support for studies of metaphor translation, which involve intensive aesthetic processing.

1.3 Implications of Metaphor Translation from an Aesthetic Perspective

As a highly condensed linguistic form, metaphor simultaneously carries cognitive meaning and aesthetic value. If translation remains confined to semantic equivalence, it often fails to reproduce the artistic effects embedded in metaphors. Integrating metaphor theory with translation aesthetics offers a comprehensive perspective that accounts for both cognitive mechanisms and aesthetic values. Cognitively, translators must accurately grasp the conceptual mappings underlying metaphors; aesthetically, they must attend to the emotional coloration, artistic intent and aesthetic function of metaphors in specific contexts.

From the perspective of translation aesthetics, metaphor translation should not be constrained by formal correspondence but should be guided by the reproduction of aesthetic function. This allows translators, when necessary, to adjust metaphorical forms or even adopt substitution and reconstruction strategies to achieve comparable aesthetic effects

in the target language. In this process, translators act not only as interpreters of cognitive meaning but also as reconstructors of aesthetic value, with their subjectivity playing a particularly prominent role.

Thus, the ideal goal of metaphor translation is not unidimensional equivalence, but a dynamic balance between cognitive intelligibility and aesthetic resonance. The integration of translation aesthetics and conceptual metaphor theory provides a systematic analytical framework for metaphor translation and lays a solid theoretical foundation for the subsequent textual analysis.

2. Research Methodology and Data Sources

This study adopts a qualitative research approach grounded in translation aesthetics and conceptual metaphor theory. Through close reading and English–Chinese comparative analysis, metaphors in the source texts and their translations are examined on a case-by-case basis. The analysis focuses on three aspects: (1) the reproduction of core metaphorical images and their aesthetic integrity; (2) formal adjustments in syntax, lexical choice, and rhythm, along with their aesthetic effects; (3) the transmission of emotional coloration and value implications across languages. By doing so, the study seeks to reveal how different translation strategies influence the aesthetic reproduction of metaphors.

The research data are drawn primarily from classic English literary works, including Shakespearean drama, English poetry, and British and American novels. These texts are rich in metaphorical language and possess high cognitive complexity and aesthetic value, making them representative and suitable for translation studies. Authoritative Chinese translations widely recognized in academic circles such as those by Zhu and Bian are selected to ensure translational quality and the academic reliability of the analysis^[9].

3. Aesthetic Analysis of English Metaphors in Chinese Translation

In literary texts, metaphors often manifest as multilayered and composite image structures, whose aesthetic value lies not only in figurative meaning but also in associative tension, emotional coloring and linguistic artistry. An aesthetic analysis of the Chinese translation of English metaphors thus helps illuminate how translators achieve aesthetic recreation in cross-linguistic transfer. This chapter examines representative metaphor translations from three dimensions: imagistic beauty, formal beauty and emotional beauty.

3.1 Aesthetic Reconstruction of Imagistic Beauty in Composite Metaphors

Example 1:

Life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.

(Shakespeare, *Macbeth*)

Translation (Zhu):

人生不过是一个愚人所讲的故事，充满了喧嚣和骚动，却毫无意义。

This line is a highly representative metaphor in Shakespeare's drama, constituting a composite metaphor with multiple overlapping images. "Life" is compared to "a tale told by an idiot," further intensified by "sound and fury," which reinforces its chaotic and empty nature. The metaphor constructs an image of existential nihilism imbued with intense tragic emotion.

From the perspective of translation aesthetics, the core aesthetic value of this metaphor lies in three aspects. First, imagistic integrity: Zhu preserves the central metaphor of "a tale" and reproduces the sensory impact of "sound and fury" through "喧嚣和骚动," maintaining aesthetic tension at both visual and auditory levels. Second, continuity of imagistic logic: the progression from "tale" to "sound and fury" to "nothing" is rendered through the structure "充满……却毫无意义," effectively reproducing the original semantic progression. Third, cultural aesthetic acceptability: while Chinese literary tradition also employs metaphors such as "life as a dream" or "life as a play," this translation retains the defamiliarized imagery of the original without impeding comprehension, thereby achieving effective aesthetic communication.

This example demonstrates an image-retention-oriented strategy that preserves the original metaphorical structure while achieving cross-cultural aesthetic resonance.

3.2 Re-creation of Formal Beauty through Metaphorical Structural Adjustment

Example 2:

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes.
(T. S. Eliot, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*)

Translation (Bian Zhilin):

黄色的雾在窗玻璃上摩擦着它的脊背，
黄色的烟在窗玻璃上蹭着它的口鼻。

Here, “fog” and “smoke” are metaphorically endowed with animal characteristics, combining personification and synesthetic metaphor. Through repetitive sentence structures and anthropomorphic actions, the original creates a slow, viscous urban atmosphere, with form itself constituting a crucial component of aesthetic effect.

Rather than pursuing mere semantic equivalence, Bian pays close attention to formal beauty and rhythm. First, syntactically, the parallel structure and repetition are retained, producing visual and rhythmic correspondence in Chinese. Second, in lexical choice, verbs such as “摩擦” and “蹭” capture the tactile and physical quality of “rubs” and “muzzle,” while enhancing poetic flow through their rhythm and colloquial resonance. Third, the metaphorical image of fog and smoke as animal-like entities is fully preserved, maintaining the defamiliarization and symbolic tension of the original.

This example illustrates that formal beauty is not ancillary but integral to aesthetic meaning, and that careful manipulation of syntax, rhythm and diction enables effective aesthetic re-creation.

3.3 Aesthetic Adjustment in the Translation of Emotional Metaphors

Example 3:

Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul.
(Emily Dickinson)

Translation (common version):

希望是一只长着羽毛的鸟，
栖息在人的灵魂里。

This metaphor constructs a light, warm and life-affirming image of hope. Unlike the tragic metaphor above, its aesthetic value lies primarily in emotional softness and consolation. In translation, “thing with feathers” is rendered as “鸟,” a slight concretization that enhances imagery and emotional accessibility in Chinese aesthetic tradition. From the perspective of translation aesthetics, this reflects an emotion-prioritized strategy of aesthetic adjustment. Meanwhile, “perches in the soul” is translated as “栖息在人的灵魂里,” preserving the spatial metaphor and depicting hope as a gentle presence within the inner spiritual world, thus maintaining emotional alignment with the original.

This example demonstrates that translators may need to balance semantic precision and aesthetic reception, adjusting metaphorical images to maximize emotional resonance.

Overall, the analysis shows that the Chinese translation of English metaphors is a multifaceted process involving cognitive understanding, aesthetic judgment and translator subjectivity. Successful metaphor translation requires a dynamic balance among imagistic beauty, formal beauty and emotional beauty, respecting the aesthetic spirit of the source text while creatively reconstructing metaphors within the target language’s aesthetic tradition.

Conclusion

Based on the systematic analysis of multiple English metaphors and their Chinese translations, this study finds that the

success of metaphor translation does not hinge on mechanical formal correspondence, but on the translator's ability to grasp the aesthetic functions embedded in the original metaphors and to reconstruct them creatively in the target language. From an aesthetic perspective, metaphor is not merely a cognitive mapping device but a highly condensed aesthetic form of expression, and its translation is essentially an act of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural aesthetic reproduction.

The findings indicate that rigid literal translation often fails to preserve imagistic beauty and emotional tension, whereas appropriate image transformation, semantic adjustment, and even creative rewriting may better achieve aesthetic equivalence. Translators are not passive transmitters of meaning but active participants in aesthetic construction, whose aesthetic judgment and artistic competence play a decisive role in metaphor translation. This observation confirms a core tenet of translation aesthetics: translation is not simple replication, but re-creation grounded in faithful understanding. Moreover, aesthetic fidelity in metaphor translation does not equate to formal equivalence, but to a holistic grasp of aesthetic spirit, emotional tone and artistic intention. Translators must maintain a dynamic balance between fidelity and creativity, avoiding both rigidity that results in aesthetic loss and excessive freedom that deviates from the original. In this way, translated texts can better meet the aesthetic expectations of target-language readers.

In sum, the Chinese translation of English metaphors is not merely a process of transferring cognitive meaning or semantic information, but one of reconstructing aesthetic value across linguistic systems. An effective metaphor translation should integrate imagistic beauty, formal beauty and emotional beauty through flexible strategy selection based on a thorough understanding of the metaphor's cognitive foundation. The aesthetic perspective offers a comprehensive approach that transcends purely cognitive or functional analyses, contributing to a deeper understanding of the nature of literary translation.

References

- [1] Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M. *Metaphors We Live By*[M]. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.
- [2] Newmark, P. *A Textbook of Translation*[M]. London: Prentice Hall, 1988.
- [3] Fu Z X. *Practical Translation Aesthetics*[M]. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 1993.
- [4] Liu M Q. *An Outline of Cultural Translation*[M]. Beijing: China Translation & Publishing Corporation, 2016.
- [5] Zhang Y. "My way is consistent throughout": A review of Liu Miqing's translation aesthetics[J]. *Foreign Language and Translation*, 2025, 32(3): 16–20, 98.
- [6] Liu M Q. An outline of translation aesthetics[J]. *Foreign Languages*, 1986(2): 46–51.
- [7] Fan Z R, Yu H L. Aesthetic orientation: An ancient yet renewed topic in translation studies[J]. *Foreign Languages and Their Teaching*, 2024(1): 111–117, 145, 150.
- [8] Fang M Z. *Dictionary of Translation Studies*[Z]. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2004.
- [9] Zhu S H. *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*[M]. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 2010.

Author Biography: Rongxiang Sun, born in January 2002, female, Han ethnicity, native of Weifang, Shandong Province. She is a master's candidate at the College of Foreign Languages, Shandong University of Science and Technology, majoring in Foreign Linguistics and Applied Linguistics.