

The Cognitive Turn in Metaphor Translation Studies: A Critical Overview

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Abstract

Metaphor translation has been a matter of concern in translation studies because its interlinguistic transfer can be impeded by cross-cultural and crosslinguistic differences. Since the inception of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), which focuses on the conceptual structure of metaphorical language, a range of studies have emerged to investigate metaphor translation from a cognitive perspective, presenting an eclectic mix of research questions and methodologies. This paper is targeted at illustrating what the cognitive approach has offered to translation studies by providing a critical overview of recent research in metaphor translation from a cognitive perspective. It is pointed out that cognitive theory can get to the heart of metaphor, an essential cognitive device for meaning-making, as well as translation, a cognitive activity. Illustrations from the literature show that a cognitive approach can account for in-depth conceptual transfer in the analysis of product- and process-oriented metaphor translation. The cognitive approach also provides important insights into translation as cross-cultural communication by offering a redefinition of culture. Within this context, the paper provides multilingual illustrations while paying special attention to translation between culturally-distant languages, e.g., English-Chinese and French-Chinese translation. Lastly, it is argued that there is potential in combining cognitive theory with translation theories such as Descriptive Translation Studies and the Interpretive Theory of Translation.

Keywords

metaphor translation, conceptual metaphor, cognitive approach to translation, translation studies, cognitive linguistics

1. Introduction

Investigating metaphor is a continuing concern within philosophy, rhetoric, linguistics, and translation studies (TS), as well as other disciplines related to language and thought. When metaphor is addressed in TS, things become even more intricate because the challenges of dealing with one language are “at least doubled—if not squared—when two languages come into play” (Rojo 2015, 721). As a result, translators will “suffer” twice when tackling metaphors: they must first have a sound grasp of the meaning of metaphors in the source text (ST) and secondly find equivalent meanings with similar functions in the target text (TT) (Al-Zoubi, Al-Ali, and Al-Hasnawi 2007, 230). Thus, approaching metaphor translation tests the validity and applicability of different translation theories. Further, since metaphor entails a complex interplay of numerous linguistic and extra-linguistic factors, it appears to be an ideal research ground for translation theorists to venture into.

Before the 1990s, the issue of metaphor translation was mainly addressed by linguistic approaches (Nida 1964; Dagut 1976; Newmark 1981) and textual approaches (van den Broeck 1981; Mason 1982; Snell-Hornby 1995; Menacere 1992; Alvarez 1993; Toury 2012). Whereas in traditional approaches metaphor was thought of as an exceptional use of language, a cognitive approach argues that metaphor is not a matter of language but should be best understood as a conceptual device that allows one to understand and reason about abstract concepts and experience (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), which, when applied to TS, can provide a more realistic prospect of metaphor translation that “reflects the true nature of metaphor” (Samaniego Fernández 2011, 262). The past two decades have witnessed a dramatic growth of research interest in metaphor translation from a cognitive perspective (Samaniego Fernández 2002; Schäffner 2004; Samaniego Fernández, Velasco Sacristán, and Fuertes Olivera 2005; Vandaele and Lubin 2005; Schäffner and Shuttleworth 2013; Kövecses 2014; Hanić, Pavlović, and Jahić 2017; Massey and Ehrensberger-Dow 2017). It is here necessary to remark that the above-mentioned approaches are not meant to be mutually exclusive; quite the opposite, in numerous studies they are used in a combined way,