

# A Relevance Translation Theory-Based Analysis of Translation Methods of Metaphorical Words in 2019 China's Government Work Report

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**ABSTRACT.** *The annual “Report on the Work of the Government” emerges as an image to publicize China’s policies and principles and a path to display China’s new achievements. However, numerous metaphorical buzz words bring a wide array of translation problems and become foreign readers’ stumbling blocks. From the perspective of Relevance Translation Theory, this paper views metaphorical words and phrases in the “2019 Government Work Report” as linguistic data, gives them a classification in the light of the degree of formality, and puts forward three translation methods: addition, division and substitution. The author makes every effort to explain and illustrate the necessity and effectiveness of those remedies with the cognitive reasoning ability and optimal relevance in Relevance Translation Theory. The exploration proves that addition, division and substitution have a powerful explanation for the translation of metaphorical words and phrases in political writings, and it also offers a novel theoretical foundation and fresh reference for translation enthusiasts in the study of metaphorical words translation.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Relevance Translation Theory, metaphorical words and phrases, 2019 Government Work Report, cognitive reasoning, optimal relevance.*

## 1. Introduction

Metaphorical words, namely, words with literal and implicit meaning, often appear in a certain cultural environment, and objectively show the country’s cultural characteristics. They are often seen as fixed words and phrases, even slang and idioms and featured by particularity, popularity, and vividness. The use of metaphorical words and phrases in the 2019 GWR, a non-literary political text with numerous culture-loaded words and phrases, not only achieves the language effect of concision and simplicity, but highlights region-cultural characteristics and creates traditional atmosphere.

Generally, political writings have strong peculiarities, which are mainly manifested in the purpose of political propaganda, the complexity of words and

sentences, the objectivity of position and the formality of style. The “2019 Government Work Report” is a typically political one with extensive and complex contents, from the summary of the past work and deployments of martial in various fields years to come. However, with new buzz words and phrases gathering momentum, metaphorical words and phrases can be seen in this report, which are a heavy burden for translators to translate those political vocabularies. Many scholars seek effective translation strategies and approaches from different perspectives. Liu Jing explored the translation of culture-loaded words from the perspective of Relevance Theory, analyzed some translation factors of culture-loaded words and phrases, and made a suggestion that the translation of such words should combine literal translation with free translation [7]. The fact that the translation of political texts should center on politics was put forward by Cheng Zhenqiu [5]. He also held that as a translator who was engaged in the translation of political essays, he must always keep his head sober, on the basis of accurately understanding the original text and striving to be faithful to the original text, fully considering the situation and expectations of the target readers, and using various appropriate translation strategies to achieve the intended purpose of the translation and communicative function. How can we give an accurate translation of metaphorical words and phrases, allowing the target reader to obtain the original information and the writer’s communicative intentions? This is what the author must do.

The author believes that the translation of metaphorical words and phrases should fully consider the mix of foreign readers’ cognition and reasoning ability through RTT (Relevance Translation Theory). The goal is to obtain the best connection between information and communicative intentions. In order to achieve it, the author provides three translation methods: addition, division and substitution. Based on RTT, the necessity of these three translation methods is explained in detail with a variety of cases.

## **2. Relevance translation theory**

Relevance Theory studied pragmatics on a cognitive view, holding that language communication was a dynamic “ostensive-inferential” process [5]. Moreover, discourse understanding was also a cognitive process that must rely on inference. Gutt (1999) saw translation as a kind of pragmatically communicative act and defined translation as a process of reasoning and interpretation. The optimal relevance was the pith of the theory, and its force depended on processing efforts and contextual effects. Under the same condition, the smaller the processing effort was, the stronger the correlation; the greater the contextual effect was, the stronger the correlation. In the process of translation, the optimal dynamic relevance is the goal the translator strives to achieve, and it is also the standard of translation researches. Gutt, in his masterpiece, “Translation and Relevance-Cognition and Context” mentioned that translation was an interpretive use [1]. This one allows the translation text to link the author’s cognitive thinking, the translator and the reader, making an achievement of communicative interaction.

### 3. Classification of metaphorical words and phrases in political writings

The Government Work Report is a unique non-literary text with strong authority and popularization. Chinese people are good at emotional expressions, so vivid vocabularies are favored, one of which is unique metaphors. Apart from a kind of figure of speech, metaphor is a tool for people to acquire new knowledge and get new ideas. The application of appropriate metaphorical words and phrases in Chinese political essays is not only easier to convey the textual information, also reflects Chinese unique thoughts and ideologies [10]. According to the degree of their formality, metaphorical words and phrases can be roughly classified into metaphorical locutions, metaphorical idioms and metaphorical slang [11].

#### 3.1 *Metaphorical locutions*

As a descriptive narrative unit, locutions can be seen in popular literary works with complex structures and variable sentence patterns. Metaphorical locutions have dual meanings, the denotative meaning and connotative meaning in a specific context. Those words and phrases can often be found in the “2019 Government Work Report”, such as “新官不理旧帐(literally, The new office dismissed the old account)”, “厕所革命(toilet revolution)”, “大水漫灌(broad irrigation)”, “半拉子工程(half-strap projects)”, “底线思维(bottom-line thoughts)” and so on. The addition of those words to the political writings helps to create a genial and down-to-earth atmosphere, and reflect Chinese politics’ benevolent thoughts.

#### 3.2 *Metaphorical idioms*

Idioms emerge as fixed four-character structures the characteristic of completeness and convention. There remain a few metaphorical idioms in 2019 GWR, adding an air of seriousness to the report, from “实实在在,明明白白(literally, down-to-earth, as clear as day)”, “雪上加霜(offer fuel in snowy weather)” to “量力而行(do according to your abilities)”, “砥砺前行(work hard and overcome obstacles)”.

#### 3.3 *Metaphorical slang*

Slang, a kind of popular, informal, and non-standard dialect, are easy-to-understand and use-friendly words and phrases summed up by ordinary people in their daily lives. Metaphorical slang in 2019 GWR is mostly used to show new thinking patterns and Chinese specific language style, achieving the language effect of humor and geniality. Common terms appear as three-character phrases, such as “打硬仗(literally, fight an uphill battle)”, “硬道理(hard truth)”, “补短板(repair short slab)”, “丢饭碗(lose rice bowl)”, “下功夫(put in kongfu)” and so on. Of course, there are other metaphorical slang with figurative meaning, like “僵尸企

业(literally, zombie enterprises)”,“枫桥经验(fengqiaojingyan)”,“同心圆(concentric circles)” and so on.

#### 4. Three translation methods from the Perspective of Relevance Translation Theory

It's true that there are different standards to clarify metaphorical words and phrases in political writings; the author just classifies them from the degree of formality. As for translators, the translation of metaphors in political essays is quite a tough task, mainly because he is not easy to find corresponding expressions in the target language. So how does he convey the writer's information to the readers so as to obtain the optimal relevance? Relevance theory has strong adaptability in translation studies, especially in lexical translation [9]. Vocabulary is the most direct form to express meaning, which proves the importance of the translation of metaphorical phrases. Thus, the author comes up with three translation methods, namely, addition, division and substitution, explains them in detail and fully illustrates the necessity and effectiveness of translation methods from the perspective of RTT.

##### 4.1 Addition

Addition is a well-known translation method. In the choice of contexts, Sperber & Wilson (1995) defined context as “assumptions about the world” or cognitive environment. Gutt (1999) took the notion into account various external factors including cultural background, communicators' thinking patterns and social knowledge. This idea inspired the author to consider the original writer and the readers' different cognitive environments when translation. This is because diverse thinking patterns and cognitive habits fail to help target readers understand the metaphorical phrases literally in political texts, otherwise, the misunderstanding of the writer's information intentions will come out. Therefore, the translator needs to know the scope of cultural default in the conversion of the source language and the target language through reasoning, and adopts addition to add some useful background information to make up for target readers' cultural default, allowing them to involve more acceptable contexts and make less efforts to grasp the writer's meaning. Now, the author shows several examples to prove the necessity of addition in the view of RTT.

例 1:面对新情况新变化,我们坚持不搞“大水漫灌”式强刺激。(2019 GWR)

Faced with new circumstances and changes, we insist on not **flooding Chinese economy with liquidity**.

Obviously, “大水漫灌 (literally, broad irrigation)” is the most striking metaphorical phrase in this sentence. It was originally an approach of agricultural irrigation, but in the context of economic regulation, its meaning is to pour a flood of capital into the market to stimulate the economy. Based on different cognitive

environments [1] the translator should consider foreign readers' cultural defaults and limited social knowledge, adding some essential information to them when translating. Here the author adopts addition to translate “大水漫灌” into “flood Chinese economy with liquidity”, where “liquidity” means “the state of value that can be easily exchanged for cash”, “flood” expresses the symbol of overwhelming flood, and the meaning of “a lot of money to stimulate the economy” is shown to readers. This translation version takes into account the target readers' multicultural backgrounds and cognitive habits. Beyond capturing the pith of the original text, the translator adds essential background information to readers, allowing them to reduce their cognitive efforts and understand the author's information and communicative intentions.

例 2:依法处置 “僵尸企业”.这里的语境是国家想鼓励所有企业通过改革创新来不断增强发展活力和核心竞争力.(2019 GWR)

“**Non-profitable and debt-laden zombie enterprises**” must be addressed in accordance with laws.

It's easy for us to notice the metaphorical phrase “僵尸企业(literally, zombie enterprises)” in the sentence. This is an economic term put forward by economist Peter Coy, referring to those debt companies that are hopeless to regain their vitality, but are saved from bankruptcy due to the support of lenders or the government. Gutt said: “Not all the assumptions available from the potential context are equally accessible at any given point in time.” [1]. This reveals that perhaps there exists shared cognitive environment between the writer and the reader, but this context is not equally accessible by all readers. Perhaps some readers more interested in economics are familiar with it, and they can accept the literal translation version “zombie enterprises”. However, not every target reader shares the same relevant cognitive community. Therefore, the translator must first grasp the writer's authentic idea from the original text, and then adopt addition to supply some encyclopedic and logical information that readers lack to fill in their cognitive gaps, thereby producing greater contextual effects. The “僵尸企业” means “non-profitable and debt-laden zombie enterprises”. On the surface, the version is cumbersome; but scratch a little deeper, it gives a detailed expression to the readers, which benefits them to enter the shared cognitive environment between the writer and all the readers, and even gain the writer's real idea.

例 3:推广促进社会和谐的 “枫桥经验”,构建城乡社区治理新格局.(2019 GWR)

We should widen **the Fengqiao experience of comprehensive management of social security** in promoting social harmony and develop a novel governance mode of urban and rural community.

The “枫桥经验(literally, fengqiaojingyan)” is also a metaphorical locution in this sentence, even a metaphorical buzzword often seen in important political reports recent years. However, many Chinese readers are not familiar with this new term at all, let alone foreigners. They cannot catch the writer's meaning correctly. Here the

author cannot ignore the importance of contextual effect. Gutt mentioned that contexts modifications are referred to as contextual effects, one of which is contextual implications [1]. They are inferences which not only follow the contents of utterance, but involve some propositions like essential cultural information. Therefore, it's necessary for the translator to add the relevant background information to the reader, so as to help them get the best contextual effects. According to the political material, "fengqiao jingyan" refers to the work management experience of the grassroots people, which comes from grassroots masses and appears on the question of how to properly handle the comprehensive management of social security, closely related to grassroots public security and social stability. The author in the article adds some information and translates it into "The Fengqiao experience of comprehensive management of social security". This method captures the core of the original text and the author's real communicative intentions, and shows the rich political and cultural connotations. In this way, the target readers use the least cognitive reasoning to gain the best contextual effects and achieve the optimal relevance.

#### 4.2 Division

Gutt believed that relevance depended on two factors: contextual effects and processing effort. He viewed relevance as "a comparative notion –utterances can vary in the light of the degree of relevance they achieve in some context" [1]. Therefore, we can choose the most appropriate and simplest translation method to solve the problem of metaphorical words on the ground of the degree of relevance. Division is a right choice, which catches the pith of the phrase and translates it in the simplest way to achieve a concise and clear language effect. The translation problems of metaphorical locutions and idioms in the GWR are usually solved through this method. This is because it is difficult for translators to find the phrases with the same language power force in the target language. If the literal translation or addition is adopted, the version will be repetitive and cumbersome. Hence, the translator has to choose division to grasp the core meaning of the phrase and delete the words that have nothing to do with the writer's authentic meaning, achieving adequate contextual effect at minimal processing cost [1]. Here are three examples as follows:

例 1:全面开展蓝天,碧水,净土保卫战.(2019 GWR)

We are supposed to launch a full-scale **fight to keep** our skies blue, our waters clear, and our land pollution-free.

“保卫战(literally, defense campaign)” is a metaphorical locution, referring to a war fought to defend one's rights. The writer uses this word here to encourage people to make every effort to keep the sky blue, the water blue and our land pure. According to the extent condition one of relevance:

*An assumption is relevant in a content to the extent that its contextual effects in this context are large [1-2].*

There is an adequate contextual effect for translating this metaphorical words and it's no need adding more repetitive meaning to readers. Therefore, what the translator needs to do is to get the key point of this word "defend or fight", allowing readers to make the minimal processing effort to understand this phrase. Thus, the translator just uses a verb "fight" to accurately express the original writer's communicative intention. If the translator applies the literal translation method and translates it into "defense campaign", foreign readers may misunderstand that China has launched a war specifically to achieve the goal of blue sky, clear water and pure land. This understanding is completely inconsistent with the original writer's idea. What's worse, this literal translation requires the target readers to make more cognitive inference efforts to understand the writer's communication and information intentions.

例 2:在全国实行“携号转网”,规范套餐设置,使降费**实实在在**,消费**明明白白**。(2019 GWR)

Cellphone subscribers nationwide will be able to keep their numbers while switching carriers, and cellphone packages will be regulated to achieves **solid** fee cuts for all consumers to **see**.

There are two four-character repetitions in this sentence, which can be counted as metaphorical idioms. In the light of the extent condition 2:

*An assumption is relevance in a context to the extent that the effort required to process it in this context is small [1-2].*

In this example, “实实在在(literally, down-to-earth)” and “明明白白(as clear as day)” are used to modify “fee reduction” and “consumption”, that is, in real life, the standard of communication charges should be reduced, so that users clearly know the details of consumption. Actually readers have the full cognitive environment to infer the meaning of these metaphorical idioms under the specific condition. In order to avoid more processing efforts to understand the meaning of them, the author explores division to translate the idioms, uses “solid” to modify “cut the fee” and chooses “see” to explain “as clear as day”. This version deletes useless and repetitive words and only leaves one adjective and one verb. It accurately expresses the original writer's original idea, helping readers to grasp the writer's meaning through the minimal processing effort and achieving the best contextual effect.

例 3:我们要尽力为群众救急解困,**雪中送炭**,基本民生的底线要坚决兜牢。(2019 GWR)

We must plough ahead with solve people's urgent and tough problems, **provide some essential help** and ensure that the basic living needs of the people are met.

It's no doubt that “雪中送炭(literally, offer fuel in snowy weather)” is a typical metaphorical idiom, which adds a sense of formality to political texts. Translation methods vary from different translators. Relevance Theory believed that human communication crucially creates an expression of optimal relevance [1-2]. Gutt applied it into the translation and viewed the pursuit of optimal relevance as the

standard of translation [7]. In translating this metaphorical idiom, the best way to achieve the optimal relevance is that the translator grasps the central meaning of “offer fuel in snowy weather” on the premise of ensuring the foreign readers also have the shared cultural information about this idiom. Therefore, this idiom can be translated as “provide some essential help when necessary”. The translator adopts division to complete the translation, favoring them to pay unnecessary processing effort to gain the optimal relevance. If the translator explains it literally: offer fuel in snowy weather, probably most Chinese readers may understand what the writer is saying, foreigners would be confused and fail to grasp the true meaning unless they pay more processing price to obtain sufficient contextual effects.

### 4.3 Substitution

Substitution, also called free translation, is an ordinary translation method, which is usually applied to the translation of metaphorical locutions and slang. Gutt defined translation as interpretive use [1]. This tells the translator that this kind of translation should adopt substitution to explain the metaphorical meaning of these words and phrases rather than translating them literally; otherwise, the translation will fail to retain the original text’s cultural features and confuse the target readers. This kind of translation method helps to better understand the original author’s information intention. Three examples can explain this:

例 1:鼓励采取市场化方式,不能搞 “半拉子”工程.(2019 GWR)

The adaptation of market approaches should be encouraged to guarantee that projects financed by such debts are not **stopped midway**.

The “半拉子工程 (literally, half-strap projects)” belongs to metaphorical locutions, which can often be seen in people’s daily life to express the meaning of not being serious and waiting for the result. In this context, the writer uses the metaphorical locution to warn officials and civil servants to take their responsibilities seriously, do something for the people, and stop procrastination. According to Zhao’s viewpoint, translation processes request the translator to take the “adequacy” of the original text and the “acceptability” of usage into consideration [4]. This revealed that the translator has to understand the original author’s internal intentions through the interpretive use of the original text to make the target readers pay the minimum amount of processing effort and gain “adequate context effects”, namely, “positive contextual effects” [8]. Therefore, the translator can adopt substitution to explain the real meaning of the metaphorical locution, namely, not being serious and waiting for the result, and chooses appropriate words to express this meaning. “Projects are not stopped midway” is a nice choice. The author adopts a substitute and explanatory way to avoid literal translation, allowing the writer’s intention to match the target reader’s expectation and easily infer his meaning. If the literal translation is applied to translate the it into “half-strap projects”, perhaps foreigners feel puzzled because of the lack of shared the cognitive context, which means that the target reader needs to make more cognitive effort to infer the writer’s communicative intention.



例 2:政府要带头讲诚信守契约,决不能“新官不理旧账”.(2019 GWR)

The government must take the lead to treat others in good faith and honor contracts; new officials and servants must not be allowed to **get away with ignoring obligations undertaken by predecessors**.

In this sentence, the metaphorical locution “新官不理旧账(literally, The new office dismissed the old account)” looks like a spotlight, attracting the people to guess its meaning and making the report more grounded and more readable. In this context, what the writer wants to say is that newly appointed governments officials cannot ignore the tasks left behind by the previous counterpart, instead, take this duty to serve the people. Gutt analyzed faithfulness in interlingual interpretive use, holding that translation should be faithful in the “ostensive-inferential” process [1]. Actually, this also stresses the importance of interpretation process. In order to express the writer’s communicative intention and guarantee its accuracy and completeness, the translator needs to consider the adequacy of the original text and the acceptability of the text’s application as Zhao mentioned above. Substitution is a kind of explanatory way when the translator cannot find the shared cognitive context between the writer and the readers. Here the author adopts this method to translate “The new office dismissed the old account” into “get away with ignoring obligations undertaken by predecessors”. At first glance, this version breaks the principle; take a closer look, the target reader can understand the writer’s communicative intention as long as the translation is faithful to the original “ostensive-inferential” process. Thus, this version gives priority to the writer’s communicative intentions and pragmatic meaning, so as to have the best connection between the original text and the target text.

例 3:要继续坚持以供给侧结构性改革为主线,在“巩固,增强,提升,畅通”八字上下功夫.(2019 GWR)

We will continue to pursue supply-side structural reform as our main task, focusing on consolidating, strengthening, upgrading and ensuing unimpeded flows.

“下功夫(literally, put in kongfu)”, a metaphorical slang term, often appears in some popular literary works. The meaning is that someone has to make every effort to do what he wants with full concentration and enthusiasm. The writer uses this metaphoric slang here to encourage people to complete the “consolidating, strengthening, upgrading and ensuing unimpeded flows” assignment as much as they can. Gutt also admitted that readers would react in different ways in the interpretation process [1]. This tells that readers have different reactions when reading different translation versions about the metaphorical slang. They may feel confused about some words literally translated and doubt the translation because of cultural default. This means they need higher investment in processing cost [1]. Therefore, the translator throws the literal translation and chooses “focus on / concentrate on” to express the meaning of “put in kongfu”, saving readers’ processing time and achieving the optimal relevance. This substitution method helps to make readers have an accurate understanding of the writer’s meaning.

All in all, when translating different metaphorical words and phrases, the translator must firstly be aware of the difference of potential readers' cognitive thinking, choose the most appropriate translation method on the ground of the characteristics of diverse metaphorical words and phrases, express the original writer's communicative meaning as much as possible, and meet target readers' communicative expectations.

## 5. Conclusion

As China's latest political document, the 2019 government work report is a significant window for foreign countries to understand China's recent development. The importance of its translation is obvious. Analysis proves that Relevance Translation Theory has a powerful explanation force for the all kinds of translation researches, especially for highly specialized materials like political writings. This paper has proved that these three translation methods are very effective for the translation of metaphorical phrases. What's more, the author suggests that the translator has to take target readers' cognitive differences and cultural background into consideration before actual translation, select the most appropriate translation method to fulfill the assignment, and convey the original writer's authentic intention to the readers, meeting their communicative expectations. However, the author clearly knows that there exist some drawbacks in the study. These three translation methods are effective but ordinary with little innovation, and the author merely explains these three approaches from the perspective of RTT. Perhaps the choice of these translation methods may not be the best one from other perspectives.

To sum up, the author explains and illustrates the translation methods of metaphorical phrases in political texts from the perspective of Relevance Translation Theory, which is also a manifestation of the application of this theory in practice. It offers a fresh theoretical basis and method to translation enthusiasts in studying the translation of metaphorical words and phrases, showing a certain practical significance.

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