

A Cognitive Poetic Analysis into the Translation of Yi Poetry

Illustrating with Jidi Majia's Poems in "Words of Fire"*

Yujuan Feng

School of Foreign Languages
Southwest Minzu University
Chengdu, China

Abstract—With the development of cognitive science, the discipline of cognitive poetics has been established. And a great deal of research has been done on Chinese and foreign literature works, especially Chinese ancient poems, but little concern is paid to the domain of poetry by Chinese ethnic minorities. Therefore, this article intends to take the theory of cognitive poetics as the cut-in point, and endeavors to provide a unique perspective and paradigm for the study of the translation of literary works for Chinese ethnic minorities.

Keywords—*cognitive poetics; Yi Poetry; translation*

I. INTRODUCTION

The Yi people have been in the forefront of Chinese ethnic minorities in modern poetic creation, which has attracted great attention from international literary and academic world, and led to the extensive research from multiple perspectives. As the leading figures of contemporary minority literary circles, the Yi poets, represented by Jidi Majia and Aku Wuwu, have produced a large number of popular and influential narrative poems as well as poem collections, such as "Words of Fire – Poems by Jidi Majia", "I, Leopard", "Coyote Traces: Aku Wuwu's Poetic Sojourn in America", "Tiger Traces", etc.. Moreover, the Yi poetry has appealed to a lot of overseas sinologists, including Denis Mair and Mark Bender, who have long focused on and devoted themselves to translation of the Yi literature. Therefore, it is fair to say that the Yi poetry has provided a model of cultural communication not only for the Yi nationality, but also for other Chinese minority groups in the world.

In recent years, with the development of cognitive science, especially that of cognitive linguistics, there is a universally recognized cognitive turn in the field of traditional literary criticism, as the result of which emerges the discipline of cognitive poetics. The first National Conference for Cognitive Poetics held in 2008 in China,

followed by a series of subsequent national and international conferences afterwards, has witnessed the rapid development of that comparatively new discipline. Ever since then, scholars from home and abroad have done a great deal of research on Chinese and foreign literature works, especially Chinese ancient poems. But it is a pity that little concern is paid to the domain of poetry by Chinese ethnic minorities, not to mention the contrastive analysis between the translation and original texts. Therefore, this article intends to take the theory of cognitive poetics as the cut-in point, and endeavors to provide a unique perspective and paradigm for the study of the translation of literary works for Chinese ethnic minorities.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Development of Cognitive Poetics

Cognitive Poetics is a new subject combining linguistics and literature for interdisciplinary research, which began in the 1970s during the cognitive turn of literary research. Professor Reuven Tsur of the Tel Aviv University, Israel, is one of the pioneers in applying academic findings in cognitive science to literary research, and his early works, "Toward a Theory of Cognitive Poetics"[1], together with the modified edition "Toward a Theory of Cognitive Poetics: Second, Expanded and Updated Edition"[2], is recognized as the beginning of cognitive poetic study, while "Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction" by Peter Stockwell from University of Nottingham is well recognized as a milestone in this field[3]. For this new interdisciplinary subject, Professor Reuven Tsur and Peter Stockwell name it cognitive poetics, while some scholars call it cognitive stylistics. If the target of the research is concentrated on narration, it is also termed as cognitive narratology. Tsur extends the research findings of cognitive science to the study of the relationship between literary structures and effects, and reiterates that his literary criticism does not intend to replace any traditional literary criticism, but attempts to find the answer to the problems which cannot be settled by the traditional literary approaches.

A large portion of research on cognitive poetics remains, currently, in the domain of Tang and Song Poems, with a

*This paper is supported by the "Teaching Reform Project of SMU" (Number: 2012YB10), "Projects for Basic Scientific Research Funds in Central Colleges and Universities of SMU"(Number: 13SQN40), and "National College Students Innovation and Entrepreneurship Training Program of SMU"(A Cognitive Poetic Study of the Translation of Yi's Contemporary Poetry; Number: 201810656046).

small portion on English poetry and literary works, such as “A Cognitive Approach to Tang and Song Poems” (2011) [4], “An Interpretation of ‘Mooring By Maple Bridge at Night’ from Perspective of Cognitive Poetics” (2014) [5], “On the Multi-dimensional Techniques of Cognitive Poetic Analysis: Illustrated with Shylock’s Speech in The Merchant of Venice” (2014)[6], “The Multimodal Metonymy-metaphor Representation of ANGER in Jimmy’s Narrative Picture Books: a Cognitive Poetic Perspective” (2016) [7], and so on. Therefore, the study of diversified texts will be the inevitable trend of cognitive poetics in the future, and specifically, the application of cognitive poetics to the analysis of translation versions will become the focus of research due to its great academic value and significance in promoting Chinese literature and culture.

B. Influence of Yi Poetry Represented by Jidi Majia

Jidi Majia has been in the forefront of Yi modern poetry ever since the cry of "I am Yi people" in the early 1980s. Moreover, he is the leading figure not only in Yi poetry circle, but also in Chinese Minority Literature. His 30 years of high productivity and creativity in poetry writing guides Yi modern poetry to the mainstream direction, which attracts more attention to the Yi nationality, Yi culture, geographical features of Yi region, modern Yi writers, etc..

As a famous poet, writer and calligrapher, Jidi Majia is not only a famous contemporary representative of Chinese ethnic groups, but also an international poet with extensive influence, and more than 20 of his poet collections have been published home and abroad. “*Words of Fire – Poems by Jidi Majia*” is a selected poetry collection translated by the American sinologist and poet Denis Mair, which pours history and national culture into the world and integrates deep ethnic reflection into the poetic language[8]. That’s exactly the reason why this translated version of poetry collection is chosen as the target text for this research.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES IN COGNITIVE POETICS

A. Contrast between Cognitive Poetics and Traditional Literary Criticism

Cognitive poetics is an interdisciplinary approach to literary research with the tool of cognitive science, trying to solve the problem of how literary language is constrained by human information processing. It requires a combination of the tool of cognitive science and the tool of such traditional disciplines as literature criticism and linguistics, and explores the possibility and limitation of the combination of these two tools. In the history of literary criticism in the 20th century, impressionist critics only discussed the effects of literary texts without establishing the connection between their structures and effects, while the structuralist critics are proficient at describing the structure of literary discourse without explaining the literary effects. Traditional literary criticism is confined to the triangular relationship of author - text – reader, with attention paid to different focuses by different schools; in contrast, cognitive poetics does not confine itself to any of the three, but re-examines the whole process of literary activity. To Tsur, one of the most

important goals of cognitive poetics is to bridge the gap between the value of humanity and trifling stylistic approaches, targeting at defamiliarization rather than de-automation [1]. His description of conventional cognitive processing mainly comes from the findings of some cognitive psychologists, with Ulrich Neisser playing the most important part. Tsur’s research method is usually divided into the following three steps:

Firstly, to describe the conventional cognitive processing.

Secondly, to describe how poetry modifies conventional cognitive processing.

Finally, to study the subsequent reorganization and literary effects based on different principles.

B. Figure-ground Theory

The theoretical methods involved in cognitive poetics include: deixis, cognitive grammar, metaphor, schema theory, possible world theory, mental space theory, text world theory, situation framework theory, and so on. Most of the theoretical foundations in “*Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction*” are based on cognitive linguistics and cognitive psychology, such as the cognitive grammar theory of Ronald Langacker, especially the figure-ground theory. Being one of core theories of the language system, figure-ground theory can be used to re-evaluate the core concepts of literary features and styles, which further consists of dominance, stylistic deviance, foregrounding, and so on.

The figure-ground theory was first put forward by the Danish psychologist Rubin in 1915 and then adopted by Gestalt Psychology to study the way of perception and describe the manner of space organization. Gestalt psychologists believe that the perceptual field can always be divided into two parts – the figure and the ground. "Figure" refers to the salience in a cognitive concept or perception – the focus part of attention; while "ground" is the part to highlight figure. When we observe an object in the surroundings, we usually regard this object as the salient figure in the perceptual field, taking the environment as the ground. Let’s take the following classic picture to illustrate:

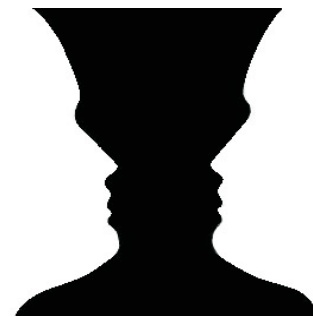


Fig. 1. A picture to illustrate figure-ground theory.

In "Fig. 1", if we concentrate on the black part of the picture, what we see is a vase. That is, black is the salient figure, while white functions as the ground. But if we do it the opposite way, the salient figure is two faces facing each other, while the black part becomes exactly the ground.

According to Stockwell, the figure is usually endowed with the following characteristics [3]:

- Regarded as a self-contained object or feature in its own right, with well-defined edges separating it from the ground;
- Moving in relation to the static ground;
- Precede the ground in time or space;
- Be a part of the ground that has broken away, or emerges to become the figure;
- More detailed ,better focused, brighter, or more attractive than the rest of the field;
- Be on top of, or in front of, or above, or larger than the rest of the field that is then the ground.

All the features of the figure, as demonstrated above, can be used as excellent criteria for the further analyses into the translation of Yi poetry in the following part.

IV. CASE STUDIES THROUGH FIGURE-GROUND THEORY

A. An Illustration of a Tang Poem – a Traditional Perspective

The figure-ground theory is very helpful for the understanding and perception of the artistic conception in Tang and Song poetry, and is also the most traditional and well-accepted research method for scholars in the domain of cognitive poetics. Let’s try to elucidate this point by analyzing two lines from Wang Wei’s famous verse “Solitary Smoke in the Desert”: 大漠孤烟直, 长河落日圆。



Fig. 2. A picture for “Solitary Smoke in the Desert”.

This verse is a very typical and representative example to demonstrate figure-ground theory for it builds a vivid image as can be distinctly illustrated by "Fig. 2": on the desolate frontier fortress of a desert, the solitary smoke rising from the beacon tower is particularly striking; with a wide range of view along the long river, the remaining part of the setting sun is more prominent. It is obviously seen that in the first half of the verse, the desert functions as the ground while the smoke functions as the figure; in the second half of the verse, the river plays the role of ground while the setting sun plays the part of figure. What is quite impressive is the contrast between the figure and ground, which not only accurately depicts the sight of the desert, but also shows the author's

deep feelings. Since the salient figures of "solitary smoke" and "setting sun" are the embodiment of author’s loneliness, the scenery is enormously broadened and the artistic conception is even more vigorous. That’s why this verse is reputed as one of the most classic poems and the "eternal glory" by Wang Guowei.

B. An illustration of Translation in Words of Fire – a New Insight

In this section, two poems, selected from the poem collection “Words of Fire – Poems by Jidi Majia” and translated by Denis Mair, will be further analyzed by figure-ground theory, in order to shed new light on the cognitive poetic research paradigm. Let’s look at the first poem “民歌”, translated as “Folk Song” and demonstrated in “Table I”:

TABLE I. “民歌” vs. “FOLK SONG”

No.	Original Poem	Translation
1	在 太阳 沉落的时候	As <i>the sun</i> edged downward
2	望着 流血的山岗	It was watching the bleeding hill
	from 民歌	from Folk Song

In line 1, both “太阳” in the original poem and “the sun” in the translation are bold and italicized, which function as the ground; while in line 2, both “流血的山岗” and “the bleeding hill” are bold and underlined, which function as the figure. To be more specific, with “the sun” being the ground, the “bleeding hill”, as the figure, is highlighted and more vivid. In Denis Mair’s translation, the contrast between figure and ground in the original poem is perfectly translated and maintained. Therefore, from the criterion of figure-ground theory, the translation of Denis Mair conveys the artful images hidden in the original poem of Jidi Majia, and both forms complement each other in an ingenious way.

Then let’s look at another poem “母亲的手”, translated as “Mother’s Hand” and demonstrated in “Table II”:

TABLE II. “母亲的手” vs. “MOTHER’S HAND”

No.	Original Poem	Translation
1	就这样向右悄悄地睡去	In this right-facing pose she goes off to sleep
2	在 清清 的风中	In <i>the clear-aided wind</i>
3	在 蒙蒙 的雨	In <i>a hazy rain-shower</i>
4	让 淡淡 的雾笼罩	She is enveloped in <i>thin mist</i>
5	让 白白 的云萦绕	She is enwreathed in <i>white clouds</i>
6	无论是在 静静 的黎明	Whether at <i>tranquil daybreak</i>
7	还是在 迷人 的黄昏	Or in <i>enchanting twilight</i>
8	一切都成了 冰冷 的雕像	All else turns to <i>chilled sculpture</i>
9	只有 她的左手 还漂浮着	Only her left arm floats free
10	皮肤上一定有 温度	Its skin surely gives off warmth
11	血管里一定有 血流	Its veins surely flow with blood
	from 母亲的手	from Mother’s Hand

In line 2 to 8, such expressions as “清清的风”, “蒙蒙的雨”, “淡淡的雾”, etc., in the original poem, as well as such corresponding expressions as “the clear-aided wind”, “a hazy rain-shower”, “thin mist”, etc., in the translation, all function as the ground; while in line 9, both “她的左手” and “her left arm” function as the figure. It is apparent that the seven

multifold phrases in both the original poem and the translation build up a well-structured and multi-layer ground, which give prominence to the figure – “her left arm”. In a general sense, this translation keeps strictly with the original poem as in the delivery of the original figure-ground images. Furthermore, as the figure, “her left arm” is much more salient and outstanding with the well-built ground. However, the original poem outdoes the translation in the aesthetic and artistic effect for “清的风”, “蒙蒙的雨”, “淡淡的雾” are in strictly paralleled construction while the corresponding translated structures by Denis Mair fail to produce the same the formal symmetry.

V. CONCLUSION

As a new literary theory and research paradigm, cognitive poetics can not only explain how the meaning of the text is generated and achieved, but also facilitate new discoveries of the text, namely, the discovery of new causes, connotations, features and aesthetic values. As a matter of fact, some of the main categories of cognitive poetics not only have the instrumental advantages in discovering meaning, but also have the aesthetic potential, which contain aesthetic orientations: the figure-ground theory is correspondent with aesthetic attention; the stereotype theory is concerned with literary convention and aesthetic attitude; the iconic relationship between form and meaning is a defining feature for literary text since senses, emotions and images are blended into language due to iconicity, and so on and so forth. Meanwhile, as the product of language, the core element of poetry is image. In the process of poetry reading and appreciation, routine images are transformed into aesthetic images, which is a recategorization of the original categories.

The Yi poets, such as Jidi Majia, Aku Wuwu, etc., write poems in Chinese rather than in their native language, which are similar to such foreign writers as William Butler Yeats, George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde, and so on. The cultural propositions of the contemporary Yi poets is surprisingly similar to those in American Harlem Renaissance; that is, in the context of modern cultural misplacement and confusion, the ethnic identity of their own should be awakened from its root again. Therefore, this paper analyzes Jidi Majia’s poems from the perspective of cognitive poetics, which not only intends to promote the literature of ethnic minorities, but more importantly, provides the world with a better understanding of Yi Poetry and Yi culture.

REFERENCES

- [1] Tsur, R. *Toward a Theory of Cognitive Poetics*. Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1992.
- [2] Tsur, R. *Toward a Theory of Cognitive Poetics: Second, Expanded and Updated Edition*. Brighton and Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2008, pp. 19.
- [3] Stockwell, P. *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction*. London: Routledge, 2002, pp. 15.
- [4] Chun, Lan. A Cognitive Approach to Tang and Song Poems. *Foreign Language and Literature(bimonthly)*, 2011(1), pp. 39-43.
- [5] Yanping, Xia. An Interpretation of “Mooring By Maple Bridge at Night” from Perspective of Cognitive Poetics. *Foreign Language and Literature(bimonthly)*, 2014(1), pp. 48-50.
- [6] Muqing, Xiong. On the Multi-dimensional Techniques of Cognitive Poetic Analysis: Illustrated with Shylock’s Speech in *The Merchant of Venice*. *Cognitive Poetics*, 2014, pp. 3-22.
- [7] Xiufeng, Zhao & Xiaowei, Li. The Multimodal Metonymy-metaphor Representation of ANGER in Jimmy’s Narrative Picturebooks: a Cognitive Poetic Perspective. *Foreign Language Education*, 2016(1), pp. 10-14.
- [8] Jidi Majia, (translated by)Denis Mair. *Words of Fire – Poems by Jidi Majia*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2013.