



A Construal Analysis of *A Preliminary Survey of the Book: Qi Min Yao Shu* Translated by Shi Shenghan and Revised by Joseph Needham

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Abstract: This paper examines the concept of construal, the components of construal and the correlation of construal and translation, then employs the five elements of construal to investigate the construal disparities of Shi Shenghan and Joseph Needham when translating *A Preliminary Survey of the Book: Qi Min Yao Shu* based on three dimensional analysis: the translation of the book title, the sentence and the paragraph. It is found that their construal disparities are embodied not only in the selection of translation strategies and methods, but also in that of words and expressions, sentence structures, positive and passive voices, figurative devices and language forms/genre type in translation, which is inseparable from the background knowledge and cultural scope the translator possesses, the focus of prominence the translator desires, the standpoint and viewpoint the translator holds, and the varying levels of precision and detail the translator portrays. Apart from Shi's translation manuscript and Joseph's revision, the first-hand material involved, this research takes no the translation principle and quality into considerations, providing a relatively new perspective for translation studies compared with the prescriptive one and that of imposing value-judgement.

Keywords: Construal, The Five Elements of Construal, Translation Manuscript, *A Preliminary Survey of the Book: Qi Min Yao Shu*, Shi Shenghan, Joseph Needham

1. Introduction

Qi Min Yao Shu, an agricultural encyclopedia in ancient China, written by Jia Sixie (488-556), some of technologies in which used to spread to Asia and Europe and played a vital role in the promotion of the local agricultural productivity. For its historical, cultural or practical values, *Qi Min Yao Shu* has been attracting attentions of scholars at different times in China and even sinologists among which Shi Shenghan and Joseph Needham are the two of most influential researchers. In 1950s, Shi Shenghan embarked on collating and annotating *Qi Min Yao Shu*, and translated it into modern Chinese language. On that basis, Shi authored *A Preliminary Survey of the Book: Qi Min Yao Shu*, making a scientific analysis and assessment on the ancient agricultural technologies involved in *Qi Min Yao Shu*, then translated his work into English and

sent his translation manuscript to Joseph Needham in request for revision. Why did it happen?

They met for the first time in 1943 when Joseph visited Leshan to do survey for his research on science and civilization in China. At the time, Shi was the professor in Biology Department, Wuhan University (relocated to Leshan in the Second World War). Many years later, Joseph remarked in *A Letter to Shi Dingxu* (the second son of Shi's) on his initial impression of Shi, a "Cambridge-like" and "ingenious" scholar, and highlighted "he became very well-known in the Western world because of his English publications-one on the Early Han agricultural writer, Fan Shêng-Chih; and the other on the immortal treatise *Chhi Min Yao Shu (Important Arts for the People's Welfare)*, written by Chia Ssu-Hsieh of Wei (Liu Chhao) period." [1] It's the very occasional acquaintance and common interest in ancient Chinese technologies that lays a

foundation for their academic interactions in subsequent years.

A Preliminary Survey of the Book: Qi Min Yao Shu, self-translated by Shi, has been the only version so far. Few of translation studies are concerned about it. Dan analyzed the translation strategies of terms, sentences and discourses in it from the perspective of cultural translation theory, back-transformation theory and cohesion theory respectively. [2] Hui & Wenyan examined the translation strategies of agricultural terms [3] and the translation methods of agricultural products processing [4] in it based on the three-dimensional conversion of Eco-translatology. These studies are mainly prescription-oriented. In view of the only version by Shi's and uneasy to obtain Shi's translation manuscript, the comparative study of different renditions has been absent up to now. This paper is designed to make construal analysis of Shi's translation manuscript of *A Preliminary Survey of the Book: Qi Min Yao Shu* and Joseph's revision. Previously, it's essential to introduce the concept of construal, the components of construal and the correlation of construal and translation.

2. The Concept of *Construal (Construe)*

Before explicating the concept of construal (construe) proposed by Langacker, it's necessary to retrospect briefly the development of cognitive linguistics (CL). Chomsky blazes a way in studying on linguistics from the cognitive perspective, and constructs the transformational generative grammar (TG), highlighting the form and structure of syntax while attaching less importance to the semantic category. Meanwhile, he maintains that linguistic competence is innate and inserted in speaker-hearer's autonomous and independent syntactical rules [5]. Lakoff criticizes such kind of objectivism and formalistic views on language, and absorbs the "phenomenology of body" [6] by Merleau-Ponty, further proposes the "embodied realism" [7] constituting the philosophical base of CL, thereby initiating a new research paradigm of CL. The new paradigm focuses on semantics and contends that body experience plays a crucial part in the production and understanding of linguistic meanings. Based on and nourished by these theoretical resources, Langacker proposes the concept of construal (construe) in an attempt to reveal the construal mechanism in the process of cognition. His descriptions of construal or construe are as the following:

- (a) Speakers have the conceptual freedom to construe a given situation in many different ways and we cannot predict in absolute terms which particular image might be chosen and conventionalized. [8].
- (b) Grammatical structure is based on conventional imagery, which reflects our ability to construe situation in alternate ways. [8].
- (c) A linguistic structure embodies conventional imagery and thus imposes a certain construal on the situation it codes. [8].
- (d) Various dimensions of imagery (i.e. construal) must be recognized. [9].
- (e) The key to matter is the distinction drawn in cognitive grammar between conceptual content and how that

content is construed (imagery). [10].

- (f) Linguistic meaning does not, however, reside in content alone, for we are able to construe the same content in alternate ways, resulting in substantially different meanings. [11].

From (a), (b), (f), construe can be understood as: we have the ability to conceive the same situation in many different ways; the same content can be construed in different ways, thus producing different meanings. For this point, linguistic meaning is not determinate and constant, but individualized and dynamically constructed especially in the interlingual practice. Then where do different ways of construing originate from? They are actually planted in our body experience on one hand and cognitive process on the other hand. Now that we human beings are equipped with the same sensory organs which endow us with similar abilities of sensory perception, thereby laying a basic foundation for different languages being communicated and understood through interpretation or translation. But it doesn't necessarily result in absolutely undifferentiated meanings and understanding. In other words, different temporal and spatial environments bring about different body experience that shapes different ways of construing. So linguistic meaning is not only involved in the conceptual content, but also in the way of construing the content as illustrated in (e).

In addition, according to the above-depiction of construal, to be also found is that image or imagery and construal are alternately employed in Langacker's expressions. It can be postulated that they have similar or common referential meaning. In his later works, however, Langacker replaces imagery with construal. When asked for the reason, "There have been some terminological adjustments, such as construal in lieu of the potentially misleading imagery" [12], he answered. Namely, it is apt to render readers or listeners associate with image universally applied in the cognitive psychology, therefore, adopting the term construal is to avoid misleading and misunderstanding. By the way, the concept of construal that is also widely applied in the field of social psychology refers to how individuals perceive, comprehend, and interpret the external realistic world around them, particularly the behaviour of others towards themselves, which is quite different from what has been discussed in this paper, and not the concern of this paper, either. Simply speaking, construal refers not only to cognitive ways but also to cognitive abilities. The image schema proposed by Lakoff & Jonson [13], the frame by Fillmore [14], and the force dynamics by Talmy [15], generally or partially, can be categorized into construal, or rather the way of construing.

3. The Components of *Construal*

The components of construal have been illustrated by several linguistic scholars. Tamly (1988) contends that construal is comprised of "the exertion of force, resistance to such a force, the overcoming of such a resistance, blockage of the expression of force, removal of such blockage, and the like" [15]. Langacker (1999) explicates five elements of construal:

specificity, background, perspective, scope and prominence [11]. Croft & Cruse (2004) divides construal operation into 4 types: attention/salience, judgement/ comparison, perspective/situatedness and constitution/gestalt [16]. This chapter mainly focuses on Langacker's explications of the five elements.

Specificity pertains to our capacity for conceiving and portraying an entity at varying levels of precision and detail. [11].

Background our ability to construe one structure against the background afforded by another has numerous linguistic manifestations. The broadest of these is categorization, in which the categorizing structure serves as background for assessing the target. Another kind of background is previous discourse, which figures in notions like focus the given/new distinction. [11].

Perspective subsumes a number of different factors. Some lexical items. A second factor is mental scanning. [11].

Scope is defined as the array of conceptual content it invokes (either typically or on a given occasion of its use). It thus comprises a set of cognitive domains, or those portions of active domains which are actually called upon and exploited for the purpose at hand. [11].

Prominence one kind of prominence is the ranking of cognitive domains by a lexical item... a further type of prominence is the status of being a conceptual referent. From the array of content it invokes, every expression selects some entity for designation [11].

According to the above-mentioned, I'm inclined to hold that prominence is the most crucial element of all. Because choosing certain specificity (varying levels of precision and detail) or a specific perspective both aims to make the particular information prominent or salient. Meanwhile, the way and perspective of prominence is determined by the background/scope. Prominence is equipped with rich connotations, such as the object, being (action and being, constituent of event in Event-domain Cognitive Model), semantic logic, purpose, way and perspective of prominence, and so on. The five elements of construal can be applied to explain why we select different words, phrases, voices, sentence structures, figurative devices or language forms/genre type to depict the same situation/entity and conceive different linguistic meanings.

4. Correlation of *Construal* and Translation

Essentially speaking, the problem of translation is the problem of understanding and expression in which cognitive processing, namely construal, is necessarily involved and plays a pivotal role. Gutt (1991) pointed out "... a cognitive activity taken to be central to any act of communication and thus crucial in any act of reading or translation" [17]. Robinson (1991) mentioned "translation is fundamentally a cognitive process governed systematically by abstract structures or normative rules" [18]. Accordingly, cognitive

studies also constitute an indispensable part of translation studies. Neubert (2000) highlighted that "There is an intricate network between all cognitive components which it is the task of translation studies to unravel" [19]. Munday (2001) held that "In the study of translating and interpreting, psychology and cognitive science also play a leading role" [20]. Boase-Beier (2004) claimed that "There is a cognitive turn in translation studies" [21]. Martin (2010) proposed "Cognitive Translatology" [22]. Yin (2021) proposed "Embodied-Cognitive Translatology", which laid emphasis on the two important factors, "Ti (interactive embodiment on reality)" and "Ren (cognitive processing based on embodiment)", in language formation and translation process, thus initially indicating that language is of embodiment in nature and that translation is a kind of embodied-cognitive activity. [23] In a word, the construal is closely related to the translation, or rather the former is the inner mechanism of the latter. Therefore, the study of construal mechanism is definitely essential and will be probably on the rise in the forthcoming translation studies.

Selection of translation strategies and methods is the external behavior of a translator, but restricted by his or her internal embodied-cognitive way. As an important way of embodiment and cognition, construal can be applied to analyze our subjectivity formed in the process of cognizing the world and corresponding linguistic expressions. The correlation of construal and translation is concretely manifested by the following aspects: the specificity refers to the words addition or reduction in terms of translation methods, such as amplification, omission, annotation, etc.; the background/scope refers to the background knowledge of culture, society and history in both source domain and target domain that a translator possesses, which takes effects on the translator's capacity of comprehension and bilingual transformation; the perspective refers to the standpoint and viewpoint held or adopted by a translator, different languages differ in conventions, constructions and expressions, necessarily resulting in the shift of perspective, such as choice of literal translation, free translation, foreignization or domestication, and conversion in part of speech, grammatical components, syntax, tense or voice in terms of translation strategies and translation methods respectively; the prominence refers to making the important information salient and explicit in translation, generally speaking, it can be divided into semantic prominence and cultural prominence, furthermore worthy of mentioning is that obligatory explicitation, optional explicitation, pragmatic explicitation and translation-inherent explicitation proposed by Klaudy [24], can be also viewed as the subset of prominence.

5. Construal Analysis of Shi's Translation Manuscript and Joseph's Revision

The part of introduction mentioned that Shi's translation manuscript of *A Preliminary Survey of the Book: Qi Min Yao Shu* was sent to Joseph for revision. In view of Shi's request

and his own interest in ancient Chinese agricultural technologies, Joseph perused the manuscript and revised it in a very detailed way, such as normalizing the translation of proper nouns, refining words, phrases and sentences, rectifying mistakes of spelling and collocation, etc. This part is to focus on the construal analysis of Shi's version and Joseph's revision in the following three aspects: the translation of the book title, the sentence and the paragraph. The purpose of construal analysis of the two renditions is not to assess their translation qualities or summarize the general translation principle by comparison, but to disclose the two translators' construal disparities and their manifestations in terms of the specificity, background/scope, perspective and prominence.

5.1. Translation of the Book Title

Source Text:

《齐民要术》 [25].

Shi's Version:

Ch'i Min Yao Shu (Essential Ways for Living of the Common People) [25].

Joseph's Revision:

Chhi Min Yao Shu (Important Arts for the People's Welfare). [25].

“齐民” (*qi min*) literally means ordinary or common people, “要术” (*yao shu*) literally means important ways or methods. With a view to the agricultural theme, “《齐民要术》” can be interpreted as “important ways for ordinary people to engage in agricultural production”. Comparing with the two renditions in the bracket, it's found that Shi and Joseph adopted different translation strategies/methods (perspectives), literal translation and free translation respectively. The construal disparities are embodied in the following 4 aspects.

Firstly, people is the subordinate concept of common people whose semantic extensions are less than that of the former. People can be obviously divided into different types in accordance with their status, identities, genders, races and nations, etc. Joseph employed the generalized word “people” to neutralize people's wide gap in social stratification, indirectly reflecting the notion of all men being born equal around the western world.

Secondly, “living” (earning one's bread) and “welfare” (material comforts and well-being) are totally different concepts. Langacker maintains that semantic formation and construction is conceptualization, including the conceptual content and the way of construing [26]. Croft & Cruse contends that conceptualization is construal operation [16]. Different concepts adopted reveal different cognition and construal of the same entity. China develops from the traditional agricultural society to modern major agricultural country, agriculture has been playing a fundamental part in the national economy and people's livelihood, so to speak, to chiefly satisfy farmers' subsistence for a long time in history, far from what can be called “welfare” level except for metaphorical meaning.

Thirdly, compared with “important”, “essential” (very important and necessary) is equipped with more semantic

intensity. Shi selected “essential” rather than “important” to make salient the importance of ways of agricultural production involved in the book, belonging to semantic prominence.

Fourthly, “way” and “art” are also two concepts of great differences. The two words employed are outcomes of different ways of construing “术” (*shu*) which is loaded with multiple meanings, such as way, method, technique, art, strategy, etc. “way” is a direct and plain translation of “术” (*shu*) while “art” is a pictorial and figurative translation of “术” (*shu*). It goes without saying that two translators are clear about the theme and content of the book. Therefore, apart from the ambiguous conceptual content, how to construe the agricultural science and technology involved in the book is another source of construal disparities. It's universally acknowledged that science and technology characterized by mathematical logic can be repeatedly verifiable since Francis Bacon initiated the scientific paradigm in the late 16th century. From then on, the scientism has been prevailing in the scientific community around the world. However, most of agricultural knowledge recorded in *Qi Min Yao Shu* is subjective experience. In spite of practicability, it's not the true science by the western standard. It's perhaps the very reason that Joseph translated “术” (*shu*) into “arts”.

The selection of words and expressions that depends on translators' background knowledge and cultural scope of both source domain and target domain represents and reflects their construal disparities.

5.2. Translation of the Sentence

Source Text:

顺天时，量地利，则用力少而成功多。 [25].

Shi's Version:

Follow the fitness of the season, consider the condition of the soil, less labour will be needed to bring better success. [25].

Joseph's Revision:

Follow the season of Heaven, consider well the nature and condition of the soil, then and only then the least labour will bring best success. [25].

In terms of the translation strategy/method, Shi and Joseph, in general, adopted the same perspective (i.e. literal translation). However, as far as the voice is concerned, they adopted different perspectives, passive voice and positive voice employed respectively. Moreover, Joseph added “well” (adverb of degree), “nature” (context-related word), and “then and only then” (intensifiers), and used “least... best” (superlative adjective), thereby achieving high level of precision and detail (specificity) on the one hand and intensifying the semantic logic, namely, realizing semantic prominence on the other hand.

“天” (*tian*, literally means the sky) has many collocations in Chinese, such as “天命” (*tian ming*, basically means destiny), “天道” (*tian dao*, basically means natural law), “天理” (*tian li*, basically means natural justice), “天时” (*tian shi*, basically means proper time or favourable condition), “天人合一” (*tian ren he yi*, basically means harmony between man and nature or

unity of man and nature), etc. In general, “天” is not only a physical concept, corresponding to “地” (*di*, literally mean the earth), but also an important philosophical concept in Chinese. “heaven” generally means “paradise”, “city of god” or “pure land” in English, exuding heavy religious implications. Comparing with the two renditions, Shi chose the basic meaning of “天时” (the fitness of the season) rather than its philosophical or religious implication while Joseph capitalized “H” (Heaven) in his revision (the season of Heaven), probably, for the purpose of underlining the philosophical implication of “天”. The same word possesses different meanings in different collocations or contexts. Likewise, the same concept content is construed differently in different backgrounds/scopes, particularly culture-specific ones, which can most properly illustrate differences of the two languages and cultures, or rather that of the conceptualization or construal operation of people in them.

According to the above-analyzed, it's seen that construal disparities are manifested by words addition, syntactical construction, voice choices and responses to the culture-loaded words in translation, designed to achieve the semantic prominence and cultural prominence.

5.3. Translation of the Paragraph

Source Text:

苗，其弱也，欲孤；其长也，欲相与俱；其熟也，欲相扶。是故三以为族，乃多粟。吾苗有行，故速长；弱不相害，故速大；横行必得，纵行必术，正其行，通其风。[25].

Shi's Version:

The plants in young age to start, must be wide apart; after a period of growth, would mutually approach; when ripening and old, could each other uphold. Several grow in a bunch they are used, corn in plenty will be produced. Because my plants grow in rows, they extend fast; and fast will they expand, because no overcrowding happened in the past. In rows they meet, in lines they stand as a street; straight and due being every row, good air can be let in to flow. [25].

Joseph's Revision:

Young plants at the start,
Must first be wide apart;
But when they are half-grown,
Need no more stand alone;
And when they are ripe and old,
Can one another uphold,
Bunches in threes make no harm,
They bring good harvest on the farm.
Our plants being set in rows,
Each of them rapidly grows.
As none does its neighbors' oppose,
In size the young plants rapidly grow.
Upstanding in straight street,
The good fresh air they meet. [25].

The source text is a paragraph of quotation from *Lü Shi Chun Qiu* in which the ancient Chinese language involved was extremely concise, and quite elusive for most of nowadays Chinese people, let alone foreigners. By virtue of the two renditions, however, readers can get the general idea of the

source text. What to be chiefly analyzed herein is not the meaning transformation, but the language form employed in translation and why.

Comparing with the two renditions, it is found that Shi employed the genre of science and technology, direct and plain language used, but also being equipped with certain rhythm of poetry, such as the end rhymes: “t” (start), “t” (apart), “d” (old), “d” (uphold), “d” (used) and “d” (produced), while Joseph adopted the genre of sonnet, rendering the poetic feature prominent without loss of faithfulness to the source text. It's worthwhile noting that the source text is also characterized by some poetic elements, such as the end rhymes: “gu” (孤), “ju” (俱), “fu” (扶), “zu” (族) and “su” (粟). As the above-analyzed, Shi and Joseph took both formal and semantic equivalence into considerations in translation. However, their renditions are obviously different in terms of the language form. There are two possible reasons accounting for the differences. Firstly, texts of Chinese sci-tech classics tend to be featured by literary, technological and philosophical properties. In the two renditions, Shi focused on the technological property of the source text while Joseph highlighted the literary property. Secondly, Joseph knew that Shi was not only greatly interested in poetry but also skilled in writing poetry. Therefore, he employed the genre of sonnet in his translation to possibly pay tribute to Shi's poetic talents or their closed friendship.

The language form or genre type adopted in translation also reveals the translator's way of construing. Translating is an activity with plural or particular purposes which are perhaps related to the construal, or under many circumstances, irrelevant to the construal. As one of the most complex activities, translation is much influenced and conditioned especially by the construal mechanism of translators as well as their translation purposes.

6. Conclusion

As a key concept of cognitive linguistics, construal comprises of five elements: specificity, perspective, background, scope and prominence, which can be applied to analyze different ways of construing the same situation/entity. Construal operation necessarily engages in the translation process and possibly results in different translations of the same source text due to construal disparities which depend on the background knowledge and cultural scope the translator possesses, the focus of prominence the translator desires, the standpoint and viewpoint the translator holds, and the varying levels of precision and detail the translator portrays. And these construal elements take effects on the translator selecting translation strategies and methods, words and expressions, sentence structures, positive and passive voices, figurative devices and language forms/genre type, etc. This paper illustrates adequately the ideas above through the conceptual analysis and the case study.

Translation studies have undergone various so-called “turns”, such as linguistic turn, cultural turn, philosophical turn, technical turn, cognitive turn and language service turn.

Since Boase-Beier (2004) claimed the “cognitive turn”, Martin (2010) threw the concept of “Cognitive Translatology” forward for discussion, Yin (2021) proposed the systematic theory of “Embodied-Cognitive Translatology”. It’s seen that translation cognitive studies (TCS) are on the rise. There is no denying the fact that TCS based on instrumental reason have seen a rapid development, but also suffered from questions and criticisms that will probably be undermined by TCS based on construal mechanism. Meanwhile such a construal analysis provides a relatively new perspective for translation studies compared with that of focusing on the translation quality and principle.

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