

TRANSLATION PROBLEMS OF METAPHORS AND SYMBOLS

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Annotation: This chapter examines the translation problems of metaphors and symbols in literary texts. It analyzes the linguistic, cultural, and stylistic difficulties that arise during the translation of figurative language from one language to another. Particular attention is given to the differences between English and Uzbek metaphorical systems, cultural symbolism, and conceptual structures. The chapter also discusses theoretical approaches proposed by scholars such as George Lakoff, Mark Johnson, Peter Newmark, I. A. Richards, Clifford Geertz, and Zoltán Kövecses. Furthermore, various translation strategies, including literal translation, adaptation, substitution, and paraphrasing, are explored in order to demonstrate effective ways of preserving metaphorical and symbolic meaning in translation. The study concludes that successful translation of figurative language requires both linguistic competence and deep cultural awareness.

Keywords: Metaphor, symbol, figurative language, translation studies, cultural context, literary translation.

Translation of figurative language is one of the most complex tasks in translation studies. Among various types of figurative expressions, metaphors and symbols present particular challenges because they often contain culturally specific meanings that extend beyond literal interpretation. When translators encounter metaphorical or symbolic expressions in literary texts, they must consider not only linguistic equivalence but also cultural associations, aesthetic effects, and pragmatic meanings. As a result, the translation of metaphors and symbols requires deep linguistic competence as well as cultural awareness.

Metaphors function as cognitive mechanisms that allow speakers to conceptualize abstract ideas through more concrete experiences. According to George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, metaphor is not merely a stylistic device but a fundamental element of human thought and conceptualization. Because metaphors are rooted in cognitive and cultural experience, they may differ significantly between languages. Therefore, translators often face difficulties when attempting to preserve metaphorical meaning in the target language.

One of the main problems in translating metaphors arises from differences in conceptual systems between languages. Certain metaphors may be universal because they derive from shared human experiences such as movement, perception, and physical interaction with the environment. However, many metaphors are culturally specific and reflect particular historical or social contexts. For instance, English metaphors often originate from economic, technological, or maritime contexts, while Uzbek metaphors frequently draw on nature, family relations, and traditional cultural imagery.

For example, the English metaphor “time is money” reflects the economic orientation of modern Western societies, where time is treated as a valuable resource that must be managed efficiently. Expressions such as “spend time,” “save time,” and “waste time” illustrate this conceptual model. In Uzbek language, however, time is often conceptualized through natural metaphors, such as “vaqt oqar suvdek o’tadi” (time flows like water). Such differences demonstrate that direct translation of metaphors may not always preserve the original conceptual meaning.

Another difficulty arises when metaphors become deeply embedded in cultural traditions. Many symbolic expressions in literature carry historical or religious associations that may not be easily recognized by readers from another cultural background. According to Peter Newmark, “translators must carefully evaluate whether a metaphor should be translated literally, adapted, or replaced with a culturally equivalent expression”.

In some cases, literal translation may lead to misunderstanding or loss of meaning. For example, certain English symbolic images may not have direct equivalents in Uzbek culture. Symbols such as the rose, crown, or oak tree carry specific cultural associations in English literature. If these symbols are translated without cultural adaptation, readers may fail to recognize their symbolic significance.

Similarly, Uzbek literary texts contain symbols that reflect national traditions and cultural values. Symbols such as the nightingale, the garden, and the moon often appear in Uzbek poetry and represent love, beauty, and spiritual harmony. Translating such symbols into English may require careful contextual interpretation in order to preserve their emotional and cultural resonance.

Another translation problem concerns the stylistic function of metaphors and symbols in literary discourse. In many literary works, figurative language contributes to the aesthetic structure of the text. Metaphors and symbols create imagery, rhythm, and emotional atmosphere that shape the reader’s perception of the narrative. When translating literary texts, translators must attempt to reproduce not only the semantic meaning but also the stylistic effect of figurative expressions.

According to I. A. Richards, metaphorical language establishes complex relationships between different conceptual domains and therefore contributes to the richness of literary expression. If metaphors are translated too literally, the aesthetic impact of the original text may be weakened. On the other hand, excessive adaptation may distort the author’s intended meaning.

Another important aspect of metaphor translation involves conventionalized metaphors. Over time, some metaphors become so common that speakers no longer perceive them as figurative expressions. These expressions are often referred to as dead metaphors. Examples in English include phrases such as “the foot of the mountain” or “the head of the department.” Because these metaphors have become lexicalized, they can usually be translated directly without significant difficulty.

However, creative metaphors used in poetry or literary prose often require more careful translation strategies. In such cases, translators must analyze the semantic structure of the metaphor and determine how its meaning can be expressed in the target language. According to Zoltán Kövecses, “metaphor translation requires understanding the conceptual relationship between the source and target domains of the metaphor”.

Symbolic language presents additional translation challenges because symbols often carry multiple layers of meaning. A single symbol may represent emotional, cultural, and philosophical ideas simultaneously. For instance, the symbol of light in English literature may represent truth, hope, spiritual enlightenment, or divine presence. Translators must interpret these symbolic meanings within the broader context of the literary work.

The cultural dimension of symbolism is particularly important in translation. Clifford Geertz argues that symbols function as cultural systems that shape human interpretation of reality. Because symbols are deeply embedded in cultural traditions, their meanings may not be immediately accessible to readers from other cultures. Translators must therefore decide whether to preserve the original symbol or replace it with an equivalent cultural image.

Another issue in metaphor translation involves differences in linguistic structure. Languages may vary in their grammatical patterns, lexical resources, and stylistic conventions. As a result, certain metaphorical expressions may not be easily transferable from one language to another. Translators must often reformulate metaphorical expressions in order to maintain both clarity and stylistic coherence.

Uzbek scholars have also emphasized the importance of cultural context in translating figurative language. According to Sh. Safarov, “metaphorical expressions are closely connected with the cognitive and cultural experience of a linguistic community”. Therefore, successful translation requires understanding the conceptual worldview underlying metaphorical expressions.

Similarly, D. Xudoyberganova highlights that many symbolic images in Uzbek language are deeply rooted in national cultural traditions. Translators must therefore analyze the cultural background of symbolic expressions in order to preserve their semantic and emotional significance.

Another important issue concerns the balance between literal translation and adaptation. Translators must evaluate whether preserving the original metaphor is possible without compromising comprehension. In some cases, literal translation may successfully convey both meaning and stylistic effect. In other cases, cultural adaptation may be necessary in order to ensure that the target audience understands the metaphorical message.

Modern translation theory suggests several strategies for translating metaphors and symbols. These include literal translation, substitution with an equivalent metaphor, paraphrasing, and explanatory translation. Each strategy has advantages and limitations depending on the context of the literary text. For example, when a metaphor is universal and culturally neutral, literal translation may be effective.

However, when the metaphor is culturally specific, substitution with a culturally equivalent metaphor may provide a more accurate interpretation. In some cases, translators may choose to paraphrase the metaphor in order to clarify its meaning. Ultimately, the translation of metaphors and symbols requires a balance between fidelity to the original text and accessibility for the target audience. Translators must carefully consider the semantic, stylistic, and cultural dimensions of figurative language.

In conclusion, metaphors and symbols represent essential components of literary language that pose significant challenges in translation. Differences in cultural context, conceptual systems, and linguistic structure often complicate the process of transferring figurative meaning from one language to another. Successful translation requires not only linguistic competence but also deep understanding of cultural symbolism and literary aesthetics. Therefore, the study of metaphor and symbol translation contributes to broader discussions in translation studies, comparative linguistics, and intercultural communication.

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