

# Teaching Primary Concepts of Translation through Cognition Models<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This paper attempts to offer teachers effective and convenient models in explaining several basic concepts in translation theories to students in translation classes. Four models borrowed from the discipline of cognition are prototype, cognition domain, salience and the three-dimensional cognition mode. The concepts explained in this paper included translation variation, extra-linguistic knowledge for translation, translation criteria and un-translatability, all of which are among the primary concerns for students in translation classes.

**Key Words:** translation concepts; translation theories; cognitive models

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Besides improving translation skills through translation exercises, students majored in English and translation are required to get acquaintance with basic issues and concepts of the field of translation studies. Very often it is not necessary for them to go down into detailed study, so teachers should find an effective way to present the macroscopic vision of translation studies as a discipline. Teaching translation theories from the cognitive perspective, therefore, is surely refreshing and inspiring. But nowadays some interdisciplinary studies imposed a difficult link between translation and cognition study and confined to microscopic linguistic level. Their study tended to be farfetched and not in tune with the current trend of translation studies, therefore it is hardly possible to be applied to teaching practice. This paper would recourse to the paradigm of cognition study to expound some basic issues in Translation Studies, which might be macroscopic but hopefully offers a convenient way for teachers to pass basic translation concepts to students. These issues are among the biggest concerns of students in translation classes. It does not mean that students are required to master the difficult models of cognitive linguistics, but teachers should find it convenient to use these models in their teaching.

## 2. PROTOTYPE AND TRANSLATION VARIATION

Any discipline should first of all make a clear statement about its field and the members in this field. Students first come to the translation class would probably take it for granted that translation is so easily

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defined that they only focus on the most basic cases and normal situations. Teachers in translation should first of all let the students get a better understanding of translation as a subject for study. What can be called a translation? Translation (any translated work) as a subject or phenomena is perceived by people in the way of categorizing and prototyping, which is the general guideline for cognition. People understand and study translation as a category, so the category members are the subjects for study. What are the category members of translation and how to evaluate these members? Snell-Hornby has attempted to criticize the traditional categorization of translation, offering her integrated approach (based on gestalt—the important cognition principle) to text-type. But the prototype model may be more suitable to illustrate translation variation (see Z. Huang's translation variation, reformed and supplemented by the author) (Figure 1).

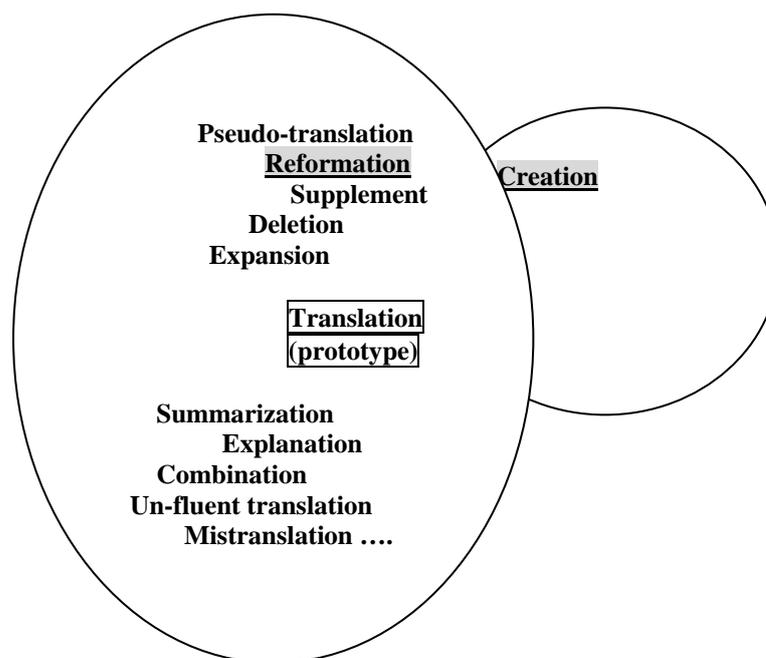


Diagram 1

Translation (prototype) is located in the middle of the category, and other members line all the way from the center and fade away to the border until *Reformation* and *Creation* come so close to each other near the borderline (which is fuzzy). That's where translation and creation tend to overlap, such as Lin Shu's translation of western novels.

For the students in translation classroom, prototypical translation is the starting point of perceiving other translation category members, and more importantly teachers may make the students understand that we should **not** equate it with best translation just like robin (sparrow), as the prototypical bird, is not the best bird.

The prototypical member has the largest number of attributes in common with members of the category and smallest number of attributes which also occur with members of neighboring categories (Ungerer & Schmid 2001:29). Prototypical translation least resembles *creation*, so we may define it as full and formal translation, which is most common perceptions of people and firstly learned by students. For example:

*One cold morning Xiao Wen got up early.*  
 一個寒冷的早晨，小文很早就起床了。  
 (yi ge han leng de zao cheng, xiao wen hen zao jiu qi chuang le.)  
 (Adapted from English Textbook of Primary School, Vol.5)

This prototypical translation is full and formal, faithful and fluent; however, real-life translation activities are far more complicated than this. (Translations) tend to deviate from its sanctioned patterns, on

one level or another (Toury 2004: 28). Teachers may tell the students that other category members should also be included in when exploring the translation field, since when they face the real world and do the real-life translation job, they may feel shocked to find that there are a lot more cases deviated from the prototypical translation. How can a student have a proper view of these deviations? Each member shares more or less attributes with prototypical translation and with each other, which is called family resemblance. The translated text was increasingly viewed as simultaneously drawing upon families of resemblances as well as writing itself into other families of resemblances (Gentzler 2004: 144).

Teachers would certainly find diagrams helpful in explaining the problem at the present. The category (see in Diagram 1) can be applied to all text types. Any translated text surely involves deletion or expansion or other variation at least linguistically if not concerning the content or meaning. For example, in ad translation, students are asked to apply this deviation from the literal and faithful translation because this is where marketing enters. So teachers should at the very beginning get it straight to the students that translation could never happen in vacuum, even not in classroom exercising. We can see some examples here:

*Good to the last drop.*

滴滴香濃，意猶未盡。(Supplement or Expansion)

(di di xiang nong, yi you wei jin)

(Bilingual AD of Maxwell Company)

接天下客，送萬里情——天津計程車公司

(jie tian xia ke, song wan li qing---the Taxi Company of Tianjin)

Give you a pleasant ride all the way! ---Tianjin Taxi Co. (Deletion)

(Jia 2000:135)

Category members which deviating from prototypical translations can also find their corresponding places in other cases not so extreme like ad translation, such as translation of names, for instance:

*Heathcliff (the name of the hero from "Wuthering Heights")*

希刺克厲夫

(Supplement or Explanation) (tr. By Yang Yi)

(xi ci ke li fu)

In Comparison with 西斯科克利夫(xi si ke li fu), which is neutral, with no indication of the hero's character, Yang's translation is somewhat explanatory.

We can presume that if teachers ask students to translate some other names in *Luotuo Xiangzi*, Lao She's famous novel, such as 祥子(Xiangzi), 虎妞(Huniu), 小福子(Xiao Fuzi), they could certainly come up with various versions. Actually there are three versions by three translators of the novel. The three translators are Shi Xiaojing, Jean M. James and Evan King. They have different versions for the same names:

	<i>Shi Xiaojing</i>	<i>Jean M. James</i>	<i>Evan King</i>
祥子	<i>Xiangzi</i>	<i>Hsiang Tzu</i>	<i>Happy Boy</i>
虎妞	<i>Tigress</i>	<i>Hu Niu</i>	<i>Tiger Girl</i>
小福子	<i>Joy</i>	<i>Hsiao Fu Tzu</i>	<i>Little Lucky One</i>

As for translation categories, not a few scholars have tried to give a complete yet concise illustration. For instance, Snell-Hornby in her book *Translation Studies* sardines all the following aspects of translation in her highly compact stratification (2001: 32):

- 1) non-linguistic disciplines (extra-linguistic reality)
- 2) aspects and criteria governing the process of translation
- 3) language problems
- 4) phonological aspects

But her diagram is far more complicated than could be applied in translation classes. Having elaborated on translation variation (including text-type) centering upon diagram 1, this paper attempt to deal with first

three of the above aspects (extra-linguistic reality, criteria governing translation process, and language problems) one by one resorting to different cognition models in the following parts, rather than to kill as many birds as possible with one stone --- that's what Snell-Hornby was exacting.

### 3. COGNITION DOMAIN AND EXTRA-LINGUISTIC KNOWLEDGE FOR TRANSLATION

As for students in translation classes, language competence is a necessity but far from enough. They should have a proper cognition domain. Cognition domain is the totality of knowledge (from immediate domain to maximal domain) upon which cognition is based (Wang 2006: 26). The cognition domain of prototypical translation is relatively small and simple --- only a few levels (scales) of cognition domain are activated. Let's look at the sentence again:

*One cold morning Xiao Wen got up early.*

一個寒冷的早晨，小文很早就起床了。

(yi ge han leng de zao chen, xiao wen hen zao jiu qi chuang le.)

This is something that students take for granted. They have a dictionary and learn some grammar points and think they can do translation well. Teachers should help them throw this simplistic assumption and pay enough attention to cognition domain in translation studying. In the above example, linguistic level (immediate domain) is the only main level of cognition domain that is activated. But when students turn to understand or explain other category members, like *Deletion*, *Expansion* or *Supplement* (see in diagram 1), much more levels of cognition domain (extra-linguistic reality) come onto the stage. For example:

*The first elected Russian president, the man who declared what once was the world's largest nation, the Soviet Union, extinct, Boris Yeltsin is resigned on December 31, 1999 after 8 years in power.*

作為俄羅斯的第一位民選總統，作為宣佈世界上最大的國家——蘇聯——解體的一代巨人，叱吒俄羅政壇八年的葉利欽，於20世紀最後一天黯然辭職。《21世紀英文報》

(zuo wei e luo si de di yi wei min xuan zong tong, zuo wei xuan bu shi jie shang zui da de guo jia --- su lian---jie ti de yi dai ju ren, chi zha e luo si zheng tan ba nian de ye li qin, yu 20 shi ji zui hou yi tian an ran ci zhi.)

ID= immediate domain, MD= maximal domain

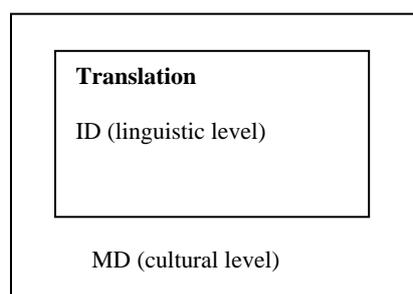


Diagram 2

The original text is objective in tone while the Chinese version involves more expressive color. “一代巨人”(a generation of giants), “叱咤” (greatly influential) are **added** to express admiration to Yeltsin, while the **added** “黯然” (forlornly) is to show sympathy for his resign. In assessing this translation,

students may find the Chinese version is not faithful enough, or they could call it an overstatement, but if political, cultural and perhaps ideological elements are considered, they would change their minds a little.

Then teachers can naturally relate to “culture turn” in translation studies, which is a typical broadening of cognition domain.

In order to understand and explain translation comprehensively, we have to activate different levels from immediate to maximal domain. Basically, translation deals with language, so linguistic level can be seen as the immediate domain, and that is the case with traditional translation studies in which criteria were constantly laid down. But without activating more levels, some translation phenomena could hardly be understood properly. Deviations from the conventional rules or violations are found in real-life translation and surprisingly function well in given situations. So Translation Studies has to go far beyond linguistic domain. Accordingly cultural level (in narrow sense), literary level, political level and ideological level are surely taken into consideration. In the last half of 20<sup>th</sup> century, scholars initiated “culture turn”, referring “culture” in the broadest sense to comprise all the levels in translation cognition domain. So we can tentatively equal culture here to maximal domain in translation cognition (Both scholars and translation studies benefit from the infinite capability of culture in “culture turn”.) Students very often feel confused that they can understand the words but find them difficult to translate. This happens when they encounter culturally-bedded terms and expressions, or terminologies from special fields. For instance, the term “spiritual guide” contains two simple words, but the meaning is quite obscure here for students. They can choose literal translation but leave the translation making no sense, or they have to activate or supplement their extra-linguistic cognition level to get the real understanding. Students often are not aware that bicultural competence is as important as bilingual competence. Nida even claimed that bicultural competence is even more important than bilingual competence (Nida 2001: 8). Most probably they simply relegate those unfaithful translations (but successful) as bad translations. Or in the opposite they are impressed that translation has no limitation or rules to abide by.

Anyway, immediate level, that is, linguistic level is the basic and most direct way to perceive translation phenomena, and influence of all the levels in cognition domain will ultimately realized and manifested at the linguistic level, because no one can deny that translation is a matter of language. Students should be guided to strike the balance among different levels of their cognition domain in order to improve their translation competence as well as make proper assessment of translated versions.

#### 4. SALIENCE AND TRANSLATION CRITERIA

One of the biggest concerns for students in translation classes would be the issue of translation criteria. To narrow it down to specific translation cases, we may call it translation principle. What is the overall principle that guides translators’ translating? Students are eager to get a simple and definite answer, which could be used as a panacea when they meet with difficulties or get puzzled in choosing an appropriate translation method. First of all, students should be made to understand that there is no such panacea, but to their relief, there are still regularities. To closely study one category member of translation, we have to crack it into smaller components to focus on each component and find out its attributes. So we need to be aided by more cognitive modes. Salience model will be used here. Salience means a focus or attention point in describing an event (Wang 2006: 30). In translation, we anatomize translation the subject (any category member) into several components, as is shown in the following:

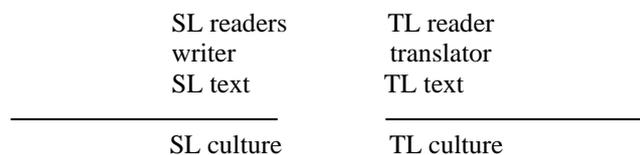


Diagram 3

Any above element in the translation event can be taken as Salience, endowing us different perspective and leading to different criteria governing the translation. If *translator* is taken as Salience, his subjectivity and creation in translation would become the study interest. If *TL readers* become the Salience, function of

translation would be studied closely. Or if SL text is the Saliience, we may focus on the faithfulness at various levels. Each Saliience makes a contribution to translation studies and it is not sensible to criticize and exclude each other. Snell-Hornby's severe criticism of equivalence is not so watertight, because her holistic or gestalt view of translation is quite another perspective and thus begets different saliience. Most students in translation classes would take equivalence as a translation criterion, and in this case, the relationship between SL text and TL text as saliience in translation event. It does not mean that equivalence is a applying-to-all criterion, as students tend to think.

In order to make Saliience model more concrete here, we take Deletion (one category member) as an example here. In terms of Deletion, we have all the same potential elements to consider.

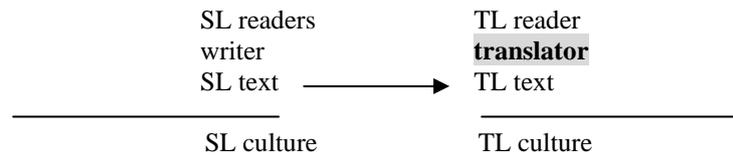


Diagram 4

Then we determine different Saliience in studying Deletion, as a result of which we get different insights. If **translator** is taken as Saliience, then we will focus on translator's intention and how he (she) realizes the intention. For example:

*Unlike Athens, Beijing did not squander the three years after it was awarded the Games. ....  
But China's advantage in planning also comes from its centralized, undemocratic government,  
which can make unilateral decisions about Olympic planning ...*

*..... 在中國，規劃辦事的優勢來自于中央政府領導下的統一決策，.....  
(zai zhong guo, gui hua ban shi de you shi lai zi yu zhong yang zheng fu ling dao xia de tong yi  
jue ce, ...)*

The translator, intentionally delete the word *undemocratic*, in order **not** to offend Chinese government or agitate Chinese readers. The word *undemocratic*, though possibly neutral in English, if translated into Chinese, would be politically derogatory and trouble-making. Then this deletion is understandable and making sense.

But if the relationship between SL text and TL text is made Saliience, this deletion is surely relegated as unfaithful and over-free, because the meaning of *centralized, undemocratic government* is partially lost in TL text.

Besides the traditional translation criteria of "Faithfulness, Fluency, Elegance" there are quite a lot other translation criteria. Students would feel confused about to which they should agree or which is more helpful to their translation practice. The co-existence of different criteria is actually caused by the shift of Saliience in translation cognition. Shift of Saliience not only brings about different perspectives and criteria that governs translation process and translation criticism, but also encourages different ways to study translation. Students will learn some basic ideas form different schools of translation studies such as Functionalist Approaches (translation function as Saliience), Polysystem (TL culture or literary system as Saliience) or Deconstruction (TL text significance and position as Saliience) perspective, but if they keep this Saliience model in mind, they would no get muddled.

## 5. THE COGNITIVE MODE AND TRANSLATABILITY

Students are sometimes haunted by the issue of translatability. When they meet with extremely serious problems in translation, they tend to assume that they are doomed by un-translatability. Sapir-Whorf notion of language conditioning thought, taken to extreme, would mean that ultimately translation is impossible (Snell-Hornby 2001: 41). On the contrary, Chomsky's concept of deep structure and surface structure

means everything is translatable (ibid). However, both are quite vague and weak when applied to clarifying translatability. Teachers may find better explanation from the cognitive perspective --- cognitive linguistics offers a three-dimensional way while Sapir-Whorf notion or Chomsky concept both deal with two.

Cognitive Linguistics deals with three layers: the world, cognition and language. It says language is the manifestation of our cognition of the world, so it denies that the direct correspondence between language and the world (Zhao, 2001: 35), as is shown in the following diagram.



**Diagram 5**

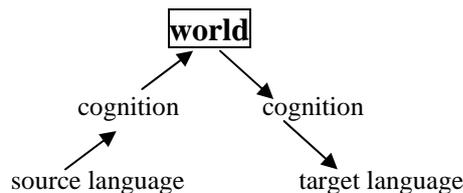
Here's an example:

A Chinese student and an English student both find that their teacher pale and weak after class. Both show their concern, "Mr ..., you look pale, are you OK?" On hearing that the teacher has got a bad cold, the two students would have quite different response:

**Chinese student:** Well, have you taken any medicine? You'd better go to a clinic and see the doctor as soon as possible. ...

**English student:** I am sorry to hear that.

It shows different linguistic representations of the students' different cognition of teacher's sickness. Teacher can explain the deep root of un-translatability to the students by applying the three dimensional models of cognition. Translation has to deal with double cognition processes, which can be illustrated as the following diagram:



**Diagram 6**

The invariant is the "world" that is manifested in language. Cognitive linguistics says that basic cognition modes are pre-linguistic, so basic cognition modes are not language-specific. In translation process, we have the invariant "world" as well as the common cognition modes (most basic ones) as the basis for translatability, but language-specific cognition modes (Hopi way of time cognition as an extreme example, as was cited by Sapir and Whorf) and different linguistic constructions that cause trouble in translation process and possibly lead to various degrees of un-translatability.

In ideal translating, firstly we infer from (decode) the language (SL) applying the knowledge of cognition modes and represent the original world that is described, and then reverse the process and construct the cognition of the world into language (TL). But in some extreme cases, say, poetry translation, the cognition modes of the poets could be so unique or idiosyncratic that it is hard to perceive them; or the construction (from cognition to language ) is deviant and uncontrolled, the translation would be almost impossible, even if we share the invariant (world), which could be very elusive too. Other cases of untranslatability are due to language-specific cognition modes. For example:

*Is life worth living? --- It depends upon the liver! (pun) (Nord 2001: 37)*

“祥子抽煙吧，兜兒裡有，別野的。”別墅牌的煙自從一出世就被車夫們改為“別野”的。《駱駝祥子》

(Luotuo Xiangzi)

(“xiang zi chou yan ba, dou er li you, bie ye de,” bie shu pai de yan zi cong yi chu shi jiu bei che fu men gai wei “bie ye” de. )

But un-translatability should never be used as an excuse for the students' giving up trying to find better solutions. Teachers should encourage the students, since un-translatability is only the matter of degree instead of an absolute item. For instance, as for the above example 3), the American translator Evan King found a very good, if not perfect translation:

*"Have a smoke, Happy Boy. There are cigarettes in the pocket --- County Villainies." Form the time that "County Villa" cigarettes had come into existence they had been called "County Villainies" by the rickshaw men.*

## 6. CONCLUSION

Teachers are disappointed with the dry and boring theory class, since they are just reclaiming and quoting others. Students always complain that theories taught in translation classes irrelevant to their translation practice. Teachers applying the above cognitive models in teaching basic concepts of translation theory may find their statements more systematic and arguments more sound. All the above translation concepts explained through cognition models would help students to gain a clearer view of translation as a discipline, a more discreet choice of translating methods as well as a more reasonable assessment of translated versions.

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