

Translation and Metaphor Research of Mulao Ancient Songs from the Multimodal Perspective

Dandan Wu

Guangxi University of Foreign Languages, Nanning, Guangxi, 530222, China

ABSTRACT

Most of The Mulao Ancient Songs are preserved in multimodal method, which integrates language, music, ritual scenes and body movements. These songs carry the historical memory and cultural identity of ethnic group of Mulao. Translators mostly focus on word to word translation while fail to convey multimodal semantics and cultural metaphors, which restricts the accurate and complete cultural exchanges. Taking the multimodal discourse analysis theory as the framework and combining cases in the Mulao Ancient Songs, this paper explores the translation of text, musical rhythm, and ritual actions in the songs and the translation strategies for metaphors. The research shows that multimodal translation needs to take into account the interaction of various modalities. Semantic integrity can be achieved by adapting text to melody and supplementing context with annotations. The translation of metaphors needs to be combined with the cultural background and local language. This paper provides multimodal theoretical guidance for the translation of Mulao Ancient Songs and also offers reference for the inheritance of ethnic oral culture and cross - cultural communication.

KEYWORDS

Mulao Ancient Songs; Metaphor; Translation Research; Multimodal Perspective

1 Introduction

The ancient songs of Mulao are precious folk culture in southern China. They involve the ethnic group's historical memories, belief system and aesthetic wisdom. They are an important carrier of national intangible cultural heritage. The core of their cross - cultural exchanges lies in translation. However, at present, the existing research mainly focuses on the transformation of text languages while ignores the cultural significance of multimodal elements such as music (melody, rhythm, style), rituals (scenes, physical interactions) and visual symbols (costumes, tools) in the ancient songs. These elements play an important role in the ancient songs. Music enhances emotional resonance, rituals construct cultural contexts and visual symbols carry metaphorical connotations.

Metaphors play a vital role in ancient songs. They contain the unique understanding of nature and life of the ethnic group. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) proposed conceptual metaphor, which suggests that people recognize and understand unfamiliar and abstract target objects through familiar, concrete and perceivable source objects. Concepts are formed based on experience. Metaphors in ancient songs are related to cognitive thinking of Mulao people, which helps us to deepen the understanding of their cultural connotations and cognitive patterns. The application of conceptual metaphor theory in analyzing ancient songs not only reveals the unique aesthetic values embedded within these cultural expressions but also highlights how abstract ideas are conveyed through tangible elements. The research of the translation of these songs is not only a language transformation but also a transmission of cultural cognition. A systematic research on multimodal translation and the specificity of metaphors will help to deepen the understanding of Chinese folk culture.

2 Translation features of mulao ancient songs from the perspective of multimodality

2.1 Reconstruction of linguistic modality: preservation of rhythm and cultural images

As oral materials passed down through generations, the linguistic modality of Ancient Songs of the Mulao Ethnic Group has distinct local and rhythmic features and carries rich ethnic cultural images. During the translation process, how to preserve these features becomes a major challenge. First, the reconstruction of the rhythm needs to be close to the oral expression habits of the original songs. Mulao ancient Songs mostly adopts verse forms of "four lines with even characters per line" or "six lines with five characters per line". Translators need to avoid excessive formality and try to use short sentences and colloquial words while retaining the original rhythmic structure. For example, in *Mulao Ancient Songs* (2018 edition), the English version "We sing old songs At Yifan Festival, so melodious that eagles stop to enjoy" not only retains the name of an old festival but also rebuild the vivid scene of the original context by using the personification. The translator added a footnote to the festival in the English version, explaining that the Yifan Festival is an important traditional festival of the Mulao ethnic group. During the festival, villagers from each village gather together and each family brings a few dishes to make a grand dinner. In the translated version, the translator personified the eagle to show

the charm of the Mulao people. Although the songs are short, it requires the translator to have a good understand of Mulao culture to fully convey the untranslated parts of the lyrics.

Second, the translation of cultural images needs to think about both "accuracy" and "comprehensibility." Images in Ancient Songs of the Mulao Ethnic Group are mostly related to the natural environment and farming activities, such as "glutinous rice", "tung tree" and "bronze drum." These images are not only linguistic symbols but also carriers of ethnic culture. When translating, literal translation with annotations is a commonly used strategy, which can not only retain cultural characteristics but also help target readers to understand. For example, in Song of *the Girl*, "The girl is like a glutinous rice flower, blooming on the ridge with dew", the translator translated "glutinous rice flower" literally and explains in a footnote: "Glutinous rice is the main food crop of the Mulao Ethnic Group and its flower symbolizes purity and vitality." This not only retains the cultural connotation of the original image but also avoids misunderstanding by target readers. In addition, for images with strong ethnic identifiers like "bronze drum," translators directly use "bronze drum" and supplement its role in Mulao's sacrificial rituals and festivals to ensure the complete transmission of cultural information.

2.2 Conversion of non-verbal elements: supplement of music and visual elements

The multimodality in translation of Mulao ancient songs is reflected not only in the text but also in the collaborative effect of non-verbal symbols such as music (tune, rhythm, timbre) and vision (body movements, costumes, scenes). During the translation process, converting these non-verbal elements into the form that perceivable by the target readers is crucial in cross-cultural communication.

Firstly, the conversion of the music mode needs to be achieved through text annotation and auxiliary media. The tunes of Mulao ancient songs varies with the content. For instance, the *Song of Sorrow* employs a slow tune to convey sadness while *The Harvest Song* uses a lively tune to express joy. In translation, the translator can provide an audio link to the original song, allowing target readers to perceive the emotional connotations of the music through listening.

Secondly, the conversion of the visual mode should be accomplished through verbal description and image supplementation. When Mulao ancient songs are performed, singers typically wear traditional costumes such as blue cloth shirts and silver ornaments. Body movements like waving hands and turning around are necessary. These visual elements are essential for the emotional expression of the ancient songs. In translation, the translator can add footnotes to describe the visual scenes or include illustrations, enabling target readers to imagine the scenes of the ancient songs.

In conclusion, the translation of Mulao ancient songs from the multimodal perspective requires consideration of both the reconstruction of the language elements and the conversion of non-verbal elements. By preserving the colloquial rhythm, cultural images and incorporating music and visual elements, the overall transmission of the multimodal symbol system of the ancient songs can be realized. The various methods and skills in translation not only improves the accuracy and comprehensibility of the translation but also allows target readers to fully experience the artistic allure and cultural significance of Mulao ancient songs.

3 Research on the translation and metaphors of Mulao ancient songs from a multimodal perspective

3.1 Rhythmic management and metaphorical translation research in Mulao ancient songs from a multimodal perspective

The rhythm of a song constitutes a primary concern in the translation process. The scenarios depicted in Mulao ancient songs are similar to theatrical performances to some degree. As Susan Bassnett elucidated: "Theoretical constructs of dramatic translation must encompass the delineation of linguistic expression's rhythm, and when rendering linguistic components, their function within the broader dramatic dialogue must be contemplated" (1978). Mulao ancient songs different from other popular songs and they present life-like scenarios akin to a dramatic play on stage. Consequently, when dealing with the rhythmic dimension of lyrics translation, translators can learn from theoretical frameworks of dramatic translation.

Case 1:

Stopping the Girl on the Road

(Four - line Song)

Seeing a girl on the road,

I sing a song to stop her.

Ignoring thousands of soldiers and horses,

I just sing romantic songs with my girl.

I want to sing romantic songs with that girl,

Wonder if she agrees or not.
 If you're willing, please stop,
 If not, go and wander elsewhere.
 There is only a girl on the road,
 I sing a folk song to stop her.
 I don't pick another flower,
 only attracted by this girl.
 The Mid - Autumn Festival is on the 15th of August,
 I will buy mooncakes and put them on the road.
 ignoring thousands of people,
 I give a dozen to my girl.
 Walking along the way and singing a song,
 I meet a charming girl,
 Hi! This beautiful girl,
 Please wait for me.
 forging iron needs fire,
 cooking a pig needs a knife,
 doing business needs a scale,
 singing romantic songs needs a girl.
 The road is white and broad,
 The girl is standing here,
 I want to stop the girl to sing,
 wonder if she'll agree or not.
 Cannot stop the floods in the mountain gate,
 The flower is on the high mountain and the fish is in the river,
 An girl who is eighteen years old ,
 is the one that I'll stop her.
 The song has sense,
 the umbrella provides shade,
 the wine makes people drunk.
 others laugh out loud.
 Planting willows with intention, they may not sprout,
 Planting flowers without thought, they might bloom,
 Shanbo stands under the green pine tree,
 Lucky to meet Zhuyingtai there.
 I am a carp swimming in the water,
 encountering Jiang Ziya who is fishing in the river.
 The Eight Immortals cross the East China Sea,
 Zhongli and Lan Caihe meet each other.
 (Jiang Ziya, Zhongli and Lan Caihe are famous figures in Chinese legend)
 Climbing the mountain and lucky to get the firewood,
 going down the slope and lucky to meet the girl.
 You and me are like pepper and galangal,
 which makes perfect flavor.

Analysis:

This song is sung by young men and women of the Mulao ethnic group when they first meet and invite each other to sing. Songs sung during the initial acquaintance stage of young men and women include: *First - meeting Song* and *Invitation - to - sing Song*. Since it's the first time they sing together, they use songs to ask each other's name and address. If both sides are satisfied with each other during the singing process, they will agree on the time and place for the next date in the song and then sing the Farewell Song and leave. Such songs can directly express the emotions of the characters, frankly show their affection for each other, reflecting the straightforward character traits of young men and women of the Mulao ethnic group. Judging from the original lyrics, the original lyrics are concise with a relatively high pitch. In the translation, the translator adjusted the words at the end of each sentence, using words like road/ her /river/ old/ loud/ there /girl /together to help rhyme at the end. The translated version was also arranged in four lines to be consistent with the original text. Therefore, the translated version has achieved a better effect in terms of words, rhythm and intonation from a Multimodal Perspective.

In terms of metaphor, from these lyrics, we can see that the metaphors in the ancient songs of the Mulao ethnic group are full of local culture and the humorous attitude of ordinary working people. "I am a carp swimming in the water, encountering Jiang Ziya who is fishing in the river. The Eight Immortals cross the East China Sea, Zhongli and Lan Caihe meet each other." The singer compares himself to "a carp" and the other one to "Jiang Ziya". their encounter is compared to "Zhongli and Lan Caihe meet each other", which is related to the Eight Immortals in Chinese mythology. Such a metaphor has the beauty of predestined fate and literal translation was used in the translation of lyrics. The name of characters in the lyrics are directly translated in Pinyin because they are specific mythological figures. However, considering that many foreign readers may not be familiar with the figures in Chinese mythology, a note "(Jiang Ziya, Zhongli and Lan Caihe are famous figures in Chinese legend)" was added at the end of this paragraph of lyrics. In the ancient songs of the Mulao ethnic group, the relationship between lovers was often compared to common things in life. For example, the relationship between lovers is compared to "pepper and galangal". Both pepper and galangal are spices with unique flavors, metaphorically indicating that their encounter will produce a unique "flavor".

3.2 Images of the characters and metaphor translation research in mulao ancient songs from a multimodal perspective

The Mulao people have a deep love for singing and build images of themselves and others through their songs. The character images depicted in the lyrics are vivid, making the multimodal representation of these characters crucial. When translating these songs, it is essential to adopt different translation methods that align with the specific multimodal design of the character images. Moreover, the translation must balance the tension between words and actions, ensuring they are harmoniously coordinated. Thus, translators should concentrate not only on conveying ideas or attempting to replicate features but also on re-establishing the cohesion between words and actions.

Case 2:

The chinaberry fears winter because it will lose all its leaves,
when spring water comes, it turns green again.
I've wished to live a humble life like a loach,
but when hearing your words, my heart warms again.
A tiger walking with the wind,
a dragon flying with the cloud!
With you,
I'm like a tiger with wings unfurled.
Without you,
I'm a dragon trapped in the sand.
The moon shines bright when the sky is clear,
stars glow bright when they are near the moon!
With you,
I'm a star near the moon,
without you,
dark clouds cover my heart.
This morning you came to see me off,
I would always remember your love!
My girl treated me so well that she walked to the end of the harbour,
I loved my girl so deep that I returned to send her back,
A river divides you and me,
like a thousand miles between us.
I yearn for my love,
when will a bridge bring you to me?

Analysis:

The translator employed a combination of literal and free translation methods to balance faithfulness to the original meaning and readability in English. Literal translation was used for concrete images and straightforward expressions, such as "The chinaberry fears winter because it will lose all its leaves, when spring water comes, it turns green again" and "A river divides you and me, like a thousand miles between us", preserving the original imagery and direct meaning. Free translation was applied to enhance naturalness and emotional resonance, particularly in metaphorical expressions like "I'm like a tiger with wings unfurled" and "I'm a dragon trapped in the sand", where the core metaphorical meaning was retained while adjusting the phrasing for idiomatic English. Parallel structure was maintained in contrasting lines such as "With you, I'm like a tiger with wings unfurled. Without you, I'm a dragon trapped in the sand" and "With you, I'm a star

near the moon, without you, dark clouds cover my heart", ensuring the rhythmic balance and emotional contrast of the original are conveyed.

The images of the major roles in the song were created through a series of vivid natural metaphors that reflect emotional transformation and relational dependence. The "humble loach" suggested a desire for simplicity and survival. The shift to powerful mythical creatures—"tiger walking with the wind" and "dragon flying with the cloud"—dramatizes the transformative impact of the loved one. Their presence grants strength and freedom ("tiger with wings unfurled") while absence leads to powerlessness ("dragon trapped in the sand"). The moon and star metaphor is also poignant. A clear sky with a bright moon and nearby glowing stars creates a beautiful celestial scene. The singer claims that "with you, I'm a star near the moon," suggesting that the presence of this person causes the singer to shine, just as a star near the moon appears more prominent. Without this person, "dark clouds cover my heart," indicating that their absence brings a sense of darkness and sadness, with the dark clouds symbolizing emotional gloom.

4 Conclusion

As younger generations move away from traditional lifestyles, the oral and performative dimensions of ancient songs are eroding faster than ever. This study concludes that the multimodal analysis of metaphor in Mulao ancient songs and their translation is not merely an academic exercise but a vital endeavor to safeguard and transmit an endangered intangible cultural heritage. By integrating linguistic, musical and performative modes, the author has demonstrated that Mulao ancient songs are deeply embedded in a syncretic system of meaning, where nature, ancestor worship and communal identity intersect. Translating these metaphors requires more than lexical equivalence. It demands a nuanced negotiation of modal coherence, which includes balancing the rhythmic cadence of oral performance, the symbolic resonance of folk imagery and the pragmatic functions of ritual communication. Translation, when approached as a multimodal practice, can serve as a bridge between cultural memory and contemporary audiences, ensuring that the metaphorical richness of Mulao heritage is not lost in translation. In a world where cultural diversity is increasingly threatened, such efforts are not just scholarly, they are an act of cultural stewardship.

Funding

A Study on the Metaphors and Translation Strategies of Mulao Ancient Songs

References

- [1] Aaltonen, Sirkku. *Time-Sharing on Stage: Drama Translation in Theatre and Society* [M]. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2000.
- [2] Bassnett, Susan. *Translating Spatial Poetry : An Examination of Theatre Texts in Performance* [A]. In Holmes, J. S. et al. (eds.). *Literature and Translation* [C]. Leuven: Acco, 1978.
- [3] Birch, David Ian. *The Language of Drama* [M]. London: The Macmillan Publishers, 1991.
- [4] Goatly, Andrew. *The Language of Metaphors* [M]. London: Routledge, 1997.
- [5] Kovecses, Zoltán. *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction* [M]. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- [6] Lakoff, G. & M. Johnson. *Metaphors We Live By* [M]. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980.
- [7] Newmark P. *A Textbook of Translation* [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 1988.