

# A Semiotic Perspective of the Translations of Metaphors in Literary Works with Reproducing the Metaphorical Image Schema

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## Abstract

Metaphor is more often a way of thinking than a mere rhetorical device. To understand a metaphor requires an exploration into the process during which it is created, thus discovering how certain inter-connections between an object and the sign that it refers to are structured and interpreted. In this case, metaphors are considered to be semiotic in nature. And when it comes to metaphors in literary works, the context that the object and its sign are placed in matters a great deal. Therefore, when translating a metaphor from the original text into the target language, one needs to consider both the image schema of the original metaphor and the context it is in, so as to reproduce the metaphor to the greatest extent in the translated text. This paper selects three literary works of two local writers from Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region in China, which, were translated into English via a magazine known as *Pathlight*, for carrying out a text-based translation research, with a purpose of evaluating if the translation is equivalent when it comes to reproducing the structure as well as meaning of the original metaphor. Some attempts of metaphor translation aiming at reproducing the original metaphorical image schema are made as well, to show that the translator has to fully understand the original metaphor mapping mode first and then engages in the translation practice as a key interpretant in metaphor reproduction.

## Keywords

Metaphor, Metaphorical Image Schema, Metaphor Translation, Interpretant of Metaphor

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. What Is Metaphor

According to Aristotle, metaphor works when “a noun properly applies to

something else” and is a matter of transfer from “genus to species”, “species to genus” or “species to species” (Kenny, 2013: p. 43), which indicates that the metaphorical process refers to a transfer in meaning from one word to another by category, leading to a series of studies afterwards focusing on exploring the figurative mechanism of metaphor. It is Richards (1981) that originally put forward the connection between metaphor and thought and referred to the metaphorical nature as two ideas working upon each other, he then suggested using “tenor” and “vehicle” for these two interactive ideas, with the former being the principal object while the latter connecting it to a certain implication system (p. 96). These two categories of metaphor were explained by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) as “target domain” and “source domain” in their conceptual metaphor theory, extending the ranges of possible similarities to be compared between two objects and leading to their following classifications of metaphor as “orientational”, “ontological” and “structural”, with each having its conceptual grounding deeply rooted in cultural contexts and people’s life experiences.

## 1.2. Translation of Metaphor in Literary Works

It can be inferred from the above discussed characteristics of metaphor that it not only serves as a key in understanding the culture as well as conceptual mode of people in a certain place, but is also an important rhetorical device with words as its carrier. In this case, metaphors in literary works bear the function of enriching language expressions and reflecting individual cognitive habits of specific characters as well. Analysis of metaphors in literary works helps to analyze the thoughts and behaviors of characters and interpret the works in depth. What’s more, it provides people with opportunities to know about the social and cultural background of a region or a nation in a certain period of time. Therefore, it is of vital importance for literary translation activities to focus on an effective delivery of metaphors in the target language due to their significant role in cross-cultural exchanges.

From a linguistic and textual level, metaphor translation was addressed by some (Nida, 1964; Newmark, 1981; Toury, 1995) as an issue involving linguistic and semantic equivalence. Since metaphor is often confined to cultural context, it can cause great difficulties in translation provided an original cultural image may not exist in the culture of the target language. Take metaphors concerning “dragon” as an example, they carry propitious connotations and serve as unique symbols for the Chinese nation, like shown in the expressions “龙的传人” (descendants of dragons) and “藏龙卧虎” (hidden dragons and crouching tigers). Translated literally, these two expressions can be difficult for the target language readers to understand since dragons do not render the same auspicious meanings as they are in Chinese culture. Therefore, several strategies need to be applied in adjusting the original metaphors so as to help them make sense in the target language.

Peter Newmark (1981) provided several strategies for metaphor translation, including keeping the original metaphor with adding notes, replacing the meta-

phor with an acceptable equivalent in the target language and deleting the metaphor in translation (pp. 88-91). Similarly, Schäffner (2004) analyzed three strategies to apply in metaphor translation, including paraphrase, substitution and deletion (p. 1263), with each focusing on metaphor transference from the source text to the target text at a linguistic level.

Translation strategies put forward from linguistic and textual approaches like the above listed ones are of great practical values in metaphor translation. However, metaphor is still considered as untranslatable in a number of cases as long as cultural gaps exist, with losing either the original linguistic form or connotative function in translation. Hence, the paper puts forward that the translation of metaphor needs to be re-addressed and traced back as an issue regarding metaphor in nature, namely a cognitive activity with being expressed via language. Considered as a cognitive process, analysis of metaphor as well as metaphor translation should strive to figure out what makes an expression metaphorical both in form and connotation. Taken these key aspects into consideration, the paper seeks further clarifications of the nature of metaphor and metaphor translation from a semiotic perspective.

## **2. A Semiotic Perspective of Metaphor and Metaphor Translation**

### **2.1. Metaphor as Semiotic Sign**

Being discussed above, metaphor is considered as a rhetorical device and later being interpreted to be a way of thinking. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980/2003) put it, people's conceptual system is "metaphorical in nature" (p. 3). Since metaphor involves the process during which one compares a certain object with another based on his own life experiences, words can be viewed as the carrier of metaphor. What makes a metaphor understandable and transferable does not merely lie in words, but in how the connection between the objects involved is built. In other words, metaphor occurs when the original object and the object applied to further explain the original one interact with one another in a certain way. According to Richards (1981), metaphorical meaning comes into sense when the "tenor" interacts with the "vehicle". Therefore, it is the interaction mode between them that matters (p. 100).

Black (1962) claims that the similarities between objects are key in metaphor, he also further illustrated this point with cases like "Richard is a lion" and "man is a wolf" to show that the similarities are dependent on the person who creates a metaphor with regards to his or her perceptions towards how they are related, since there are no existing similarities (p. 37). This indicates that the schema the tenor and the vehicle is compared in is decisive when it comes to which characteristics among them are chosen to be mapped onto one another, so as to create a new symbol or image. According to some experts whose researches center around the schema of metaphor (Gentner, 1983; Wolff & Gentner, 2000; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Tourangeau & Stemberg, 1981), how the source domain in

which the vehicle comes from as well as the target domain that generates the tenor are defined serves as the key issue, along with the rules of selecting characteristics to achieve the mapping process.

In the above analysis, it can be seen that there are three aspects that are of significance in creating a metaphor, namely a principal object, a certain way of interpretation, and a newly-formed image based one's interpretation concerning the mapping schema. Peirce explains the relationship among the three with a "triad" figure in his semiotics theory, which includes a sign, an object and an interpretant (Pharies, 1985: pp. 13-18). According to him, for an object to become a sign requires certain interpretation as the media, with a knowledgeable basis of how the object and the sign is connected, known as the ground. Peirce's theory provide researchers with great insights into re-examining the formation of metaphor, as well as how to best deliver the original message carried in a metaphor into the target language via translation.

## 2.2. Translation as Semiotic Transference

Inspired by Peircean semiotics, Jakobson (1959) holds that it is crucial for translation to focus on generating and transferring the meaning of a sign (p. 233). In this case, it is the translator's job to decode the message carried in the original text and reproduce it in the target text so as to achieve equivalence. According to Jakobson (1971), cases of untranslatability only exist in poetry translation, since there is more to poetic lines other than their linguistic features, that the emotional expression via rhythms may add complications to translation (p. 259). Apart from that, nearly all texts are translatable provided the semiotic signs are interpreted in a way that leads to a follow-up transference in translation in a message-equivalent sense.

To view translation as a semiotic transferring process provides a new insight into translation practices as well as the evaluation of translated works. As for the translation of metaphors, it is even more necessary to do so since metaphors are semiotic in nature as discussed above. For an original sign delivered in a metaphor to be equivalently reproduced into another language, a translator has to firstly understand the original metaphorical image schema via the clues given in the context, and then strive to recreate the metaphor in the target text with the similar image schema.

Despite the insights of combining semiotics with metaphor translation, few studies have made inquiries into applying this theoretical framework in translation practices, while some only elaborate the paradigms of metaphor translation from a semiotic perspective (Dusi, 2015; Wang & Lai, 2022; Luo, 2019; Xiao & Li, 2010). This paper takes the translation of metaphors as the object of research, explores into the metaphorical image schema of the original metaphors as well as how they are reproduced in the target text, and by evaluating the message equivalence between the original sign and the sign reproduced in translation, attempting to come up with a practical and adequate way of translating metaphors in a cross-cultural context.

### 3. Transference of Signs in Metaphor Translation

#### 3.1. Metaphorical Images in Literary Works of Ningxia

As a nation with great literary history since the ancient times, China sees a large quantity of literary works with metaphors, from classical poems to modern fictions alike. What's more, since there are 56 ethnic groups all over China, and almost each is with its own unique customs and culture, the literary works produced in each ethnic context is rich in metaphors symbolizing both the local common belief and behavior as well as that of the entire nation.

As one of the distinctive ethnic regions in China, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region produces literary works rich in metaphors reflecting the living conditions and lifestyles of the local people, creating a number of unique cultural images via metaphorical expressions, like “换水” (change water), a unique expression for bath-taking for the Hui people in Ningxia, and “狗娃子” (dog-like kid) with an actual reference to people who always look dirty and filthy. There are also less plainly-expressed metaphors, some of which are related to certain furniture pieces or financial state reflecting the difficult lives led by the local people. For instance, a fragile wooden bed used to be frequently seen at many households in Ningxia, for they couldn't afford to buy a properly-functioned bed under difficult living conditions, hence it is an image symbolizing the hard times that the local people encountered in the past. Analysis of metaphors like these provides people with chances of getting to know how the local people in Ningxia view the world differently from other ethnic groups. What's more, with adequate translations, readers from different cultural backgrounds may find their ways into better understanding Ningxia. Therefore, the selection of the metaphors in this part is carried out with considerations as to what may best reflect the living conditions, folk customs and cognitive habits of the local.

Despite the unique connotations carried in the metaphors of Ningxia literary works, relevant translation practices are numbered, and only a few works were translated into English by means of a magazine focusing on translating Chinese ethnic literary works, known as *Pathlight*. Therefore, this paper selects the three literary works of two local writers from Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region that were translated into English and published on *Pathlight*, to carry out a text-based research from a semiotic perspective with a purpose of evaluating if the translation is adequate when it comes to whether the translated metaphors reflect the above discussed living conditions as well as cultural images of the local in Ningxia.

#### 3.2. Metaphorical Image Schema in the Original Works

Metaphorical meaning occurs when someone creates a new image to further explain the original object based on personal cognition. In literary works, a writer applies metaphor to vividly build up a character or a scene, with a purpose of helping the readers better understand the emotions underneath as well as the background in which a literary piece is written. In this case, the characteristic among many that the writer picks from the original object to be mapped or pro-

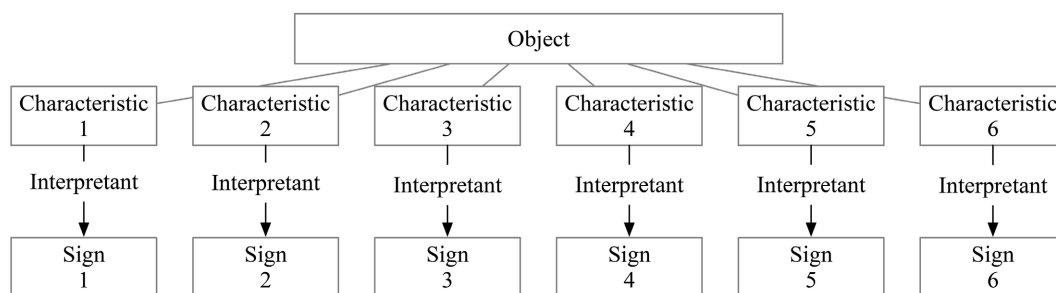
jected onto another so as to create a new image or sign is the key. For instance, in the expression “我们家穷得叮当响” (Shi, 2012a: p. 1), the writer is projecting the state of being so poor so as to having only a few coins to spare onto the sound of coins clanging.

In the above example, there may be multiple ways to show that someone is stuck in poverty, it is the writer that chooses one of the many characteristics to express his idea of being poor and reproduce it with another image showing bare coins jingling.

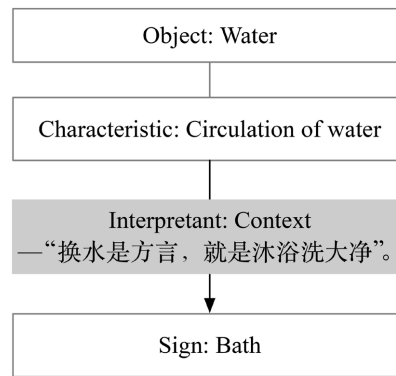
It can be inferred that the newly built sign to replace the original object needs to be activated via certain interpretants, while the original object has to provide a range of features or meanings to be projected onto the sign. Since any object can be endowed with actual meanings as long as it is a matter of personal cognition, the range of features of a certain object is also dependent on how one perceives it. Consequently, a variety of characteristics may be generated with cognition as the interpretants. **Figure 1** is given below to better illustrate this point.

In literary works, apart from the writer, the context is also an important interpretant. Another example is used to illustrate this point: “清水河一代回民习俗是要出远门换水” (Li, 2009: p. 86). As much as the writer is clear about what metaphor he is trying to pull here, namely the flowing and circulation of water being projected onto the movement or running a bath, the readers still need to proceed a few more sentences of reading to discover more given clues. Applying the above mapping figure, the image schema of the second example can be drawn as shown in **Figure 2**.

Based on the above analysis, it is clear to see that interpretants are decisive in generating the final outcome of a metaphor. According to Peirce, interpretants can also be considered as semiotic in nature as they are able to constantly lead to new signs once the inner connections inside the image schema of a metaphor undergo changes (Buchler, 2011: p. 99). Therefore, the types of interpretants can be categorized based on the differing relations between the object and the sign. From a communicative perspective, Pietarinen (2006) divides interpretants in metaphors as being intentional, effectual and communicative (p. 33), so as to fulfill the goal of inter-communication. However, there is no categorization found when it comes to metaphors in literary works, therefore, the paper considers the above discussed two interpretants, namely the writer as well as the context to be the basic classifications in the metaphorical image-schema presented.



**Figure 1.** Mapping process from object to sign.



**Figure 2.** Mapping process of metaphor “换水”.

### 3.3. Metaphorical Image Schema in the Translated Texts

Seen from a semiotic perspective, translation is about the transference of semi-otic signs so as to achieve equivalence between the source language (SL) and target language (TL). Since metaphor comes out of the interaction among different semiotic signs based on a particular image schema, the translation of metaphor involves not only equivalence at word level but also a reproduction of the original schema, following its logic and mapping pattern. The following example is used to illustrate this point, with both the original image-schema as well as that in the translated text presented in **Figure 3**.

1) Source text: “不会像现在的床那样，翻一个身，咳嗽一声，它也受不住似的咿呀不已。” (Shi, 2012b: p. 6)

2) Target text: “It wasn’t like beds today, where all you have to do is turn over or cough and it creeeaks as if it’s going to fall apart” (translation by Philip Hand)

Based on the above comparison between the metaphorical image schema of both the source text and the target text, it can be seen that the object of metaphor in the target text is lost during the process of translation. As a result, the target language readers may fail at getting that the writer is trying to depict a more vivid picture by comparing the old bed to an aging person. Another example is listed below with **Figure 4** to show an inadequate transference of metaphor due to a incompleteness in reproducing the image schema in the target text .

1) Source text: “被子似乎总是淑静地叠放在靠墙的被床子上。” (Shi, 2012a: p. 3)

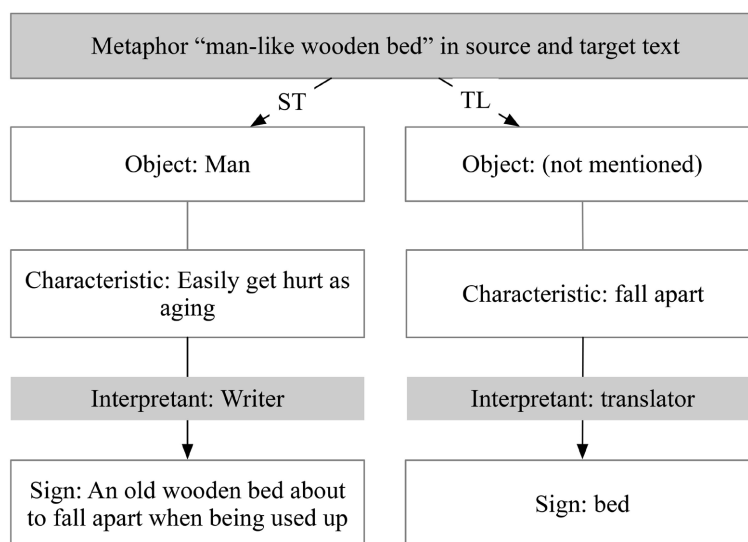
2) Target text: “it was folded daintily on the linen shelf by the wall.” (translation by Philip Hand)

There is no denying that the characteristic of the duvet being dainty is delivered in the target text. However, based on the overall context, the whole passage is about the history of this special duvet and how much it means to the writer. Therefore, to achieve the greatest equivalence when it comes to the translation of this core metaphor seems to be necessary, since it helps convey the writer’s feelings and emotions behind when taking a retrospect into his life in the past via this duvet, as well as bring the target language readers closer to that particular moment in the writer’s memory. Missing one part in building the image schema

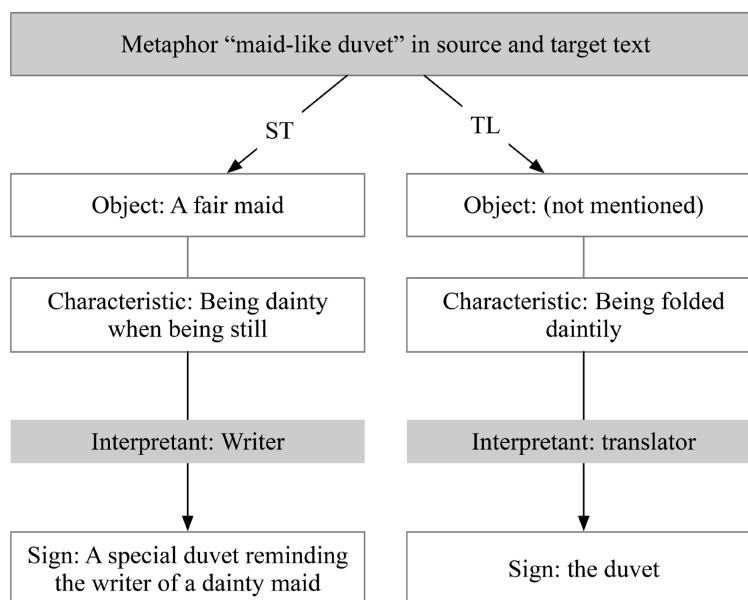


in the target language may lead to an incomplete transference of both the writer's intention and the original connotation.

Another important reason of having to fully reproduce the original metaphorical image schema is for cross-cultural communication. Although cultural contexts may greatly differ and influence readers' understanding of literary works coming from a totally different culture, it is the translator's job to create an equivalent expression in the target language with a purpose of promoting readers' understanding and at the same time keeping the original metaphorical sense. In the following example with its image schema shown in **Figure 5**, it seems that the translator does a great job in the former aspect instead of in the latter one.

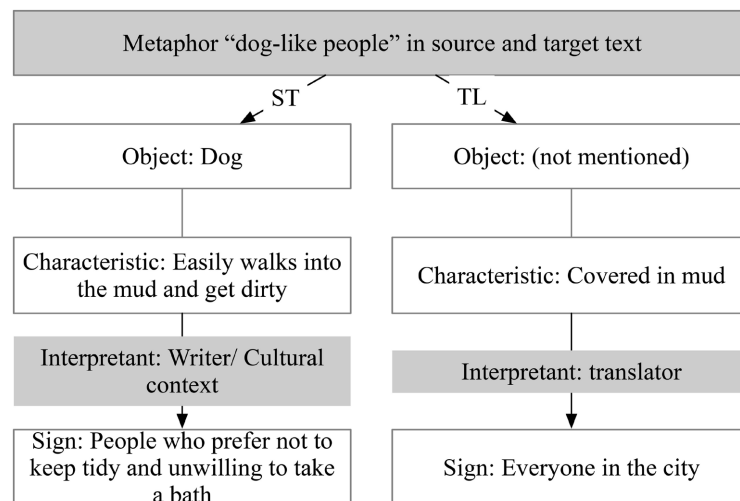


**Figure 3.** Image schema of metaphor “man-like wooden bed” in SL and TL.



**Figure 4.** Image schema of metaphor “maid-like duvet” in SL and TL.





**Figure 5.** Image schema of metaphor “dog-like people” in SL and TL.

1) Source text: “你以为城里人都跟脏狗娃子一样？” (Li, 2009: p. 87)

2) Target text: “You don’t think everyone in the city walks around covered in mud, do you?” (translation by Philip Hand)

There are several regions in China where the local like to compare people to dogs, in a way to show that some people resemble dogs with having features like being naughty, easily get attached or not enjoying get cleaned up so much. In Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, dog is a word even more frequently used in the local dialect, with which people would project some unwelcomed qualities onto others that they seem to have issues with. Calling someone who doesn’t like to stay hygiene as being like a dog is one the most commonly used phrases. In this case, it is better for the translator to keep the original image in the process of translation, since it may give the target language readers a chance to rethink about the writer’s intention of pulling such a metaphor, thereby getting to know better the cultural context that a literary work is based on.

### 3.4. Reproduction of Metaphorical Image Schema in Translation

According to the above analysis and example illustrations, this paper holds that the image schema of a metaphor consists of the core elements needed in achieving a metaphorical sense, therefore the translator needs to strive to make the meaning of the original metaphor equivalent in the target text by reproducing the original metaphorical image schema, in terms of delivering the original cultural connotations, linguistic features as well as the writer’s emotions and feelings. In this way, the translation of metaphor should be kept as a semiotic transference which takes into account as many key factors as possible, instead of being a mere linguistic transference that may sometimes lead to word-word translation.

Aiming at carrying out metaphor translation activities in a practical sense, an attempt of improving the previously discussed examples of metaphor translation is made in this part, with the revised translated versions presented as the follow-

ing.

**Example 1:** “我们家穷得叮当响。” (Shi, 2012a: p. 1)

Original translation: “My family was as poor as the day is long.” (translation by Philip Hand)

Revised translation: “My family was so broke that we only have some clanging coins to spare at hand.”

**Example 2:** “清水河一代回民习俗是要出远门换水。” (Li, 2009: p. 86)

Original translation: “The Hui people living along the River Qingshui ‘change the water’ before they start a long journey.” (translation by Philip Hand)

Revised translation: “The Hui people living along the River Qingshui fancy a bath to get fully cleaned up, for a better start at a long journey.”

**Example 3:** “不会像现在的床那样，翻一个身，咳嗽一声，它也受不住似的啾呀不已。” (Shi, 2012b: p. 6)

Original Translation: “It wasn’t like beds today, where all you have to do is turn over or cough and it creaks as if it’s going to fall apart” (translation by Philip Hand).

Revised Translation: “It wasn’t like beds today, where all you have to do is turn over or cough and it creeks to say that it cannot take it as an old crock.”

**Example 4:** “被子似乎总是淑静地叠放在靠墙的被床子上。” (Shi, 2012a: p. 3)

Original translation: “it was folded daintily on the linen shelf by the wall.” (translation by Philip Hand).

Revised translation: “The duvet sits on the linen shelf by the wall like a dainty maid.”

**Example 5:** “你以为城里人都跟脏狗娃子一样？” (Li, 2009: p. 87)

Original translation: “You don’t think everyone in the city walks around covered in mud, do you?” (translation by Philip Hand).

Revised translation: “You don’t think everyone in the city walks around like filthy dogs covered in mud, do you?”

To make the original metaphor in a literary work come into sense, it is the writer and the context that are decisive due to their roles in interpreting the inter-connections between the object and the sign. Similarly, for the metaphor to make sense in the target language, it is the translator that serves as a key interpretant and should work to reproduce the image schema of the original metaphor, so as to make both the original metaphorical meaning as well mapping patterns equivalent in the target text.

#### 4. Conclusion

Metaphor has a long history of being a rhetorical device, yet it represents people’s way of thinking in a large sense. By representing one object with another via building certain inter-connections between them, metaphor is semiotic in nature, with language as one of the main form of expression and a mapping pattern as its image schema. In this case, metaphors in literary works can be viewed as a process when a writer attempts to build an image schema between two objects, with a purpose of strengthening the vividness in conveying the special

qualities of a person, an object, or an event. In this process, the writer himself/herself as well as the literary context function is as the interpretants.

Due to the semiotic nature of metaphors, translation practices can also be carried out within a semiotic framework. Since it is the translator's turn to decode the original messages kept in a metaphor, the translator is an important interpretant in the process of translation. Therefore, the translator should work to reproduce the original metaphorical image schema in the target text, so as to keep an equivalence to the largest extent at both semantic level and mapping patterns between the original metaphor and the metaphor to be presented in the translated text.

This paper makes an attempt to view metaphor translation from a semiotic perspective and puts forward an image-schema-based approach to metaphor translation, with several examples of the metaphors from three literary works of Ningxia as well as the corresponding translated texts illustrated in the paper. These works are rich in unique metaphors reflecting the living conditions as well as cognitive habits of the local people, yet few of them have been adequately translated into English. With an aim of reproducing the original metaphorical schema, several modifications of example translated texts are carried out in the paper to show the factors to be taken into consideration by translators in translation.

There are, however, some important issues left under-explored, including a further discussion concerning the rules of categorizing the interpretants in the original metaphorical image schema, and a possibility of applying certain translation techniques in the presented image-schema-based translation approach so as to maximize the equivalence in translation. Also, how to restructure the sentences in translation based on relevant metaphorical image schema seems to be worth exploring into from a perspective of syntax. In future studies, translators and researchers may take these issues into account and further explore metaphor translation from an image-schema-based approach with conducting more extensive text-based analysis. The present study would also continue to dig deeper into these issues and produce complementary research outcomes.

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### **Conflicts of Interest**

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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