

Analysis of Culture-Specific Items Translation in *Red Crag* from the Perspective of Cognitive Construal

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Abstract: Culture-specific items (CSIs) are expressions imbued with specific cultural connotations, containing rich social implications beyond their literal meanings. *Red Crag*, an outstanding classic red-themed Chinese novel, is replete with numerous CSIs. Studying the English translations of CSIs in *Red Crag* is conducive to inheriting and disseminating the spirit of the Red Revolution, and promoting Chinese red culture internationally. Currently, research on the English translation of CSIs in red classic novels lacks scientific rigor and motive analysis. Therefore, guided by the construal theory in cognitive translation studies, this research will employ a qualitative and quantitative approach by constructing a parallel Chinese-English corpus to investigate the translation of culture-specific items in *Red Crag*. The goal is to explore the translation methods and the motivational factors behind the translation of these items, as well as to promote the development of the translation of red classics.

Keywords: Cognitive Construal Theory, *Red Crag*, Corpus, English Translation of Culture-Specific Items.

1. Introduction

The novel *Red Crag*, co-authored by modern writers Luo Guangbin and Yang Yiyang, is one of the most representative works of revolutionary literature classics. Culture-specific items (CSIs), also known as culture-loaded words (Liao, 2000), refer to terms with specific ethnic and cultural connotations. These are words that, based on their original meaning, encompass rich social connotations. In 1996, Spanish translator Javier Franco Aixelá defined CSIs as “certain items in a text that, due to the absence of corresponding items in the target reader’s cultural system, or because they have a different textual status, pose translation difficulties when translating their function and meaning from the source text into the target text” (Aixelá, 1996:58). As a part of China’s excellent culture, revolutionary literature classics have red characteristics distinct from other literary works. Currently, research on CSIs has covered multiple areas such as poetry, ancient classics, and film and television subtitles. However, there is relatively little research on CSIs in revolutionary literature classics.

Therefore, the research aims to study culture-specific items (CSIs) in *Red Crag* by constructing a Chinese-English parallel corpus of the novel, starting from three dimensions of understanding: Scope and Background, Perspective, and Prominence. It explores the English translation strategies for CSIs in revolutionary literature classics, summarizes the translation patterns of CSIs, and investigates the driving forces behind these patterns. The goal is to provide theoretical support for the translation of revolutionary classics and promote the spread of Chinese revolutionary culture.

2. Research Framework and Methodology

2.1. Literature Review

Culture-specific items (CSIs) are expressions rich in cultural connotations that pose significant challenges in translation. Defined by Aixelá (1996), CSIs are elements within a source text that hold unique cultural significance, making their translation into a different cultural context

difficult. These items encompass a wide range of categories, including linguistic, social, ecological, and material culture-specific terms. Various scholars have contributed to the categorization of CSIs, such as Nida’s (1945) ecological, linguistic, religious, material, and social categories, and Newmark’s (2001) expanded framework. In the Chinese context, terms like “culturally loaded words” (Xu, 1980) and “cultural default” (Wang, 1997) have been developed to address the translation of these items within China’s political and historical framework.

Research on CSIs has increasingly focused on their translation, with scholars proposing various strategies such as liberal and literal translation, foreignization, and domestication (Baker, 2000; Aixelá, 1996). Notably, the translation of CSIs in *Red Crag* remains underexplored, despite its rich historical and cultural context, making it an important subject for research.

2.2. Theoretical Framework

This study applies Cognitive Construal Theory, proposed by Langacker (1987), which emphasizes how language reflects the human mind’s interpretation of the world. Cognitive construal involves three dimensions: Scope and Background, Perspective, and Prominence. These categories are integral in understanding how a translator constructs meaning in the target language based on the source text’s context and the reader’s cognitive framework. The theory is particularly useful in analyzing CSIs because it helps explain how translators navigate cultural differences and prioritize certain aspects of meaning in the translation process.

Langacker’s framework categorizes construal into Selection, Perspective, and Abstraction, which can be applied to translation strategies. Shapiro’s translation of *Red Crag* is examined through these lenses, with particular attention to how he balances the need to remain faithful to the source text while making the content accessible to the target audience. The theory helps explain Shapiro’s choices in translating culturally loaded terms, ensuring that the original’s emotional and cultural nuances are retained.

2.3. Methodology

This study employs both qualitative and quantitative methods, building a Chinese-English parallel corpus from Sidney Shapiro's translation of *Red Crag* to analyze the translation of CSIs. The corpus consists of 30 chapters, with the original Chinese text aligned with Shapiro's English translation. The CSIs are classified into four categories: linguistic, social, ecological, and material, as outlined by Nida (1945).

Using corpus tools, the study systematically identifies and analyzes CSIs within the text, focusing on their translation strategies. The analysis aims to reveal patterns in how Shapiro handles CSIs, particularly his use of liberal translation (59%) versus literal translation (around 10%). The study also incorporates cognitive construal theory to explore the underlying cognitive factors that influence translation choices, such as Shapiro's bicultural identity and his role in promoting China's cultural narrative internationally.

2.4. Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection process involves aligning the original and translated texts at the sentence and paragraph levels. After proofreading the texts for accuracy, the author categorizes the CSIs based on Eugene Nida's classification. A corpus analysis tool such as ParaConc is used to extract relevant segments from the text for detailed analysis.

This research quantitatively identifies the distribution of CSIs across the four categories, with a special focus on how Shapiro's translation strategies align with the principles of Scope and Background, Perspective, and Prominence in cognitive construal theory. The study provides a nuanced understanding of how these cognitive factors shape the translator's approach to rendering Chinese culture into English while maintaining cultural relevance and readability.

3. Analysis of Culture-Specific Items Translation in *Red Crag*

This section analyzes the translation of culture-specific items (CSIs) in *Red Crag* through Sidney Shapiro's English rendition, using Cognitive Construal Theory as the analytical lens. The translation strategies adopted by Shapiro are examined in relation to three key cognitive construal dimensions: Scope and Background, Perspective, and Prominence. These factors are integral to understanding how Shapiro navigates cultural differences in his translation and ensures that the source text's meaning is accurately conveyed to the target audience.

3.1. Translation of Linguistic Culture-Specific Items

Linguistic CSIs in *Red Crag* primarily involve Chinese idioms, expressions, and culturally bound terms. The challenge in translating these items lies in balancing the need to retain their cultural nuances while ensuring they are comprehensible to an English-speaking audience.

Shapiro often employs liberal translation (75.3%), where the focus is on conveying the underlying meaning rather than a word-for-word rendering. For example, the Chinese idiom “提心吊胆”, which vividly describes a state of intense fear or nervousness, is translated as “have one's heart in one's mouth”. This translation retains the emotional intensity of the original expression but adapts it to a more familiar idiomatic expression in English. This strategy aligns with the

Prominence dimension of cognitive construal, as it highlights the most prominent emotional aspect—fear—while leaving out the literal imagery, which might be culturally unfamiliar to English speakers.

Another example is the translation of “朱门酒肉臭，路有冻死骨”, a famous line from Du Fu's poetry. Shapiro's translation, “the portals of the rich reek of flesh and wine, while frozen bodies by the roadside lie”, retains the essence of the original but simplifies the poetic structure to suit English sensibilities. This reflects a Perspective shift, as Shapiro emphasizes the contrast between wealth and poverty while adjusting the poetic form for accessibility in the target language.

3.2. Translation of Social Culture-Specific Items

Social CSIs reflect the norms, customs, and societal structures unique to a culture. Shapiro's approach to these items varies, with liberal translation being the most common strategy (52.2%). For example, the term “皖南事变”, referring to the Southern Anhwei Incident, is translated as “the Southern Anhwei Incident”. The translation maintains the historical context but adapts the term for clarity and understanding by the target audience.

In another instance, “大革命”, referring to the First National Revolution, is translated as “the Revolution of 1927”. This adaptation provides a clearer temporal reference, ensuring that readers unfamiliar with Chinese history can grasp the significance of the event. This translation reflects the Scope and Background dimension of cognitive construal, as it requires the translator to provide context that the target audience may not possess.

Shapiro's choices often align with the Prominence aspect of cognitive construal, where the translator emphasizes the most salient aspects of the term—such as the historical significance of events—while downplaying or omitting aspects that might be less accessible to the target audience.

3.3. Translation of Ecological Culture-Specific Items

Ecological CSIs are deeply tied to the geography, flora, and fauna of a region. Shapiro's translation of these items frequently uses literal translation and transliteration. For example, “巴山” is translated as “Pa Mountains”, and “贵阳” is rendered as “Kweiyang”. These transliterations preserve the phonetic essence of the original terms while allowing English-speaking readers to recognize and relate to the geographical entities.

However, some ecological CSIs require more adaptive translation strategies. For example, “川东” is translated as “eastern Szechuan”, which not only preserves the geographical reference but also adapts it for English speakers familiar with the older system of romanization. This strategy is consistent with Scope and Background, as it provides contextual information that aids in understanding the cultural and geographical references of the original text.

Shapiro's use of transliteration highlights the Prominence dimension, where the geographical names are emphasized to retain their cultural specificity and evoke a sense of place for the target audience.

3.4. Translation of Material Culture-Specific Items

Material CSIs refer to tangible items such as objects, clothing, and tools that carry cultural significance. In *Red Crag*, Shapiro employs a mix of literal translation and liberal translation to convey the meaning of material culture items while adapting them for English-speaking audiences. For example, “对联”, a traditional form of Chinese couplets, is translated as “couplet”. While this term captures the essence of the original, it does not fully convey the cultural context of the practice. Shapiro’s choice reflects a Prominence approach, where the focus is on the function of the item rather than its cultural specificity.

In translating “横额”, a horizontal plaque or banner, Shapiro uses “the horizontal one”, emphasizing the physical positioning of the item rather than its cultural connotation. This strategy exemplifies the Scope and Background dimension, as it shifts the focus from a specific cultural practice to a more universal concept that English-speaking readers can understand.

Another example is the translation of “天蓝色旗袍” as “blue gown”. While “旗袍” refers specifically to the traditional Chinese dress, Shapiro uses “gown” to make the item more familiar to English speakers, reflecting a Perspective shift that prioritizes the item’s general form over its specific cultural significance.

3.5. Cognitive Construal in Translation Strategies

The analysis of Shapiro’s translation strategies reveals how cognitive construal factors—Scope and Background, Perspective, and Prominence—influence his approach to CSIs. These factors are not only shaped by the cultural context of the source text but also by the translator’s cognitive processes, including his bicultural identity. Shapiro’s background as a Chinese-American allows him to navigate between the two cultures, ensuring that the translations are both faithful to the source text and accessible to the target audience.

Shapiro’s use of liberal translation is often driven by the Prominence dimension, as he emphasizes the most salient aspects of the culture-specific items, making them more relatable to English-speaking readers. In contrast, his use of literal translation and transliteration preserves the cultural specificity of the items but requires additional contextualization for the target audience.

By analyzing these strategies through the lens of cognitive construal theory, this study provides insights into how Shapiro’s translation reflects not only the cognitive mechanisms involved in the translation process but also the cultural and ideological considerations that shape the translation of Chinese revolutionary literature for a global audience.

4. Conclusion

The study found that Shapiro emphasizes preserving the genre of the source text and conveying the original author’s emotions. Approximately 59% of CSIs undergo free translation, accurately conveying Chinese emotions and history, meeting the requirements of China’s external propaganda at that time. To ensure fluency and reader acceptance of the translated text, Shapiro adapts both the source and target languages as needed. The reason lies in his

dual cultural identity as a Chinese-American and his mission as a national narrative disseminator in translation practice on behalf of the country.

This study has explored the translation of culture-specific items (CSIs) in *Red Crag* through Sidney Shapiro’s English rendition, utilizing Cognitive Construal Theory as a framework. The analysis of Shapiro’s translation strategies reveals how cognitive factors—Scope and Background, Perspective, and Prominence—shape the translation of culturally loaded terms, ensuring that the original cultural nuances are preserved while making the text accessible to English-speaking readers.

The findings indicate that Shapiro predominantly uses liberal translation (59%) for CSIs, allowing him to convey the emotional and cultural essence of the original while adapting it to the target language. This approach emphasizes the Prominence of key cultural aspects, such as historical events, social values, and geographical references, making them more relatable to an English-speaking audience. Shapiro’s use of literal translation and transliteration (10%) serves to preserve the cultural specificity of the items, particularly when translating place names and proper nouns, aligning with the Scope and Background dimension of cognitive construal.

Additionally, Shapiro’s translation choices reflect his dual cultural identity as a Chinese-American, which plays a crucial role in his ability to navigate between the two cultural systems. His work is not only a linguistic translation but also a cultural mediation, balancing fidelity to the source text with the need for cultural adaptation. This study demonstrates that translation is a dynamic process influenced by both the cognitive mechanisms of the translator and the broader cultural context.

In conclusion, this research contributes to the understanding of translation strategies for CSIs in revolutionary Chinese literature, highlighting the significance of Cognitive Construal Theory in analyzing how cultural meaning is constructed and conveyed across languages. Further research could expand on these findings by examining other red classics or applying cognitive construal to the translation of CSIs in different literary genres, offering deeper insights into the intersection of language, culture, and translation.

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