Can an Awareness of Conceptual Metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) Aid the Translator in His/Her Task?

Grace Crerar-Bromelow
University of Westminster

Abstract. This paper examines the relevance of conceptual metaphor to the task of translation. Although translation as a human activity is as old as the Babel myth, Translation Studies as a discipline is relatively new and still evolving. Guidelines for translators in English tend to see figurative language as being separate from literal. Advice on metaphor is often restricted to its stylistic status or genre role, or, simply to render literal translations of novel metaphors regardless of context. However, in light of the cognitive linguistic research of Lakoff and Johnson (1980), it would seem that this is insufficient, indeed irresponsible. If the translator understands the cognitive and linguistic processes behind the words or phrases employed in the source text, then s/he is in an empowered position to create a suitable equivalent text in the target language and at the same time to intelligently increase the translation's 'visibility'. The usefulness of employing conceptual metaphor when translating terminology is also examined; as is the translator's responsibility not to disrupt the integrity of the ST.

Keywords: source text (ST); target text (TT); conceptual metaphor; metonymy; equivalence; Adam's apple; tertium comparationis; skopos.

1 Introduction

The process of translation attracts many metaphors. For some, it is the creation of a mirror image of the original text in a new setting; Norman Shapiro describes a translation as being like "a pane of glass" (Shapiro quoted in Venuti 1995), which only reveals its true nature as a piece of secondary or reflected writing by the presence of scratches or imperfections on its surface; while George Steiner slyly suggests that a source text must be seduced and conquered for a translation to be successfully created; and feminist translation scholars engaged

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angrily in the 1970s/80s with what they felt to be a general acceptance of the

> distinction between writing and translating — marking, that is, the one to be original and 'masculine', the other to be derivative and 'feminine'.
> (Chamberlain quoted in Venuti 1992: 57)

All of the above demonstrates how attractive metaphor is for describing the mysterious process of transferring a message from one set of linguistic signs to another. However, despite Christina Schäffner's detailed and valuable analysis (2004) of the conceptual metaphors informing European political discourse from a translator's point of view, Translation Studies still tends to see the actual process of translating metaphors as problematic and somehow separate from 'straightforward' literal language. Although, as anyone who has tried to translate even the simplest literal passage through Babelfish knows, translation choices are rarely as simple as they might seem and equivalence is elusive at best.

2 An existing approach to translating metaphor

> Whenever you meet a sentence that is grammatically correct but does not appear to make sense, you have to test its apparently nonsensical element for a possible metaphorical meaning. (Newmark 1988: 106)

This metaphor-hostile statement comes from Peter Newmark's 1988 *A Textbook of Translation.* His eminently practical guide to negotiating one's way through the translation mine field leaves discussion of metaphor until chapter 10. It also expresses a certain irritation with figurative language, which one might say is typical of English translation textbooks. He says that while the "central *problem* of translation is the overall choice of a translation method for a text", the strategy, when once decided upon, informs all the hundreds of smaller decisions necessary to the creation of the new text. For him, it is the translation of metaphor that is "the most important *particular* problem" (Newmark 1988: 104). Whether stock or original, for Newmark, metaphor "always involves illusion … [it is] a kind of deception, often used to conceal an intention" (ibid). This, I would

argue, is a conflation of use with function: as language users we often prefer to imply messages, rather than making blunt statements, for reasons of status, wit, politeness, etc. He goes on to say:

> metaphor incidentally demonstrates a resemblance, a common semantic area between two or more or less similar things — the image and the object. (Newmark 1988: 104)

If this resemblance is just "incidental", then how is a sensible and effective equivalent to be produced? And indeed, is it the text's function, or form, or both, or neither which is to be translated? Newmark gives many examples of polysemy from single words to extended phrases and suggests possible translations. He even acknowledges that a whole text can be based on a metaphor. But he still presents metaphor in six degrees of conventionality; "dead, cliché, stock, adapted, recent and original" (Newmark 1988: 105). These are, of course, the surface forms in which we encounter metaphor, the importance of which cannot be overlooked, as the working translator must always deal with specifics: each source text is already a given use of language, already a cultural product with a specific context and function(s) that requires a pragmatic response from the translator. However, this fails to provide us with a more generalised framework for engaging with the source text on any deeper level and, in turn, generating more than mere word-for-word equivalence in the target text.

3 Lakoff and Johnson's conceptual metaphor

With this in mind, it seems that perhaps an approach based on Lakoff and Johnson's idea of conceptual metaphor might potentially be very useful to the translator. Although their studies were only conducted in English, they build on Michael Reddy's pioneering CONDUIT metaphor, revealing it to be a function of perception and thought which may be expressed linguistically and which is not incidental, but fundamental. Conceptual metaphors, the umbrella ideas which are rarely explicitly expressed, but nonetheless are accepted and shared by the whole community of language users, make the entire range of

associated metaphorical expressions usable and comprehensible without requiring undue processing effort for either the user or receiver. Conceptual metaphor, as a shared and shareable thought process, can therefore pass over interlinguistic barriers. In 1980 they said:

> metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. […] Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities. (Lakoff & Johnson 1980: 3)

This universality allows us to look for, and perhaps find, parallels for the orientational and ontological metaphors we use in one language to "identify our experiences as entities and substances" (Lakoff & Johnson 1980: 25) in another language — even if, as is often the case, there is no exact surface 'match'. And, even more excitingly for the translator, they found that metonymy, Roman Jakobson's partner trope of metaphor, also functioned in the same way. "Metonymic concepts (like THE PART FOR THE WHOLE) are part of the ordinary, everyday way we think and act as well as talk" (Lakoff & Johnson 1980: 37). The translational options for their example "I've got a new *set of wheels*" (ibid) potentially expand if one takes a cognitive linguistic approach.

They further identified that it is neither an incidental, nor a blanket comparison, between the source domain (often a physical entity, e.g. JOURNEY) and the target domain (an abstract, e.g. LOVE) that gives metaphor its power, but specific mappings between the salient features of the two, which best convey the effect intended by the user. This connotational 'third way' cannot be created so efficiently by any other device. Different communities will, of course, emphasise different mappings, according to their concerns/prejudices/experience. Once the translator goes beyond merely identifying a metaphor's static stylistic category and examines the structure which informs it, s/he is in an empowered position to investigate the nature of the idiom; the strength of the image invoked; what relationship it might have to an extended metaphor in the text's discourse or, indeed, to the larger culture. And, in turn, when considering the TL conventions and genre expectations, the search for a TL solution is no longer limited to a matching TL

idiom. The translator may allow him/herself a greater flexibility and even reasonably consider translation by explanation/paraphrase; or translation PLUS explanation, if the ST author's intentions and motivations are accessible. The translation may be culturally a secondary text, but it does not write itself, the translator is creating a new text for a new context, albeit one with special intertextual responsibility to its source.

3.1 Non-cognitive linguistic approaches

If we look for a moment at a non-cognitive linguistic approach, we find Rolf Kloepfer, for instance, full of breathless enthusiasm in his 1967 review of the treatment of novel metaphorical expressions in a translation into German of Rimbaud's *Metropolitain.* He claimed it had preserved

> all the metaphors: their famous "boldness" is no problem for the translation — on the contrary, the bolder and more creative the metaphor, the easier it is to repeat in other languages. There is not only a "harmony of metaphorical fields" among the various European languages, there are also definite "structures of the imagination" on which they are based. (Snell-Hornby 1995: 57, her translation)

However, as he does not explain what these "structures" might be, he is without the solid framework that Lakoff and Johnson provide. As Dagut comments critically, we are given the impression that

> [t]he further removed an utterance is from language "competence" the easier it becomes to translate. As if the unique were, by the very virtue of being unique, immediately translatable, and only the commonplace gave the translator pause. (Dagut 1976: 26)

Practical experience of any text for translation is surely likely to make us doubt such an idea, but Katarina Reiss, whose work centres on communicating a ST's function, seems convinced. To Dagut's dismay, she includes Kloepfer's statement in her own discussion of metaphor in *Möglichkeiten und Grenzen der Übersetzungskritik* (1971). She further advises that a novel metaphor, which has been

created by the author, should be translated "wortwörtlich" (43–44) (literally). Doing this, one might well achieve an equivalent effect, but it would only be by happy accident and not design. Such expediency is almost shocking and if one were to follow her logic then poetry would be the simplest genre to translate. Each kingfisher flash of new poetic connection, which delights us and conventionally makes this form of expression so demanding for both creator and reader, could be rendered easily by anyone with a good bilingual dictionary.

4 A potential application of conceptual metaphor in translation

Perhaps surprisingly, an awareness of conceptual metaphors also allows us to investigate terminology; words that are established in a culture delimiting their signifieds (Saussure) are often essentially metaphorical in origin. Eugene Nida, working for the American Bible Society, has had practical experience of the problems of achieving both what he termed formal and dynamic equivalence in a greater variety of source and target languages than most other translators would even care to contemplate. In *Towards a Science of Translating* (1964) he identifies the gaps between culturally defined metaphors, even when they are playing a literal role, as requiring particular attention.

> With an obvious metaphor, e.g. *Adam's apple*, it is clear that some adjustment in lexical form is inevitable, especially in regions where apples are unknown and no one has ever heard of Adam. In Uduk, for example, this anatomical feature becomes 'the thing that wants beer'. (Nida 1964: 219)

For a translator working into either language, attempting to force a literal rendition would constitute what Berman calls "ethno-centric violence" (Berman 1985) and simply confuse both sets of readers. However, if the translator uses the same analytical process which Lakoff and Johnson employed in the endnotes of their updated version of *Metaphors We Live By* (2003), conceptual metaphor will allow him/her to explore the dual metaphorical structures behind Nida's two terms, as follows.

English: *Adam's apple*	Uduk: *the thing that wants beer*
Conceptual Metonym: In Judeo-Christian tradition Adam was the first man. Adam is a man; Adam stands for all men. (The part for the whole)	1st Conceptual Metonym: The thyroid cartilage is in the throat, i.e. in the area of the body where thirst is felt; where beer and its effects are first experienced, although it is the whole man who wants the beer. (The part stands for the whole)
Conceptual Metaphor: The stretched skin over the forward protrusion of the thyroid cartilage evokes the shape of an apple; although this only is one unidirectional mapping, it is still very effective and striking. In English, descriptions of the body abound in such linkings: roof of the mouth, bridge of the nose, arch of the foot, etc. (One object is described in terms of another.)	2ndConceptual Metonym: Although women also have a thyroid cartilage in the same part of the body, it is not a prominent feature of their physique. In Uduk culture of Southern Sudan women are associated with growing grain and brewing beer, while men are more associated with drinking it. So, a male feature can be described in terms of a male activity. (One aspect can stand for another.)

As this demonstrates, the linguistic terms are very different, but the metaphorical thought processes, by which the respective cultures have created them, are very similar. Conceptual metaphor gave us the tools to investigate the structure and components of these lexical items, alerting the translator to there being no actual apple belonging to an individual named Adam, nor to there being a physiological feature in a man's throat constantly demanding 'BEER!'.

The literally descriptive medical term *prominentia laryngea* is rare in common parlance, while *Adam's apple* has been in use since at least the 18th century. Interestingly for the purpose of this study, it seems that the Latin *pomum Adami*, which is the direct source of the colloquial English term, is an under-translation of the original Hebrew *tappuach ha adam.* In Hebrew both of these nouns have double meanings: *tappuach* is either an apple or swelling and *adham* means a man, or indeed, Adam himself. In the course of my research, I found some online sources[1] even blaming St. Jerome, the patron saint of translation, personally for this semi-error which is now so embedded in most European languages (Italian: *pomo d'Adamo*, Swedish: *adamsäpple*, etc) (Levin 2004). However, I am glad to say, this was

[1] E.g. http://www.medterms.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=2137.

refuted by our chairman after he had consulted the extensive database of post-classical Latin, *Patrologia Latina*.

One might argue that a native speaker of English has no need for this kind of analysis, especially if working into a language that uses the same term; nor is the native Uduk speaker going to misunderstand something familiar and established in his language. However, it is a fact of life that most translators today are not in the relatively comfortable position of working from a second language into their own, but conversely into the second language or even more confusingly from a second into a third, in which case analysis based on conceptual metaphor could most definitely be of assistance. One could even speculate that St Jerome might have given us a different term, if Lakoff and Johnson had been active in the 5th century.

4.1 Conceptual metaphor's wider relevance to translation

Furthermore, in order to minimise translation loss one may be able to employ the *tertium comparationis*; a conceptual non-linguistic "invariant against which two text segments can be measured to gauge variation" (Munday 2001: 49), by way of conceptual metaphor analysis. And, although we must not patronise the ST and as Berman says inadvertently "ennoble" it by treating it as "*raw material*" waiting to be rewritten in the mistaken notion that we are "recovering the rhetorical elements inherent in all prose", (Berman 1985 in Venuti 2000: 291) we are now in the position boldly to consider translating a ST literal phrase by a TT metaphor if it is more suitable to the TT context and *skopos* (Vermeer 1989 quoted in Munday 2001: 79) (i.e. the whole aim and purpose of producing the translation). As Nida comments:

> Some persons object to any shift from a metaphor to another, a metaphor to a simile, or a metaphor to a nonmetaphor, because they regard such an alteration as involving some loss of information. However, the same persons usually do not object to the translation of a nonmetaphor by a metaphor, for such a change appears to increase the effectiveness of the communication. (Nida 1964: 220)

4 Conclusion

And finally, rather than always striving to find an equivalent TT phrase, the translator armed by conceptual metaphor can consider embracing the enlivening effect of foreign expressions as Newmark (1991) encourages us to do, saying:

> A language such as English would gain by the literal translation of many foreign key-words, idioms and possibly even proverbs. (Newmark 1991: 35)

Skilfully handled this strategy could intelligently increase what Lawrence Venuti calls the translation's "visibility" (Venuti 1995 in Munday 2001: 145), i.e. the rhythms and references in a text which make it clear that its ultimate source is in another language and culture. If the translator has access to all the mechanisms at work in both languages, above and beyond simple competence with vocabulary and usage, then s/he no longer scans the text with a sceptical eye and expecting to find: 'Literal word – verb – preposition – **SCARY METAPHOR** – literal word'. Modern understandings of the interaction between thought and linguistic expression can help the translator can see that there is a cline, rather than a gap, between literal and metaphorical usage, and that "the metaphorical web" of language (Newmark 1995: 84) is not a retarius net designed to entrap us, but a flexible, useful material.

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