

# The Figure-Ground Theory in the Chinese Poetry Translation Strategies

## A Case Study on *Seeing Meng Haoran Off at Yellow Crane Tower*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper projects figure-ground theory onto the translator's dynamic cognition around the translation process, exploring the cognitive translation strategies for the Chinese poetry adopted by the translator. Taking *Seeing Meng Haoran Off at Yellow Crane Tower* as an example, this paper focuses on three translation strategies: those for figure-ground internalization, figure-ground innovation, and figure-ground replacement respectively. It is found that the key factor of the translated version is to look for the asymmetrical balance point or new critical point among all the translation strategies, and employ it to convey the figure-ground schema in the source text.

**Keywords:** *figure-ground, Chinese poetry, translation strategies, cognition*

### I. INTRODUCTION

Since the 1980s, the study of translator's subjectivity has gradually attracted the attention of academic circles, becoming one of the focuses of many scholars' research on translation. From the philosophical theories such as feminism and hermeneutics to the micro-level explanations such as translation strategies and subtitle translation, many results have been achieved from researches on translator's subjectivity. As an important part of the research on translator's subjectivity at the micro level, the selection of translation strategies embodies the process of personal inter-subjective understanding based on phenomenology. On this basis, it is hoped to project the figure-ground theory of cognitive linguistics onto the cognitive experience in selecting translator's translation strategies. Taking Xu Yuanchong's English translation of "Seeing Meng Haoran Off at Yellow Crane Tower" as an example, the paper explores his cognitive process in selecting the translation strategy.

### II. FIGURE-GROUND THEORY

Figure-ground theory was first proposed by the Danish psychologist Rubin a century ago (Ungerer & Schmid, 1996: 157), and later incorporated into the framework of perceptual organization by Gestalt psychologists. In their theories, the ground and the figure are two components of perceptual field. The

element that is easiest to attract people's attention is figure, while ground becomes the reference of figure and a relatively blurred element. Langacker (1987: 120) studied how the relationship between figure and ground in language structure is represented based on the degree of perceived prominence. Studies have shown that figure is a sub-structure in an impression, and is more prominent than ground; usually, the picture shows the corpse structure of a center, while the ground organized on the basis of the figure and is the background of the figure. In addition, when selecting pictures, areas that have prominent features and can contrast with the environment are more easily to be selected as figures. (Langacker, 1987:120)

The introduction of figure-ground theory provides a considerable explanatory power for the selection of C-E translation strategies from a cognitive perspective. As objects with specific functions and meanings, literary works exist in the individual's cognitive domain. Cognitive domain includes knowledge information, logical information and other factors. In addition, cognition has empirical characteristics, and has a certain connection with personal experience. Because the cognitive domains of the author and the translator cannot be exactly the same, when guessing the author's intention, the translator must cognize and understand the choice and arrangement of the linguistic and cultural information embodied in the original work, namely the graphic highlights and blurred background brought about by the perceptual experience, shaping the original meaning with specific functions. In addition, the translator also needs to integrate the cognitive domain, connect the graphic background presented in

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the original text with the graphic background in the reader's potential field of vision, and reconstruct the choice and arrangement of the original language and cultural information in the translation to convey the author's intention to the reader. This mode of conveying implies the translator's choice of translation strategy.

### **III. CLASSIFICATION OF TRANSLATION STRATEGIES**

The taxonomy of translation strategies for cultural-specific items was proposed by Spanish translator Javier Franco Aixelá in 1996. This method provides an effective way to examine and analyze poetry translation. Aixelá explicitly defined the cultural-specific items as "the difficulty in normally converting the original meaning for reason that with the development of the times there will often be some content with different status or even not exist in the cultural system of the target language readers in the process of writing"(Aixelá, 1996: 58). And "different text status refers to the differences in value caused by differences in frequency of use, idiomatic expression, or ideology" (Aixelá, 1996: 57). This means that cultural-specific items "not only exist in their own factors, but are also affected by the culture of the target language. Or it can be explained that, in the process of literary translation, all items that cannot be normally understood and accepted by those in power and the target readers are cultural-specific items" (Aixelá, 1996: 58). Most Chinese poems have cultural connotations, and many of them have no corresponding items in the cultural system of the target readers. Therefore, they belong to the category of cultural-specific items as proposed by Aixelá.

In terms of research process, we first extract the description about "figure-ground" in the original poem, then find out the translation of these contents, analyze the translation conversion strategies used in the translated poetry; and finally explain the translators' cognitive process in selecting translation strategies from the perspective of figure-ground theory. In identifying the translation methods used in the original poem, we refer to the 11 translation methods summarized by Aixelá. This classification method is designed to facilitate researching the description of translation. The design basis is description. It is necessary to be careful when classifying it in detail and orderly to the extent that it can reflect the gradient of alienation and domestication (Zhang Nanfeng, 2004: 21-22). They can be roughly divided into two classifications: the first method is retention method: namely repetition method (copying the original text); spelling replacement method (including transliteration); linguistic (non-cultural) translation (try to not change the meaning of the article); extra-textual interpretation (review text, endnotes, footnotes, etc.); intra-textual interpretation

(explaining in the text). The second method is substitution method: namely synonymous substitution method; limited cosmopolitanization (selecting another original culturally specific item familiar to the target readers); absolute cosmopolitanization (using a non-cultural specific item to replace the translational cultural-specific items); assimilation (selecting a cultural-specific item of the target language to translate that of the original language); deleting; creation (Aixelá, 1996: 60-64). The domestication degree of the translation is increasing. Wherein, the "cultural retention" translation strategy is equivalent to what L. Venuti calls "foreignizing translation", namely "the translator tries to keep the original author still and guides the reader to approach the original author"; the "cultural substitution" translation strategy is equivalent to "domestication", in which the translator acts as a bridge between the original author and the reader, creating direct communication between the two parties (Venuti, 1995: 20).

### **IV. ANALYSIS OF TRANSLATION CONVERSION STRATEGY**

If translator wants to accurately translate and understand the entire poem, it is needed to grasp the degree of "prominence" in the text during the translation process. The so-called prominence degree is the extent that the author/speaker highlights an item through profiling, figure/ground comparison and other methods. When the author/speaker is describing a scene, in order to highlight a certain content, a certain composition is used as a prominent figure, and other elements that do not need to be highlighted or unimportant are used as the ground. From the "prominence" in the original poem to the "prominence" in the translated poem, translator often adopts corresponding translation conversion strategy. The following analyzes the original poem sentence by sentence.

TABLE I. FIGURE/GROUND TRANSLATION STRATEGIES IN *SEEING MENG HAORAN OFF AT YELLOW CRANE TOWER*

Original text		Target text		Translation strategy	
Figure	Ground	Figure	Ground	Figure	Ground
故人	黄鹤楼	my friend	Yellow Crane Towers	Language translation	Absolute cosmopolitanization
	烟花		green with willows and red with flowers		Language translation
孤帆	碧空尽	lessening sail	Boundless azure sky	Language translation	Language translation
	长江	I	River	Creation	Language translation

As can be seen from "Table I", the second and fourth sentences of the original poem have no "figure" (omitted), but only "ground", and the remaining sentences have both "figure" and "ground". In the translated poem, except for the fourth sentence, the other sentences are consistent with the "figures" and "grounds" of the original poem. In terms of translation conversion strategies, the translation shows flexible and diversified translation methods: generally speaking, language translation is the main method, but when translating the ground of the first sentence and the figure of the fourth sentence, absolute translation method and creation methods are used respectively. The use of creation method "emphasizes" the "figure" omitted in the fourth sentence of the original poem.

In addition, at the sentence level, we can also find the use of "figure" and "ground". In the structure of language events, boundary is an important feature that distinguishes "ground" from "figure". The boundaries of graphics are obvious. A clear closed boundary can effectively highlight a figure. "Those lacking boundary are prone to be used as the ground" (Wen Xu, 2014: 110). Among them, the boundary can be a point, or a period including a starting point and an ending point. According to this cognitive principle, we can clearly distinguish the "figure" and "environment" of the poem. Wherein, the third sentence has a clear boundary and thus is "figure". The first and second sentences describing the scenes of the poet and his friend's apart can be regarded as "ground 1", and the fourth sentence is "ground 2" which means the poet's endless feeling of separation from the friend. In the translation, Xu Yuanhong correspondingly treated the third sentence as a figure, the first and second sentences together as ground 1, and the fourth sentence as ground 2, achieving the equivalent of the "figures" and "grounds" to that of the original poem. Therefore, it can be generally considered that the translation strategies used in the translated poem tend to be cultural retention method, or it can be said that foreignization translation strategy is mainly used.

### V. COGNITION ON THE INFLUENCE OF FIGURE-GROUND THEORY ON C-E TRANSLATION STRATEGIES

Translation is a process of interpreting and expressing the original text. first understand the content in the mind of the original text, At the level of interpretation of the original text, in order to translate the content of the "figures" and "grounds" implied, translator should explore the way in which the original author expects the work to be presented, and make a preset to perceive the cognitive mechanism that reader will use for cognitive pragmatic inference. At the level of translation expression, the accurate translation of the "figures" and "grounds" will be restricted by some factors, such as the way in which events are interpreted (including the changes in prominence degree, perspective, and cognitive domain). It determines the combination of figures and grounds and is the prerequisite for accurate translation. Therefore, the translator adopts an appropriate translation method, translation strategy, to change the perspective of expression, so that the reader can better understand the meaning of the original text.

The figure-ground's influence on effective selection of C-E translation strategies reflected in the translator's cognitive process is divided into three steps: the translator subjectively activates the "figures" and "grounds" in the semantic structure of the original text and maps the psychological representations, cognizes and understands from vocabulary, syntactic, discourse and other aspects, and deconstructs it into a variety of cultural, emotional, environmental and other information and integrate them into the specific context for understanding. This process is the interpretation of events. It will produce different results due to factors such as the translator's cognitive domain, perspective, and prominence degree, but the influential factor prominently reflected in the "figure-ground" cognitive structure is perspective (specifically, is focus). When translating the original text, the translator should pay

attention to the selection of the types of figure-ground structure (retention of figure-ground, integration of figure-ground, and renewal of figure-ground), measure in combination with the specific cultural context, and determine the appropriate translation strategies in order

to change the perspective of expression, and try the best to create the figure-ground equivalent to that of the as far as possible in the translation to establish a pragmatic equivalent to the pragmatic perspective of the original text. The schematic diagram is as shown in "Fig. 1".

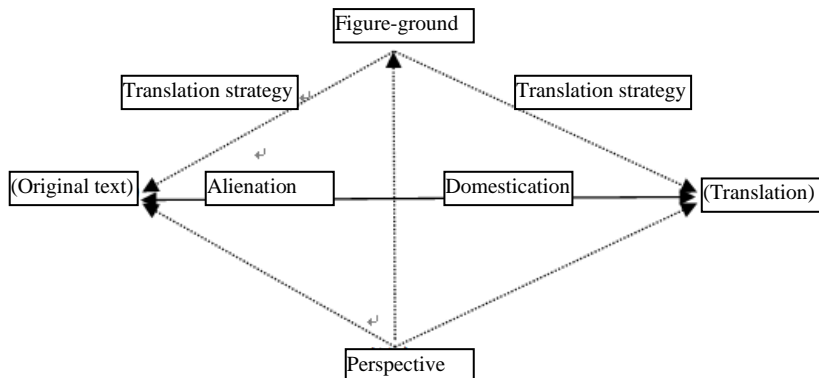


Fig. 1. Schematic diagram of the figure-ground's influence on selection of C-E translation strategies.

As can be seen from "Fig. 1", both the interpretation of the original text and the expression of the translation are affected by the translator's subjective perspective. The figure-ground under the perspective mapping will create a tension between the original text and the translation. If the figure-ground is inclined to the original text, the traction of the original will be enhanced, and the translation will have an anti-traction effect, and vice versa. When the strength of one side is strong and the other is weak, a new "critical point" or asymmetric "balance point" of domestication and alienation will generate, so as to determine the allocation of alienation and planning forces in the translation process and make clear the main and auxiliary status of the two. The main and auxiliary status will also be changed due to changes in the traction powers of both parties. Therefore, in order to highlight the type of figure-ground reconstructed in the translator's cognitive context, and achieve a balance between the two forces, it is necessary to use appropriate translation strategies.

A. Retention of figure-ground

The original text sometimes may contain a unique "figure" and "ground" derived from a specific socio-cultural context. These "figures" and "grounds" can only be understood in a specific historical context, or by looking at it from the perspective of a long historical process. Therefore, the translator's cognitive translation strategy construction should be started from the relevance between the cognitive domains of the source language and the target language: namely to get the relevant background and use purpose of the "figures" and "grounds" of the original text retained to the maximum extent and expressed in the translation. The translator needs to shuttle between the two times of the original author and the reader, try to lessen the spatial

difference and cultural difference, rethink the intention of the original author, grasp the deep connotation of the "figures" and "grounds" in the original work, make comparative research on the cultures of the original text and the target text, and finally transplant the culture of the "figures" and "grounds" by appropriate translation strategy in the target language. For example, in the poem "Seeing Meng Haoran Off at Yellow Crane Tower", the Yellow Crane Tower, located on the top of the snake mountain in Wuchang on the south bank of Yangtze River in Wuhan, is one of the "Three Famous Towers in the South of the Yangtze River". It is a landmark of Wuhan, a national 5A class and is collectively called three major tourist scenic spots of Wuhan, along with Qingchuan Pavilion and Ancient Lute Platform (Baidu Encyclopedia)<sup>1</sup>. Cui Hao, a famous poet in the Tang Dynasty, made a famous poem titled "Climbing the Yellow Crane Tower" on the Tower, making the Tower famous. Xu Yuanhong moderately organically combined the pulsation of the implicit ideology with the prominence of the appearance form, and focused on the ideographic representation of the original poem. He adopted an absolute cosmopolitan translation strategy to translate "黄鹤楼 (the Yellow Crane Tower)", which was convenient for English readers to understand, but led to loss of the original cultural information.

B. Integration of figure-ground

The figure-ground takes the actual perspective result as the existence style, the psychological cognitive representation as the interpretation mode, and the linguistic representation as the embodiment method, and is the combined effect of the three aspects.

<sup>1</sup> <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E7%83%9F%E8%8A%B1/2661>

Therefore, when translator integrates figures and grounds, he is actually constructing a balanced, compliant, related, and integrated model for them. In this process, the translator uses his cognitive system as the basis of translation, uses personal experience and knowledge to communicate with the figures and grounds of the world in the work, finds the inter-textual description points of the figures and grounds in the original work, and then constructs the figure-ground factors in the translation. This kind of interaction allows translators to continuously choose and switch translation methods, explore the implicit meaning of the figures and grounds in the original work, to the maximum extent and express it as a heterogeneous information structure with consistent overall content but different cognitive methods. Therefore, when the figure-ground concept in the original cultural context does not match that in the target language, the translator subjectively summarizes and classifies the figure-ground content of the original text and converts it into the interpretation mechanism of the target text. In the conversion process, translator should capture the cultural symbols that are most harmonious with the figure-ground concept in the original text from the current cognitive system. Based on such symbolic representations, translator should use different conversion strategies (such as intra-textual interpretation, assimilation, deletion, creation, etc.), project its characteristics onto the target language, and finally form a figure-ground representation in the target language. The following still takes "Seeing Meng Haoran Off at Yellow Crane Tower" as an example. Wherein, "烟花 (Yanhua)" in Chinese has two main meanings: the first is fireworks, a kind of thing that can emit sparks of various colors for enjoying the sight when setting it off; the second is the beautiful spring scenery. Based on personal experience, the translator integrates the background system in the world of original text, and finally determines that the meaning of the "烟花" is the beautiful spring scenery. Through the psychological scanning and subjective concept activation on the grounds of the original text, it is further extracted that the ground concept "烟花" does not conflict with the target language, and does not affect the aesthetic effect. Hence, the translation reflects the conversion strategy of language translation, further retaining the ground represented meaning of the original text.

### *C. Renewal of figure-ground*

The renewal of figure-ground requires the integration of information about them in the original text, and the integration of such special information should be based on the subjective understanding of the information. After having a full perception of the figure-ground of the original text, the translator converts the special figure-ground into the

interpretation mechanism of the target language, and represents the figure-ground to the reader with appropriate symbols. "To express full meanings with words" reflects the ideological goal of language, so the translator's translation strategy cannot be separated from the ideological construction of the language. However, some of the figure-ground in the original text contain deep cultural deposits or artistic patterns, so that it not only shows the function of ideological construction, but also reflects the needs of poetics. Taking "琴瑟 (zither)" and "蓝田 (blue field)" commonly used in Chinese poetry as examples, if the target readers do not have relevant inter-textual experience, it is difficult to appreciate the heterogeneous poetics contained in the figures and grounds of the source text (such as the artistic patterns, aesthetic concepts, cultural customs, etc.). Therefore, translators need to lock, integrate and internalize such information, and highlight the poetic needs while embodying the ideological goals. In the poem "Seeing Meng Haoran Off at Yellow Crane Tower", the translator used creation strategy in translation of in the fourth sentence. By grasping the organic nature of the figures and grounds in the original text, he supplemented and highlighted the language materialized figure and schema, implanted equivalent target language symbol system in the target language, and finally constructed a translation expression in corresponding to the figures and grounds come to his mind.

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

Based on the theory of figure-ground in cognitive linguistics, this paper interprets the translator's understanding of the selection of translation strategies at the cognitive level. Taking the figures and grounds in the English translation of "Seeing Meng Haoran Off at Yellow Crane Tower", it analyzes the translator's cognitive process in selecting the translation strategies for reconstructing three types of figure-ground. It is found that the retention of figure-ground is affected by specific social and cultural contexts. The translator's cognitive translation strategy construction often starts from the perspective of the relevance between the cognitive domains of the source language and the target language, namely to get the relevant background and use purpose of the "figures" and "grounds" of the original text retained to the maximum extent and expressed in the translation and implant the culture of the figures and grounds into the targeted language. Translator adopting the method of integration of figure-ground often extracts the figure-ground description items having the strongest intertextuality with the original text based on their own experience and world knowledge, and build scenario models in integrated, correlated, consistent, compromised, and balanced manner. Translator adopting the method of renewal of figure-ground often locks and internalizes the

information that reflects poetics, and highlights the poetic needs while embodying the ideological goals.

The effect of Chinese poetry's external communication is seriously affected by cultural substitution, cultural retention, or compromised translation strategies. When the application of various translation strategies under the influence of perspective produces a proper critical point, the translation will also show a natural balance.

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