

## Translator's Access of TL Mental Lexicon

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### Abstract

This paper analyzes the restriction factors for the translator's access of TL mental lexicon in the translation process. Translator's initiatives are crucial to the translation activities and the factors that influence the access of mental lexicon can be summed up to two broad categories—cognitive restriction and pragmatic restriction. This determines the quality of the translated text.

**Key words:** Mental lexicon; Cognitive restriction; Pragmatic restriction

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### INTRODUCTION

The quality of the TL (target language) version depends on translators' translation purpose, translation philosophy, translation methods and their personal qualities. Translation, as an activity of language works' copy and conversion, presents itself as a mental process which can be furthermore interpreted as a series of translators' thinking and imaginary activities after they received the stimulation of language signals (Fu, 1997). From this perspective, translation can also be viewed as the process in which translators read and comprehend the SL (source language) version and express it with the TL. That is to say, translators should, first of all, comprehend the

original works thoroughly and deeply, including the main content and central idea of the original works and then evaluate the character image involved in the works. As a result, the translators' subjective consciousness such as world outlook and aesthetic value will unavoidably act on the translation process.

In terms of translators' initiatives concerned, translation process can be divided distinctly into translation comprehension and translation expression. The expression of translation depends on the translators' comprehension of SL and cannot be simply concluded as a change from one language to another. In this step, a lot of elements that influence translators' mental access of lexicon, expressions, and sentence structures should be put into consideration. This paper attempts to mainly analyze the translators' access of TL mental lexicon in translation activities.

### 1. MENTAL LEXICON

The comprehension of SL is the way to get the original concepts, while the formation and definition of the concepts all depend on symbols. The core of translation is to express concepts acquired from one language to another. The concepts are formed by virtue of the word terms which play the role of a tool in this formation and also a tool to help translators to express in translation activities and to provide concept symbols to this expression. Based on this, translators should provide the correspondent TL symbols or words to match the concepts acquired from SL, which is to say, to provide the tool to control the translation process. Otherwise, more and more concepts will pile up and block the progressing of translation. From this mental aspect, the translation study should put the issue of how translators access their mental lexicon into its research.

As a matter of fact, mental lexicon also has its phonetics, syntax and meaning factors like daily dictionary

and consists in people's mind. The meaning here refers to the related information of people for some word terms. In translation, the previously presented factor in translators' mental function link is the semantic information about the word terms which followed by syntax information and then pragmatic information and the last is some other related information. As an issue related to people's mental activities, mental lexicon is always the key project studied by psycholinguistics. Language acquisition and its mental process of application are the main research object of psycholinguistics and this feature distinguishes itself from theoretical linguistics which puts the research of structure as target and from social linguistics which views the research of function as its study filed. Psycholinguistics tends to study the potential knowledge and talents which are the process carried on in mind when people apply and acquire language. Mental lexicon is one of them.

Nevertheless, we should understand that the mental lexicon is not those really existing word terms but some mental tokens stored in people's mind related to the knowledge of words in language. The organization form of these mental tokens has dual characteristics—the external world of forms and signals and the internal world of meaning and paraphrasing. But the organization function of the mental lexicon and the relationship among lexical forms, phonetics and semantic codes are always the subjects studied by psycholinguistics and cognitive psychology. We know that one of the research objects of psycholinguistics is just the application of language which has various presentations and “speaking” is the most fundamental one (Gui, 2000). Based on this, there are some upper-level forms like teaching, speech, negotiation and debate which are all the processes in which people apply their own language to express their own thoughts and opinions to achieve some purposes. Unexceptionally, these processes include the access of mental lexicon. For translation, as one of these upper-level forms, its access of mental lexicon is more complicated than other forms because there is a conversion concern involved and “the system that has the maximum storage capacity is not equal to the effective access” (Ibid.). Specifically speaking, for one point, one word term may have different meaning for different individuals with different knowledge and experience; for another point, for one specific individual, his knowledge and experience accumulate and develop with time. For translators, it is necessary to have a large storage of mental lexicon while how to access them is a relatively complicated process, the key to which is how to match the concept acquired from the comprehension of SL with the mental lexicon that actually have no complete meanings. This is also one of the important projects to be researched in translation study. Undoubtedly, there are a lot of elements to influence the translators' access in the translation process like word frequency effect, word effect (lexicality effect), semanticity effect and context effect

that can be totally summed up to cognitive restriction and pragmatic restriction.

## 2. COGNITIVE RESTRICTION

The cognitive science is an abundant subject with massive study projects and orientations and interacts with a lot of other subjects to evolve to be psycholinguistics, experimental psychology and logistics etc. From the cognitive perspective, the lexicon can be defined as a conceptual system arranged according to some principles and composed of some meaningful symbols.

We know the core procedure of information processing is to apply memory at different levels. The result of memory is the result of mentality which is the main component of the information-processing model. The information from the external environment is encoded, stored and accessed by virtue of memory in which the mental lexicon is stored.

Lexicon is not stacked casually in memory. The statistics from the speaking error shows that mental lexicon is not stored strictly according to the alphabetic sequence while, for one point, is stored with pronunciation and for another point with semantic meaning (Zhang, 2004)

and how is it stored semantically determines how is it accessed. For this question, we may turn to cognitive science to get the detailed explanation. Among the massive study projects of cognitive science, prototype theory, conceptual result and image schema are the most outstanding parts. From the relative research, the words interrelated with semantic meanings are arranged by the principles of classification, category and prototype and these principles are also available to access.

Classification is one of the basic features of human language and its mental process is usually named as “categorization” which developed into the prototype theory at its senior level. Categorization is a senior cognitive activity for people to classify all things on earth and based on this human have the ability to form concepts and the meaning of language symbols occurs. Classification involves the assessment of objects' features and how the cognition and determination mechanism composed. Prototype theory makes a standpoint on people's experience and observation of the objective world and provides a totally new perspective and method to the division and property of the category. During mid 1970s, based on massive experimental results, the cognitive psychological expert Rosch from American California University firstly put forward to the category-prototype theory. According to this theory, a category is a concept gathered by some characteristics which are just its typical features and not the necessary and complete conditions to define this category. The members of this category are divided into core members and periphery members and the features of core members gathered to be a cluster of features of category. The core members,

having the ideal value and special status, are viewed as prototypical members while the periphery members are endowed with non-prototypical members of different levels according to their similarity with prototypical members. For example, in the category of “fruit”, apple, pear and orange are usually viewed as the formal members and stay in the core position of this category, that is to say, they are the prototypical members; while coconut, pawpaw and sugarcane are viewed as periphery members as their related features are on the decrease and deviated gradually from the core members. The border of one category is not clear; one object may totally be viewed as the member of a category while another object may just partially be viewed as its member. There may be similarity and universality between members of Category A and Category B, so categories can form a continuous community. Consequently, the category-prototype theory affirms the existence of the category’s border and acknowledges the affiliation discrepancy among members.

Hence it can be seen that the arrangement of mental lexicon is seemingly complicated but also has its own regulations to abide by. The regulations to be observed are also applicable to the access process, which is to say, during people’s daily communication, the principle of the mental lexical storage is also applicable to its access. For instance, someone notices his colleague bought a new car of Buick and thinks it is beautiful. He will say: “Your car is very beautiful”. Unless there are some specific conditions to emphasize, it is not necessary to say “Your Buick car is very beautiful”. In this example, the speaker applies category-prototype theory and replaces the non-prototypical “Buick car” with the basic prototype “car” of the category “vehicle”. In translation, this principle is also available. Translation is a conversion process from one language to another in which there is an arrangement matter of the TL mental lexicon. This arrangement is different from that of the SL and having the equivalent concern. This process can be described as: after receiving the external language signals, the translators access the correspondent meaning in their long-term memory and then form concepts; then search the position of these concepts in the category and decide the correspondent level according to the conditions; and last search the equivalent mental lexicon in the TL. Here is an example, when translating the short sentence “你吃饭了吗?” the translator should distinguish whether “饭” refers to “午饭” or “晚饭”, that is to say, the translator should decide this “饭” is the prototypical “饭” or the non-prototypical “午饭” or “晚饭” in this category and then access the equivalent mental lexicon from the TL and translate this sentence to be “Have you had lunch?” or “Have you had supper?”

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### 3. PRAGMATIC RESTRICTION

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One of the features of the modern science is interaction and interpenetration with each other. Pragmatics also

studies language application and considers the cognitive basis of language application in the access of mental lexicon. But the more important issue for pragmatics is the combination with context in the study of the access of mental lexicon. Context is a massive concept which, in psycholinguistics, refers to the perception, feeling and thought activated in the access of mental lexicon and in pragmatics refers to the application environment and can be divided into social context, textual context and cultural context.

The purpose of translation is to let the TL readers get the same effect as the SL readers. The relationship between the receivers and the translated text should be basically equal to that between the original receivers and the original information (Eugene, 1964). That is to say, translation should search a dynamic equivalence or functional equivalence. Translation should express the original idea, content, artistic conception, feeling and style with another language comprehensively to achieve the most approximate and natural equivalence with SL. Therefore, the translation that only focuses on mechanical equivalence without the consideration of context is not successful.

In translation, the translators must express the original meaning explicitly with another language. This is the most fundamental element and requires the translators to access the appropriate words and expressions from their lexicon storage. But the words and their meanings are not correspondent with each other simply and strictly. The meanings of one word listed in dictionaries are just the kernel ones while it may have different meanings according to different application environment. “Meaning includes the relations between utterances and parts of utterances (e.g. words) and the world outside; and reference and denotation are among such relations.” (Robins, 2000) Reference indicates the relationship between the word and the objective world which is the extension of this word. The meaning of one word includes not only its extension, but also its intention (e.g. sense). From the cognitive aspect, for one word, the meaning category is composed of different meanings and expressions based on different situations and contexts. This category, theoretically, is boundless, because people can create tens of thousands of sentences and then the same one word can have numerous application situations. The translators’ task is to search the appropriate terms in the SL lexicon category under the influence of context and access the equivalent mental lexicon of the TL. For example, the sentence “他的脸跟关公一样”, should not be translated to be “His face is like that of Guan Gong” because “关公” here does not refer to this individual person but his face with distinguished feature. If we apply this translation version, the TL receivers cannot appropriately understand because “关公” refers to a traditional figure in Chinese history whose “red face” is a symbol and is known universally. But for readers

form other cultures, this allusion is seldom known. So the previous translated version is not appropriate. The translator should put the cultural context into consideration and translate this sentence to be "his face is as red as that of Guan Gong."

Additionally, textual context also influences the access of mental lexicon in translation. That means, when translating one word in a sentence, the whole meaning and affection factors of the sentence and even the whole paragraph should be considered. For example, here are two sentences "they incite him to go into further investigation" and "the soldier was shot for inciting his comrades to rise against their officers." Both of the two sentences have the word "incite". In the first example, from the whole meaning of the sentence, we may have the conclusion that the word "incite" should be commendatory, so the appropriate translation is "鼓励". In the second sentence, the action of "rising against the officer" is incorrect, so the word "incite" should also be translated derogatorily to be "煽动". We take the word "面临" as another example for cultural context restriction. In the three sentences "中国面临着人才危机", "我们将面临着很多机遇" and "我正面临挑战", the word "面临" has different meanings and shows different affection. In the first sentence, the object of "面临" is "人才危机 (the shortage of talents)" which is a hard and tough issue, so the choice of the translation should be negatively oriented. In the original sentence, "面临" is used to describe China and this indicates a metaphor meaning and the application of personification, therefore, the correspondent translation should be "suffer" and the appropriate translation of the sentence is "China is suffering the lack of talents". In the second sentence, "面临" also applies a metaphor meaning while here it is positively oriented which is opposite to the first sentence because "机遇 (opportunities)" here refers to hope. Therefore, the correspondent word may be "enjoy" and the whole sentence may be translated to be "we will enjoy many opportunities." In the last sentence, the word "挑战" is much more neutral compared with "危机 (crisis)" and "机遇 (opportunities)" and has no obvious commendatory or derogatory sense, therefore, for the sentence that the application context is not clear, the neutral translation is preferred. The appropriate translation should be "I have got a lot of challenges before myself."

The several instances analyzed above all illustrate the context influence on the translators' choice of words. Context is the crucial issue in pragmatics, therefore, pragmatic restriction is proved to be an important factor that impacts on the translators' access of the mental lexicon.

## CONCLUSION

For one concept, the original word is not a simple symbol but an image, a schema, a mental description and a short story. It is usually too broad or too narrow to match the related mental lexicon in the translators' mind by virtue of these concepts. Cognitive restriction and pragmatic restriction can function strictly during the process of translators' access of the TL mental lexicon, but this cannot cover all the elements. The efficient access of mental lexicon not only requires the sufficient lexicon storage but also is restricted cognitively and pragmatically and, based on which, the translators should combine with other elements like translation purpose, publishing requirements and the TL readers etc. and search the appropriate expressions to achieve the translation equivalence.

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