

# A Cognitive Analysis of False Friends in Chinese-English Translation on Conceptual Metaphor Theory

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## Abstract

Many inspirations have been drawn for false friends in Chinese-English Translation from the studies of classifications, causes as well as translation strategies in the light of Theoretical Linguistics and Pragmatics. The paper aims to conduct a cognitive study of false friends in translation under the perspective of Conceptual Metaphor Theory. With abroad data and careful analysis, non-corresponding metaphorical meanings between Chinese and English give rise to false friends in translation. Metaphorical meanings are recognized within specific culture and context which are the indirect causes of false friends in translation. Furthermore, the improvement of translators' cognitive competence of metaphors and Optimum Principle are required to avoid false friends in translation, to express the conceptual metaphorical meaning as much as possible.

**Keywords:** False friends in Chinese-English translation, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Cognitive Experience, Optimum Principle.

## 1. Introduction

False friends phenomenon in translation is defined by English scholar Mark Shuttleworth and Moira Cowie (2004: 57-58) as a standard item used to describe the Source Language and Target Language items which have the same or very similar form but different meanings. The term derives from the French words "faux amis" and was first put forward in *Les Faux Amis ou Les Trahisons du Vocabulaire Anglais* by Maxime Kœssler and Jules Derocquign in 1928. It is also a widely acknowledged from the linguistic point of view that false friends phenomenon is a

negative transfer. Then it was Zhao Zhencai(1983) who borrowed the term to depict the Chinese-English translation, including the translation of words, phrases or expressions etc., which are identical or similar in literal meaning, but different from connotative meaning, and which consequently bring about mistranslation. From then on, the definition of false friends in Chinese Translation Circle has gone through some changes as it surpasses the limitation of the field of phonology and morphology, but also involves both the intro-language and inter-language translation and synchronic and diachronic researches. A large number of translators and translating scholars, upon summarizing the experience accumulated, air their opinion about classification, causes and translating strategies of false friends in Chinese-English translation. Generally, false friends are mainly classified in the word formation, phrases and sentences structure. In addition, causes of false friends phenomenon in translation trace back to the thinking and cultural differences between China and West as well as translators' competence to identify and handle the differences just mentioned. Yao Weiwei (2013) has also proposed three translating strategies which are free translation, literal translation with annotation and borrowing translation.

In short, false friends phenomenon has attracted the attention of translators and translating researchers. However, reasons and translating strategies of false friends are still under-researched without acknowledged ones. By case analyses on false friends from daily life and existing research files,, this paper probes into the causes and prevention methods for false friends in Chinese-English in the light of Conceptual Metaphor Theory.

## **2. Conceptual Metaphor Theory**

Conceptual Metaphor was first put forward by Lakoff and Johnson (2003) in their famous paper of *Metaphors We Live By*, which proposed that our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature. It is known to all that Metaphor is a kind of rhetorical device widely used in literary creation and criticism (Peng & al., 2009). Hard evidence can be found in Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, among which there is a verse: "Sometimes too hot the eye of the heaven shines". The expression "the eye of the heaven" is a metaphor and refers to the sun. Metaphorical expressions are also part of our everyday language, such as "the eye of a hurricane" where a body part is used to describe the center of a hurricane. Later, as Lakoff and Johnson (2003) put it, metaphor is an important cognitive tool. That is, metaphor is not only a means for the expression of thought by various linguistic devices, but also a way of thinking through psychological cognitive models. The nature of metaphor is to understand and experience one entity in terms of another. In the psychological process, there are two essential factors, namely the signified and the signifier with the former referring to Target Concept, the later Source Concept. Structural elements are mapped from Source Concept onto Source Concept, which is called Mapping Scope as shown below.

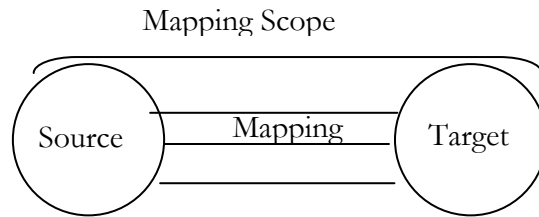


Fig. 1. Mapping Scope (Peng, 2009:132)

Generally, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, which is scientific, forward-looking and innovative, widely exists in real-world applications. On view of this, Dong Jiehua (2018) has summed up three properties of Conceptual Metaphor Theory. The first defining property is that it is universal. Conceptual Metaphor Theory covers a lot of grounds and is embedded in daily conversation, and language users can deliver metaphorical meanings by the actual choice of words. Another feature of Conceptual Metaphor Theory is cognitive as metaphor is a linear thinking rather than a rhetorical device. Conceptual Metaphor Theory is also systemic with metaphorical concept systems interconnected.

### 3. Causes For False Friends In Translation on Conceptual Metaphors

From the angle of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the translation, from the word formation and phrases structure of the source text to those of the target language, is a complex cognitive process where the translators' cognitive experience is the prerequisite (Wang, 2005: 16). In the process, the token of the source language is identified through vision, then turned into concepts. Concepts in mind generate integrate ideas through sophisticated thinking activities, such as composition, completion and elaboration, etc. Non-corresponding metaphorical concept system on account of cognitive differences between East and West also gives rise to false friends in translation. Therefore, the causes for false friends in translation can be explored from non-corresponding metaphorical concept system and translator's inadequate cognitive competence of metaphors which are illustrated in detail later.

#### 3.1 Non-corresponding Metaphorical Concept Systems

In general, non-corresponding metaphorical concept system brings about false friends in Chinese-English translation on the promise of cognitive experience. In other words, conceptual Metaphors are based on our experience and understanding of the ethnic culture (Xiao & Li, 2010). And Chinese and Westerners, indeed, share certain cognitive embodiment of cultures and some physical experience. Meanwhile, eastern and western cultures possess similar or overlapping conceptual metaphors. For instance, the Chinese idiom “如鱼得水” and the English idiom “as a fish getting into water” have the same metaphorical images of “fish” and “water”. This originates from the experience that a fish lives a comfortable and easy life in water, which implies that one person finds mind-liked companions or lives in a pleasant surroundings (Yu, 1991: 400). Besides, on face of “like father, like son” and “有其父必有其子”, there is a common cognition about parent's tremendous impact on their children between the Eastern

culture and Western culture. Therefore, there are some corresponding systems of metaphorical conception between Chinese and English.

However, if you have had in-depth exchanges with foreigners, it is a good bet that sooner or later you will come across the cognitive differences between Chinese-speakers and English-speakers. And there are Images of metaphor in Chinese and English that look similar but have disparate cultural connotative meaning. Here are amounts of examples of such, and one pair of them- “牛” and “cattle” will be considered carefully.

According to Oxford Advanced Learner’s English-Chinese Dictionary and XIANDAI HANYU DA CIDIAN, both “cattle” in English and “牛” in Chinese have similar literal meaning which is the first meaning in the dictionary, namely “a large ruminant animal with horns and cloven hoofs, domesticated for milk and meat”. But they have other different metaphorical meanings, owing to the distinct cultural experience of this animal for Chinese and Westerners. As the dictionary says, “cattle” are a broad group of cows and bulls. And cows is a negative and derogatory word, and closely related to a person, thing or situation, such as “you stupid cow” and “coward” etc, while bulls are the adult male of cattle and other animals and imply someone who acts is in a rough or awkward situation. In contrast, “牛” in Chinese culture is a generic word describing a big mammalian ruminant with horns on its head and long hair on the tip of its tail. It implies something or somebody stubborn through the metaphorical expressions of “牛脾气”, “牛劲”, “牛性子” etc. In addition, “牛” also has a negative connotation to describe someone egotistical, lack of modesty. Except for these, an amazing and extraordinary person also can be called “牛”, which is a great accolade. Phrases of “牛人” and “大牛” are good examples.

So “cattle” in English and “牛” in Chinese have partly corresponding metaphorical meanings. So the metaphorical concept system of “cattle” and “牛” are not completely correspondent, and could be false friends in some cases. For instance, “牛人” cannot be interpreted literally as “ a person as a cattle”, instead, its appropriate translation should be “a genius”. So “牛人” and “a person as a cattle” are a pair of false friends between English and Chinese which have the similar denotation and unlike connotations. And the phenomenon is due to the non-corresponding metaphorical meanings. So it is no doubt that different metaphorical meanings can be the causes of great importance for the occurrence of false friends.

### **3.2 Translator’s Inadequate Cognitive Competence of Metaphors**

It has already been analyzed that false friends in the Chinese-English translation are caused by non-corresponding metaphorical concept systems between Chinese and English. And conceptual metaphors are constrained by national culture, social context as well as translator’s cognitive competence of metaphors (Xiao & Li, 2010). Therefore, it is meaningful to probe into translator’s inadequate cognitive competence of metaphors in specific culture and context in the light of psychological cognition, to seek the internal causes of false friends in translation.

#### **3.2.1 Culture**

False friends caused by diverse cultural cognition are commonplace, for the enormous differences between Chinese and Western are obvious, and there is a huge divergence of cultural

awareness between Chinese and Westerners. The pair of false friends- “paper money” and “纸钱” are among the starkest examples. Searching in Oxford Advanced Learner’s English-Chinese Dictionary, we can figure out that “paper money” is money that made of paper, not coins or virtual currency. Here money is conceptualized by its constitute material and circulation mode, and divided into mainly three sorts which are cashes, coins and electronic money. Instead, in Chinese traditional culture, there is an underworld for ghosts. And it is supposed that there are two kinds of money in China, namely money for the living and money for the dead. Money for the dead, also known as “hell money”, “ghost money” or “纸钱”, are pieces of paper in outrageous denomination, which is meant for use in the afterlife. In addition, another conceptual idea is Tomb-sweeping Day, the Chinese traditional festival, when Chinese would worship the ancestors by burning “hell money”. Of course, it is easy to find a holiday similar to Tomb-sweeping Day, called Day of the Death. The Mexican holiday, acknowledged internationally in many other cultures, is a multi-day event from October 31 to November 2. In these days, family members and friends come together to remember and honor loved ones they have lost, setting up a mourning hall at home and visiting graves with the favorite foods and possessions of the departed as gifts. And “hell money” or “ghost money”, apparently, is not a ritual object in Mexico, but unique to China. In conclusion, conceptual meanings of “paper money” and “纸钱” are of great difference. The two phrases that seem identical but actually not, is a typical pair of false friends on account of non-corresponding metaphorical concept systems which are rooted in cultures.

### 3.2.2 Context

Recognition of metaphors is inseparable from context. It is known to all that the rational explanation of the polysemy is the context of situation. In a specific situation, words or phrases may have extended meanings beyond the common meanings in the dictionary, and then have a special metaphorical meaning. When the words or phrases are understood literally, false friends in translation occur. Therefore, only within context can metaphorical meanings be identified correctly. There is an example: A Young man came to the police station with a story (Tan, 2014:05). In Oxford Advanced Learner’s English-Chinese Dictionary, we can easily find the meaning of “story” that is a description of events and people that the writer or speaker has invented in order to entertain people. However, when “a story” is translated into “一个故事” in a literal sense, there is a confusion that what the relationship between the police station and a story. So “a story” and “一个故事” are false friends in translation. It is necessary to figure out the metaphorical meaning of “a story” in the specific situation. In a police station, the action of describing an event is to report a case. There is a cross-mapping from “reporting a case” to “telling a story”. So it is better to translate the sentence as “一个年轻人到警察局报案”. In short, the context of situation is of great importance of metaphor construal, which brings about false friends in translation.

## 4. Preventive Methods of False Friends

Within the framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, translation activities are the cognitive construal of conceptual metaphors. The causes of false friends in Chinese-English translation

considered above bring some illumination to the preventive methods that are to improve translator's cognitive competence of metaphors and adopt the optimum principle to choose proper strategies in accordance to cultural and social context. And the detailed process is that translators' cognitive competence of metaphors is required to recognize the conceptual metaphor of the source language, and then translators' bilingual competence contributes to find out the corresponding conceptual metaphor in the target culture. Finally, the optimum principle is adopted to optimally generate the target language. Hence, the process mentioned above can be illustrated clearly as below.

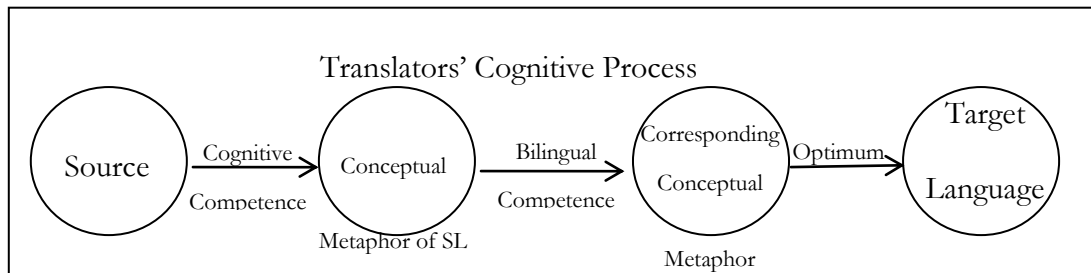


Fig. 2. Translators' Cognitive Process to Avoid False Friends in Translation

#### 4.1 Improvement of Translators' Cognitive Competence of Conceptual Metaphors

The whole translating process has already been considered from the point of Conceptual Metaphor Theory to avoid false friends. Then we look at the improvement of translators' cognitive competence of conceptual metaphors in details. The correct identification of the conceptual metaphorical meaning of the words or phrases is the precondition of true expressions. And there are mainly two elements that carry weight in improving translators' capacities, which are bilingual competence and bilingual cultural attainment.

##### 4.1.1 Bilingual Competence

Bilingual competence is the linguistic knowledge of both Chinese and English. It is well known that Chinese and English are widely divergent in phonetic, phonological, morphological, syntactic as well as semantic and others as the former belongs to the Sino-Tibetan family while the later the Indo-European languages. And false friends frequently happen when the fixed patterns in English are translated. For example, "He didn't speak to me- not one word" (Hornby, 1361). In the sentence the fixed expression "not one" is often mistranslated as "没有一个". According to the dictionary, "not one or not a" is a pattern used for emphasis to mean nothing or on person with the proper Chinese translation of "一个也不" or "一件也不". So it is clear that "没有一个" is a false friend of "not one", as it just expresses the literal meaning and neglects the conceptual meaning of "也"- an emphasis tone. The example we just mentioned is not common in Chinese-English translation. It is essential to solidify the foundation of linguistic knowledge and extensive reading is the recommended approach to enlarge vocabulary and develop a mature ability of languages.

##### 4.1.2 Bilingual Cultural Attainment

Bilingual cultural attainment is an abstract competence that is the result of a long-term

accumulation and development, and also a cross-cultural communicative competence by using the idioms, metaphors and informal expressions in the special context. Yan Fu, a great translator, has said that translators should strengthen the construction of encyclopedic knowledge, on the condition of consolidating their own language skills. Chinese classics, a model system of works that contains Chinese conceptual culture, are worth poring over to gain insight of the conceptual metaphors of Chinese. It is also true of English masterpieces.

The *Analects Of Confucius* is an invaluable Chinese work, where there is a quote from Chinese sage Confucius: “君子不可小知而可大受也，小人不可大受而可小知也”. Several different translation versions have been put forward by many great translators, such as Gu Hongming, Wang Fulin, Arthur Waley and Wu Guozhen etc. There are two of them: the first one is translated by Gu Hongming and the second is from Wu Guozhen. And there will be a comparison of the interpretation of “知” of the two.

Confucius remarked, “A wise and good man may not show his quality in small affairs, but he can be entrusted with great concerns. A fool may gain distinction in small things, but he cannot be entrusted with great concerns.”

The Master said, “A superior man should not be assigned to minor tasks, but can be entrusted with great responsibilities. An ordinary man should not be entrusted with great responsibilities, but can be assigned to minor tasks.” (Zhong, 2016)

It is obvious that “知” has been explained differently in the two versions. Mr. Gu refers “知” to “show one’s quality in” while Mr. Wu interprets it as “be assigned to”. The original sentence tells a way to use talented and ordinary people. The conceptualized idea of employing persons in China is that superior ones should undertake great responsibilities rather than wasting their talents on a petty job. Ordinary people are just the opposite. By consulting the dictionary of *XIANDAI HANYU DA CIDIAN*, we can figure out that “知” has a metaphorical meaning of “主要负责 or 管理”, such as “知” in “知府”, “知县” etc. Meanwhile there is a logical contrary in Mr. Gu’s version that someone cannot handle small affairs, but can undertake great tasks. Accordingly, “知” and “show one’s quality in” is a pair of false friends. So the translation of Mr. Gu remains open to question and the one of Mr. Wu is more faithful to the original.

The above analysis provides a glimpse into the great importance of cultural metaphors in translation. There is also a great requirement to be knowledgeable of the set expressions in certain social or cultural context. In a word, the improvement of cultural accomplishment may quicken the speed in doing translation and avoid false friends in translation.

#### **4.2 Optimum Principle**

The loss of information, especially the cultural information, is unavoidable on account of the cognitive differences between the author and the translator. So the translation of conceptual metaphors is always a kind of undertranslation no matter what translating approach, literal or free translation, domesticating or foreignizing translation, you adopt. And the condition of undertranslation can be vaguely evaluated in terms of translation strategies (Xiao & Li, 2010).

Therefore, it is hard to think of a more appropriate principle in Chinese-English translation than optimum principle to avoid false friends. Optimum principle means expressing the conceptual metaphorical meaning as much as possible. And we have known that non-corresponding conceptual metaphorical meaning between the source and target language can lead to false friends in translation. So when the target language is not identical to the target language in conceptual metaphorical meanings, three ways are helpful to avoid false friends. They are: metaphorical meaning only and substitution of the metaphorical images in the source language with the corresponding images in the target language as well as preservation of the source image with the metaphorical meaning annotated.

When it comes to the English idiom of “牛饮”, it is inappropriate to interpret it as “drink as a cow” literally. Instead, the metaphorical meaning of “牛饮” in Chinese culture is a large and hurried swallow, especially of wine, to show the bold and generous spirit. And Western cultures have no homologous metaphor meaning of cattle. So the correct translation is “to swig”. Except for this, “牛” can be replaced by “a fish” that is also an image that always opens its mouth very wide to wolf down water, then the translation would be “drink like a fish”. The two versions of translation are sound even though two different translation ways are applied. However, both “to swig” and “drink like a fish” are undertranslations which do not express the bold and generous spirit entirely.

There is another case where the image in the source language can be retained as long as the metaphorical meaning is added. When the Chinese idiom of “目无全牛” is interpreted into English, it is imperative to intelligibly explain its metaphorical meaning of “be supremely skilled”. So the widely accepted translation version of “目无全牛” is that “see an ox not as a whole (but only as parts to be cut) -- be supremely skilled”. However, the version is also an undertranslation with a loss of a Chinese allusion that there is skilled cook called Pao Ding who is well-experienced to cut an ox.

## 5. Conclusion

The studies of false friends in Chinese-English translation should penetrate the surface of language to gain in-depth understanding based on the cognitive experience and conceptual metaphors. Even though the analysis of false friends in translation can lie in the word formation, phrases and sentences structure, the transference between linguistic signs involves cognitive activities of the cross-mapping from the source domain to the target domain. Culture and context are of profound significance for correctly understanding of conceptual metaphors in the cognitive process. Therefore, translators should improve their cognitive competence of conceptual metaphor which has implicit and weak implicature. Moreover, optimum principle should be adopted to be faithful to the conceptual metaphorical meaning as much as possible. The research in the cognitive process of false friends in translation provokes thinking of establishing a scientific and systemic evaluation for false friends in Chinese-English translation, which still needs further study.

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