Research on Cognitive Linguistic Analysis of Costume Terms in the Translation of *The Peony Pavilion*

Zhou Dan[1,a], Guo Jing[1,b,*]

[1]*School of Foreign Languages, Wuhan Textile University, Wuhan, 430200, China*
[a]*Windy_zhou@163.com,* [b]*guojing1_6@qq.com*
[*]*Corresponding author*

Abstract: *This study applies the principles of cognitive linguistics, with a focus on categorization theory, to analyze the phenomenon of non-linguistic category transformation in the translation of costume terms in The Peony Pavilion. By examining the translations by Wang, Bai, and Xu Yuanchong & Xu Ming, the research highlights how these versions successfully transform cultural information and cognitive frameworks from the source language into expressions familiar and acceptable to readers of the target language. This transformation occurs through three distinct processes: equivalent category transformation, mismatched category transformation, and absent category transformation. While these processes increase the acceptability and comprehensibility of translations, they also result in some loss of accuracy of original information and dilution of cultural nuances. The aim of this study is to explore the strategies used in the translation of costume terms in The Peony Pavilion through cognitive categorization. This research aims to encourage a broader engagement with cognitive translation studies in the context of Chinese opera literature and the translation of related cultural terms.*

Keywords: *Cognitive Linguistics, Categorization Theory, translation of costume terms, The Peony Pavilion*

1. Introduction

The Peony Pavilion is one of the masterpieces of the Ming Dynasty playwright Tang Xianzu, renowned for its rich cultural connotations and profound aesthetic value. This play vividly portrays the characters' costume with delicate strokes, rendering them fully fleshed out and diverse in style. Among them, the costumes of characters such as Du Liniang, Chunxiang, Liu Mengmei, Du Bao, Madam Du, Chen Zuiliang, the Flower Deity, the Stone Daoist Nun, the Ghost Messengers (Black and White Impermanence), Judge Hu, and the Emperor all exhibit distinct personality traits. *The Peony Pavilion* is a drama filled with poeticism and delicate emotions, containing rich descriptions of costume that not only reflect the characteristics of Ming Dynasty clothing but also deeply embody the characters' personalities, emotions, and social status. [1] Ming Dynasty costume emphasized grandeur and detail, with strict regulations regarding styles, colors, and materials, all of which are reflected in the descriptions in *The Peony Pavilion*. As an exemplar of Chinese classical opera, *The Peony Pavilion* presents rich cultural connotations regarding costume and employs unique costume terms, posing rich and complex challenges for translation.[5][6] These costume terms not only carry profound Chinese cultural information but are also deeply rooted in China's unique social and historical context, necessitating a thorough understanding and appropriate conversion of the source cultural categories during translation. In English translations of *The Peony Pavilion*, the mode of category conversion for costume terms mainly includes equivalent category conversion, displaced category conversion, and vacant category conversion, reflecting how translators handle and convey costume concepts from the source text within different cultural backgrounds.

2. Literature Review

According to Feng Zhiwei (2011:29), "terms" is defined as "conventional symbols expressed or delimited by speech or writing to represent professional concepts, referred to as terms. Terms can be single words or phrases."[2] Each professional field has its unique terms system, such as literature, linguistics, traditional Chinese medicine, science and technology, law, and so on. Against the backdrop

of China's "going global" strategy for culture, the translation of terms has received significant attention at the national level. In 2014, the State Council officially approved the establishment of the "Project for the Dissemination of Chinese Thought and Culture Terms." This project, led by the Ministry of Education and the National Language Committee, involves multiple ministries working together.[4] Its aim is to organize, interpret, translate, and disseminate key terms of Chinese thought and culture. The core task is to accurately and appropriately convey the essence of Chinese culture to the world, promoting international understanding and recognition of Chinese culture.

The translation of cultural terms in classical Chinese literature has long been a concern of Chinese scholars. However, research has mostly focused on poetry and novels, with minimal attention paid to theatrical works. Within this field, research has mainly focused on philosophical terms (Wang Xiuwen, 2020; Liu Kongxi, Yang Bingjun, 2015; Chai Gaiying, 2010) and the translation of traditional Chinese medicine terms (Jiang Nan, 2015; Sun Fenglan, 2016; Chen Sixin, 2017; Wang Na, Wen Yongyi, 2020; Zhao Yanchun, Li Xiaoying, 2020; Zhang Hanwen, Ding Xiaomei, Ma Jinning, 2023). In contrast, there has been little research on the English translation of costume terms.

As a fundamental theory in cognitive linguistics, the Theory of Categories helps people understand the cognitive mechanism of re-categorization in translation. Cognitive translation studies, which integrate translation with cognitive linguistics, are becoming a new paradigm in translation research, advocating the integration of theoretical principles and research methods from cognitive science and cognitive linguistics with translation studies (Halverson, 2010; Martín, 2010; Qiu Wensheng, 2010; O'Brien, 2011; Tan Yesheng, 2012a; Rojo & Ibarretxe-Antuñano, 2013; Wang Yin, 2014; Schwieter & Ferreira, 2017; Wen Xu, 2018; Wen Xu & Xiao Kairong, 2019; Tan Yesheng, 2020). The application of categorization theory in terms translation research can effectively break through the binary oppositional framework inherent in traditional translation theory, such as literal translation vs. free translation, formal equivalence vs. dynamic equivalence, domestication vs. foreignisation, etc. Catford (1965:73) was the first to introduce the concept of categories into translation studies, mentioning two modes of translation transformation, one of which is category transformation. [3] Antia (2000) sees terms as linguistic or non-linguistic symbols that describe concepts. In the process of term translation, achieving information equivalence between the source language and the target language requires not only the consideration of linguistic categories, but also the inclusion of non-linguistic categories.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Corpus selection and sources

This study selects three English translations of *The Peony Pavilion* as the primary corpus, namely Wang's translation, White's translation and Xu Yuanchong and Xu Minghe's translation.[7][8][9]

Representativeness of translation style and period: The translations by Wang, White, and Xu Yuanchong and Xu Minghe represent translation styles and techniques of different historical periods, covering a range of translation strategies from literal translation to free translation. This cross-temporal selection facilitates the observation and analysis of the influence of temporal changes on translation strategies and category conversion methods.

Translators' backgrounds and influence: The aforementioned translators are all well-known figures in the field of translation, and their translation works are widely recognised by scholars and readers. The translators' cultural backgrounds, translation philosophies, and technical skills have a significant influence on the translated texts and provide important perspectives for the analysis of translation strategies and the application of categorization theory.

Accessibility and Impact of Text: These three translations are highly accessible in academic and market domains and play an important role in the international dissemination and reception of *The Peony Pavilion*, providing case studies with practical influence for research.

During the corpus collection process, the full texts of these three translations were first obtained through university libraries, online databases, and electronic book platforms. Subsequently, the texts were imported into text analysis software such as NVivo and AntConc for preprocessing, including removing formatting symbols, standardizing line breaks, etc., to prepare for subsequent text analysis.

3.2 Analysis Methodology

The primary analysis method employed in this study is based on the Theory of Categorization in cognitive linguistics. The specific analysis steps are as follows:

Text Segmentation and Annotation: Identify and annotate paragraphs describing costume in each translation, further subdividing them into specific category units based on the requirements of categorization, such as "equivalent category conversion," "displaced category conversion," and "vacant category conversion."

Qualitative Analysis: Utilize qualitative analysis software to conduct in-depth analysis of the annotated text, identifying instances of various category conversions and analyzing the cognitive mechanisms behind them. For example, by comparing costume descriptions in the source text with their expression in the target text, analyze how translators adjust information through different translation strategies to fit the cultural and cognitive framework of the target language.

Application of Categorization Theory: Specifically apply categorization theory to explain observed phenomena in the data, such as how categories are expanded, refined, or redefined to fit the cultural context of the target language. For example, analyze how the Chinese-specific costume "dudou" is translated into English without a direct equivalent word and its adaptation to the cognitive framework of English readers.

In-depth Case Analysis: Select specific translation instances and conduct detailed analysis of how translators handle specific cultural symbols and concepts, as well as the impact of these handling methods on the overall meaning and acceptability of the text.

Comparative Analysis: Compare differences in category conversion strategies among different translations, explore the cultural, cognitive, and linguistic factors behind these differences, and evaluate the effectiveness and adaptability of different translation strategies.

4. Research Analysis and Discussion

The concept of categories in translation studies occupies a central position in cognitive translation studies, especially when it comes to the translation of costume terms. In cognitive translation studies, translation is seen as a process of category transformation involving cognitive processes from the source language to the target language. Translation activities go beyond mere linguistic translation and involve a deep understanding and transformation of non-linguistic elements such as culture, society and historical background. Costume terminology, as a specialised term rich in cultural connotations, involves complex categorisation processes in translation. The non-linguistic category transformation modes applied in the translation of costume terms include three modes: equivalent category transformation, displaced category transformation, and empty category transformation.

4.1 Equivalent category conversion

Equivalent category conversion implies a direct correspondence between categories and their members in the source and target languages. It is based on the similarity between the categories and their members in the source and target languages, with a one-to-one correspondence between the superordinate, basic and subordinate levels of the categories in both languages. The highlighted attributes of the category members in the source and target language statements overlap in cognition for readers of both languages. At this point, the translation process can be seen as a conversion of corresponding levels, and it is a conversion of corresponding (attribute-matching) members. For example, "golden belt" directly corresponds to "jindai" in the original text, preserving the original meaning and symbolism, which can be regarded as equivalent category conversion.

4.2 Displaced category conversion

Displaced category conversion refers to a situation in which a source language category appears to have a corresponding target language term, but these corresponding terms have significant differences in usage context, cultural meaning or function that prevent full equivalence in mapping the richness of cultural or conceptual aspects from the source language. The strategy of displaced category conversion attempts to find or create target language category members that better reflect the attributes of the source language category by reintegrating or adapting the target language category. This may involve abstracting

(i.e. generalising) or concretising (i.e. specifying) certain attributes of the source language category in order to convey the intended meaning of the source language, even in cases of partial mismatch. In addition, displaced category conversion may involve the selection of a category at the same level but with different members in the target language, with the aim of approximating the cognitive patterns of the target language readers and reducing their cognitive alienation through this displaced mapping. Displaced category conversion serves as a flexible adaptation mechanism in translation practice, aiming to optimise the transmission of source language information by creatively adapting the target language category to better match the cultural and cognitive habits of the target language readers. This not only helps to preserve the meaning and emotional nuances of the original text, but also enhances the understanding and acceptance of the target language readers. For example, Cyril Birch's strategy of translating 'qunshan' as 'madder skirt' is a typical example of displaced category conversion. This translation strategy not only includes the basic type of garment, i.e. a skirt, but also further refines the category expression in the target language by adding a specific colour description (using "madder", a red dye).

4.3 Vacant category conversion

Vacant category conversion refers to a situation where a category existing in the source language may be absent in the target language, resulting in a zero-category correspondence. It is a translation strategy used to handle specific concepts existing in the source language but absent in the target language. This strategy requires translators to create or reconstruct new categories in the target language to fill the cultural and linguistic gaps, ensuring the complete conveyance of information and appropriate cultural expression. Implementing this strategy, translators need to deeply understand the cultural backgrounds of both the source and target languages and demonstrate innovation and adaptability. By developing new categories or adjusting existing ones, translators enable target language readers to comprehend concepts originally found in the source language, thus effectively promoting cross-cultural communication and understanding, and enhancing the cultural depth and readability of the translation. This process not only involves language translation but also constructs bridges between cultures and cognition.

For example, when "quncha" is translated as "dress," it refers to the patterns embroidered by a daughter on her mother's skirt. In the original text, "quncha" specifically refers to the lower part of a traditional Chinese women's long skirt. However, there is no direct equivalent part in Western clothing. Therefore, using "dress" here to describe it, substituting a more general term for the specific "quncha," represents a vacant category conversion. Due to the lack of a vocabulary equivalent to the concept of "quncha " in the target language (English), the translator chose a more common term, "dress," to convey the overall meaning while capturing the cultural and emotional value of " quncha " in the text. In this way, the translator fills the gap between the two languages, enabling readers of the target language to understand the original context and aesthetics.

Whether it is category equivalence, category displacement or category vacuum, the process of translation inevitably involves category conversion, the difference being in the different modes of category conversion. When translating, translators must strike a balance between preserving the integrity of the source language information and adapting to the target language culture. Category equivalence conversion focuses on identifying direct equivalents in function and meaning between the source and target languages, and is often the most desirable type of conversion, as it preserves the original intent and style as much as possible. However, due to linguistic and cultural differences, full equivalence conversion is not always possible. This involves selecting a target language category that is as close as possible to the source language category in situations where there are cultural or conceptual differences, even though this substitution may result in subtle shifts in meaning or deviations in cultural nuance. Finally, when there is no category in the target language that corresponds to the source language category at all, category vacuum conversion becomes necessary. Translators must be creative in using descriptions, annotations or other strategies to fill this gap. This process is not only about language conversion, but also about cross-cultural communication and interpretation. Therefore, understanding and mastering these three modes of category conversion is crucial for improving translation quality and deepening cross-cultural understanding.

5. Conclusion

In the English translation of costume terms in *The Peony Pavilion*, category conversion demonstrates its indispensable importance. This paper, through the analysis of equivalent category conversion,

displaced category conversion, and category vacuum conversion, reveals how the translation process skillfully deals with cultural and linguistic differences. Through these conversions, translators not only successfully convey the direct information of costume terms but also delve into the cultural backgrounds and symbolic meanings of these costumes, enabling readers in the target language to more comprehensively understand and appreciate the cultural aesthetics depicted in *The Peony Pavilion*. However, this process also faces challenges such as loss of information accuracy and weakening of cultural nuances. Therefore, future translation practices and education should prioritize the selection and application of translation strategies to continually enhance translation quality, ensuring effective and respectful cultural transmission, which holds profound significance for fostering cross-cultural communication and understanding.

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