

A Study on the English Translation of the Willow in Tang Poetry from the Perspective of Relevance Theory

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Abstract

From the perspective of relevance theory, this paper studies and analyzes the image translation and semantic selection in 29 English translation versions of willow in 15 representative Tang poems. Under the framework of relevance theory, translation is divided into two processes, one is the ostensive-inferential process to search for relevance, and the other is to adjust the cognitive environment so that the target reader obtains the contextual effect of the original text reader. In the imagery translation of willow in Tang poetry, the translator is both the receiver and the communicator. In the translation, sufficient clues should be set to help the reader to capture optimal relevance in the target text and the original author's informational intention and communicative intention. The authors classified the willow images into five types. Due to the differences in the cognitive environment between Chinese and English readers, this paper puts forward two translation principles and two suggestions to translate willow images in Tang poetry to realize the mutual manifestness and optimal relevance. The authors hold that relevance theory is helpful in the translation of Tang Poetry.

Keywords

Optimal relevance, Willow images, English translation

Poetry is a kind of literary genre mainly expressing emotions. Poets employ plenty of images in their poetry which convey the poet's inner affection and dense aesthetic information and evoke the readers' fresh and unique feelings and experiences. According to Yuan Xingpei, imagery is the soul of poetry, and it can be treated as the objective object which is embodied in the subjective sentiment, or the subjective affection expressed by the objective object (Yuan, 1996). Therefore, it is of great importance to render images properly.

1. Literature Review

1.1 Relevance-theoretic Translation Studies Abroad

In recent years, many theories of pragmatics have been applied in translation studies, such as Austin's Speech Act Theory, Grice's Cooperative Principle, Leech's Politeness Principle, Dawkins' Memetics, which have great revelation to translation studies, and relevance theory is no exception. Relevance Theory, first proposed by Sperber and Wilson, based on Grice's theory of Conversational Implicature, is the only pragmatic theory that combines cognition and pragmatics. It mainly studies the reasoning process of information communication, placing particular emphasis on exploring the principles of discourse interpretation of language communication. Gutt, a student of Wilson, who applied relevance

theory to translation in his book *Translation and Relevance: Cognition and Context*, suggests that translation is an instance of interpretive use. Relevance theory is not only a cognitive theory, but also a communicative theory; Translation is a cognitive activity as well as a communicative activity; so the two have good compatibility (Gutt, 2004). However, Malmkjaer pointed out that Relevance translation theory does not give specific guidelines. For his criticism, Gutt proposed "stimulus-oriented translation mode" and "understanding-oriented translation mode" to further develop relevance translation theory. So far, the development of relevance translation theory has proved that relevance theory has guiding and referential significance for translation studies.

1.2 Relevance-theoretic Translation Studies in China

Shen Jiaxuan, a Chinese linguist, first introduced relevance theory to Chinese readers through his article "Relevance of Informatics and Cognition" in 1988. He introduced the first chapter "Communication" and Chapter III, "Relevance" of *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*. The research on relevance theory of China was initiated in 1994 when Lin Kenan published a book review A Brief Introduction to the Relevance and Translation on Gutt's book *Translation and Relevance: Cognition and Context* in the Chinese Translators Journal. After that, scholars set off an upsurge of research on the theory of Relevance Translation. In 1997 and 2001, He Ziran organized two national seminars on Relevance Theory in Guangzhou, and published *Pragmatics and English Learning* in 1997, which makes a specialized introduction and research on relevance theory and its relationship between translation. Zhao Yanchun then published an article The Explanatory Power of Relevance Theory to Translation in 1999. In his opinion, translation is a dynamic act of convergence to the original text, with relevance as the criterion, by means of adaptation, with intention as the end (Zhao, 1999). According to the communicative perspective of relevance theory, Wang Jianguo put forward intentional translation theory. He believes that the process of translation involves two communication processes: 1) Communication between the original author and the target reader or translator; 2) Communication between the translator and his target reader (Wang, 2005).

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Introduction to Relevance Theory

Relevance theory is a theory of cognitive pragmatics which has influenced a lot of researches in recent years, and its core concern is communication and cognition. It holds that verbal communication is an ostensive-inferential process which purposefully and intentionally conveys the speaker's intention. Relevance theory is based on the definition of "relevance" and two principles, namely, the cognitive principle and the communicative principle. Relevance is regarded as a language input in the cognitive process, which includes discourse, thought, memory, behavior, sound, eye, odor, and so on. There are two conditions:

Extent condition 1: an assumption is relevant in a context to the extent that its contextual effects in this context are large.

Extent condition 2: an assumption is relevant in a context to the extent that the effort required to process it in this context is small. Therefore, the contextual effects of utterance and the efforts made in processing utterance are two factors determining relevance (Sperber, 2001).

Relevance relies on the communicator's cognitive ability and every act of ostensive communication has a presumption of its own optimal relevance. Different from most relevance, optimal relevance can achieve the greatest possible contextual effects derived from the smallest possible effort.

2.1.1 Ostensive—Inferential Communication

Language communication involves two modes: code model and inferential model simultaneously. Since code model requires that both sides of communication should know each other in communication, the process of cognitive inference is basic, and the encode-decode process is attached to the cognitive inference process in the process of communication (Zhang, 2008). This mutual knowledge requires that in language communication, with the change of the content of the conversation, both parties must know relevant contextual information at any time. The contextual information refers not only to the context and the social environment they speak, but also to each others' expectations, assumptions, beliefs, memories and so on. But in actual communication, it is impossible to know what the other person knows. The inferential model holds that communication is a process of mutual manifestness from cognition to inference. From the perspective of the communicator, the cognitive process is a process of ostention, and he provides certain information to make his communicative intention manifest. And then the audience infers the communicator's intention through the evidences presented by the communicator, so as to realize the success of communication.

2.1.2 Cognitive Environment and Mutual Manifestness

In relevance theory, the notion of ‘context of an utterance’ is ‘a psychological construct, a subset of the hearer’s assumptions about the world’; more specifically, it is ‘the set of premises used in interpreting an utterance’ (Hickey, 2001). This kind of hearer’s assumptions about the world is also called “cognitive environment”, which covers all the various external factors related to the communication, particularly the information provided to be accessible for the interpretation process.

In the process of language communication, it is a series of assumptions that the hearer's cognitive context really counts, rather than specific situational factors. According to the communicative principle of relevance theory, there are two kinds of intention behind communicators’ explicit behavior: informational intention and communicative intention. Informational intention refers to the literal meaning of discourse; communicative intention refers to the meaning behind discourse. In general, the speaker assumes that he has the best association for every ostension. The process of people’s understanding discourse is to find relevance, that is, the process of constructing cognitive context based on the principle of relevance, namely the process of obtaining the corresponding contextual effect by efforts, and the process of achieving optimal relevance and the speaker’s communicative intention. Relevance theory regards communicative activities (verbal and non-verbal) as cognitive activities, which is essentially the cognition of the cognitive environment in which communicators are located. In other words, the success of communication depends on whether the audience can comprehend cognitive environment or not and mutual manifestness.

2.2 Criterion for Successful Translation: Optimal Relevance

What do translators rely on to infer the communicative intention of the original text? The translation view of relevance theory regards optimal relevance as a key factor that influences the quality of translation. We have known that translation involves two rounds of ostensive-inferential processes. In the first round, the translator’s task is to trace the optimal relevance from the source text. He should pay attention to the cultural differences like encyclopedia, expressions and others, and make inferences and express the optimal relevance in target language, thus transferring the intention of the source text writer as well as satisfying the expectation of the target text readers. The object of translation studies is the operation process of translators’ brain information processing mechanism, and the effect of translation is a dynamic process of pursuing optimal relevance between translation and the original text.

3. Translation Cases Study Under the Guidance of Relevance Theory

3.1 Overview of Willow Images in Tang Poetry

Imagery is a basic artistic and poetic concept in Chinese classical poetry. The English imagery presented in Chinese as YIXIANG, in which XIANG means the natural and objective item in the world, while YI means the subjective opinion, thought, expression, etc (Ding, 2013). The Chinese ancient poets use lots of images to express their opinions, such as spring, flowers, willow and others. The image willow is a plant image with extremely high frequency and rich connotations in Chinese poetry. It accumulates the unique aesthetic taste of the Chinese nation and reflects the national characteristics of the Chinese nation and the unique style of Chinese literature. The formation of each poetic image is not accomplished in one move, and must be accomplished through the accumulation of long-term historical and cultural heritage and the continuous enrichment of many creators. The formation of the willow image is the same, which originated in the “Book of Songs”, formed in the Six Dynasties, prevalent in the Tang and Song dynasties.

Willow first appeared in the Book of Songs: “昔我往矣，杨柳依依，今我来思，雨雪霏霏。” Since then, especially in Tang dynasty, the poets have given different connotations to the willow image through their study on the rhyming and characteristics of the willow. Willow images in their poems can express feelings towards parting friends, yearning for hometown, and love for the girl they love, etc.

3.2 Willow as an Image of Reluctance to leave each other

Ancient people made good use of homophones to express emotion, for example “柳” (willow) and “留” (stay), “丝” (silk) and “思” (yearning) are harmonic phrases. Over time, people give way to willow donating farewell to parting relatives or friends, seeing someone off with an osier to express retain, and looking forward the return of relatives or friends. Here are some examples of poets’ usage of willow as an image of departure in Tang poetry. Here, 《春夜洛城闻笛》 written by Li Bai can be cited.

此夜曲中闻折柳，何人不起故园情。

When Willow-Plucking Song is heard in this night air,

From thinking of his native land who could forbear?
(Wang, 1997)

Among tunes in this night
Melody “Breaking off Willow Twigs” is heard.
Who can refrain from being nostalgic
After it bearing?
(Tang, 2005)

In this poem, “折柳”, namely Willow-Plucking, a melody of the Han Dynasty, expressing parting and departure. Here, “折柳” can be understood as the song showing parting, and can also be understood as the emotion of separation after hearing a song.

According to the relevance-theoretic approach to translation, the translator should create an effective cognitive environment to achieve positive contextual effect. Since the target readers have different cultural background with the translator and the original author, they don't have the notion that willow is an image of departure, not to mention a song produced in Han dynasty. If the translator doesn't make an explanation to image willow, the target reader cannot recognize the original author's communicative intention. As it is cited above, “折柳”, translated by Wang as Willow-Plucking Song, and translated by Tang as Melody “Breaking off Willow Twigs”, they both mentioned that “折柳” refers to a song, but they failed to make target readers clear the implication of that song. Thus target readers do not share the common cognitive context that Willow-Plucking Melody conveys the sadness of separation with the source text readers. We also can take the poet Wang Wei's 《送元二使安西》 as an example.

渭城朝雨浥轻尘， 客舍青青柳色新。
Over the city of Xian Yang
Light dust was laid by the morning rain.
In the freshened colour of weeping willows
The guest-house by the road looks green.
(Tang, 2005)

No dust is raised on pathways wet with the morning rain,
The willow by the tavern look so fresh and green.
(Xu, 1988)

Here, the poet applies the willow image to create an atmosphere of separation and farewell. The interpreter Mr. Tang gives some explanatory notes to the background of the poem behind the translation: the original writer Wang Wei saw off his friend Yuan Er on diplomatic mission to Anxi. From the point of relevance theory, it makes the target text reader more deeply understand the intentions of the original writer, that is he was reluctant to part with his friend Yuan Er in Tang's translation, he adds an adjective word “weeping”, describing the shape and posture of willow. In addition, weeping also means teardrop and alludes to a sad parting circumstance. It provides an ostensive stimulus to an effective inference and increases contextual effect, giving a greater possibility to reach the optimal relevance. While Xu's translation is simpler and terser than Tang's, the willow in his translation was just an ordinary plant and lost its originally conveyed implication. Thus, Tang's translation version more resembles the original author's communicative intention. What's more, let's take a look at Yong Tao's 《题情尽桥》.

自此改名为折柳， 任他离恨一条条。
From now on its name
Should be changed to “Breaking Willows”.
To signify parting sorrow After sorrow.
(Tang, 2005)

Besides the translation, Mr. Tang gives some explanatory notes as “In ancient times, when friends were parting, they usually broke willow twigs by the road to give each other in token of their reluctance to separate” (Tang, 2005). According to the target reader's cognitive environment, it can expand and widen the cognitive environment of target text readers for the author-envisaged intentions to be grasped.

Here, we will cite Li Bai's 《劳劳亭》 as an example:
春风知别苦， 不遣柳条青。
Knowing the bitterness of separation
Spring breeze didn't make willow twigs green.

(Tang, 2005)

The wind of early spring knows parting grieves,
It will not green the roadside willow leaves.

(Xu, 2007)

In this poem “劳劳亭”, translated as “Laolao pavilion”, was the place where people were parting from each other in ancient times. Because the spring wind knows the pain of parting, naturally it will not let the willow green, so as not to cause people’s longing for family and friends. In this sentence, the poet applies the rhetoric technique personification to describe spring breeze. And in the first translation version, the translator Mr. Tang was trying to reflect spring breeze as a subjective person by using the phrase “make willow twigs green”, but his efforts was not as good as Mr. Xu’s translation. Mr. Xu applied the adjective “green” as a verb to keep the same rhetoric communicative clues to generate more similar contextual effect, and its stylistic flavor was retained.

3.3 Willow as an Image of Homesickness

Willow trees, being easy to survive, was widely planted no matter in the courtyard, behind the house, riverside or poolside. So the plant willow tree can be found everywhere. An outsider often miss his home as he takes a glance at willow trees in a strange land. Thus, the willow is often used as a symbol of hometown, which embodies people's homesickness and their attachment to home. Following are some cases: 《杂诗》 written by Anonymity and 《凉州词二首·其一》 written by Wang Zhihuan.

近寒食雨草萋萋，着麦苗风柳映堤。

Near Cold Food Days, spring rains make grasses richly grow;
Along lake banks, through young wheat, wind blows willows low.

(Wang, 1997)

Grass grows lush in the rain as Cold Food Day draws near,
Young wheat waves in the wind and lakeside willows sway.

(Xu, 1988)

This poem reflects the scene of spring: grasses, young wheat, and willows. Seeing this, a sensation of homesickness arises in the poet’s heart. Here, the osier swaying in the wind was gifted with a symbol of hometown, which intends to trigger the poet’s longing for home. These two English versions both convey the poet’s interpretive information and communicative information intended by the source text writer. For Wang’s translation, “grow” is rhymed with “low”, which creates poetic flavor in the target text, so it is better.

羌笛何须怨杨柳，春风不度玉门关。

Why should the garrison complain
At hearing Qiang’s fluting on willows?
Spring wind blow over the Yumen Pass.

(Tang, 2005)

Why should the mongol flute complain no willows grow?
Beyond the Pass of Jade no vernal wind will blow.

(Xu, 1988)

As cited above, the poem indicates that when soldiers went to expedition to defend their motherland, they regarded the willow as their hometown and relatives in order to relieve their homesickness. The willow is their nostalgic sustenance and carrier in the place far away. It has a hidden meaning and the target text reader need spend certain processing effort to get the implication. “春风不度玉门关” was translated as “Spring wind blow over the Yumen Pass” in Tang’s version and as “Beyond the Pass of Jade no vernal wind will blow” in Xu’s version. After analyzing the two versions, in the Xu’s depiction on spring wind, “no vernal wind” refers to a communicative clue that it could guide the readers to search for the optimal relevance to confirm its contextual effect. While Tang’s “blow over” cannot clearly convey the yearning of soldiers to readers.

3.4 Willow as a Symbol of Female Figure

The willow, with its posture as whirling and its branches slender and soft, sways gracefully and charmingly with the wind ladle. It is very similar to beautiful women with those characteristics. So, the willow is usually used as a symbol of

romantic young girl by poets. The leaves of willow trees are also often used to describe female eyebrows and eyes, which are called "willow eyes" and "willow eyebrows". Therefore, a large number of lyrical works of women with willows as lyric medium were produced. 《青青河畔草》 written by Anonymity is an typical case.

青青河畔草，郁郁园中柳。

Green grows the grass upon the bank,
The willow-shoots are long and lank.
(Lu, 2002) (Tr. By Herbert A.Giles)

Blue, blue is the grass about the river
And the willows have overfilled the close garden.
(Lu, 2002) (Tr. By Ezra Pound)

The poem cited above compares the female figure as willow. It is better for the translator to give a stimulus for readers to infer the implied meaning. In the translation of Herbert, he described willow-shoots as "long and lank", which indeed reflects the futures of willow, helping the readers figure out as a female figure. For Pound's one, he didn't manifest the characteristics of willows and just mentioned the abundance of willows in the garden, which can not support the target readers recognize the implied meaning. Thus Herbert's rendering version is better to realize mutual manifest-ness to target readers than Pound's.

Here is another case, 《长恨歌》, which was written by Bai Juyi.
芙蓉如面柳如眉

In the hibiscus he sees her face, in the willow he sees her eyebrows.
(Lu, 2002) (Tr. By W.J.B Fletcher)

Facing lotus flowers like Queen's face.
(Tang, 2005)

In this poem, The poet Bai Juyi mainly talked about the life and experience of the emperor and Yang Yuhuan, a favorite concubine of the emperor Tang Xuanzong. The poet described Yang Yuhuan's eyebrows as willows. Fletcher paraphrased it as "in the willow he sees her eyebrows". While in Tang's version, "柳如眉" has been omitted. If we find no equivalent in the target language, it is also a good choice for omitting that image with a little significance.

We can cite He Zhizhang's 《咏柳》 as the prime example taking willows as a symbol of female figure.

碧玉妆成一树高，万丝垂下绿丝绦。

A piece of verdurous jade is dressed up into a tall tree,
With thousands of green silk threads and ribbons
Drooping and hanging for people to see.
(Tang, 2005)

The slender tree is dressed in emerald all about;
Thousands of branches droop like fringes made of jade.
(Xu, 1988)

The whole poem depicts the willow as a young female, characterized by slim, tall, soft, etc. "碧玉" represents a young female in ancient Chinese culture, which is frequently used in the idiom "小家碧玉". Though the translators didn't illuminate the word's implied meaning, they used "dressed up" and "dressed in" respectively to express the posture of willows. Both of them generate contextual effect of willow image, the target text reader can touch the interpretive resemblance with original text.

3.5 Willow as a Symbol of Spring

In Tang poetry, many poets depict the spring with willow trees sprouting twigs. As the air is still chilling in the early spring season, the branches of the willow burst into new shoots. People always say the willow sends the message of spring to people early. It also brings the joy of spring, so people call the wind in spring as "willow wind". Here are some poems in which willows are used as a symbol of spring: 《寒食》 written by Han Hong, 《闺怨》 written by Wang Changling

and 《春兴》 written by Wu Yuanheng.
春城无处不飞花，寒食东风御柳斜。

Everywhere in the Capital the catkin plays;
The east wind blows Court willows slant on Cold Food Days.
(Wang, 1997)

All over the capital catkins flew wantonly,
A scene of the spring so significant:
On “Cold Food” the east wind wilfully
Made the imperial willows slant.
(Xu, 1988)

These two verses describe a spectacular scenery that flowers blossom and willows sway in the spring breeze in Chang-an city. “东风” refers to the spring breeze, and willow and flower blossom represents spring. Hu’s translation gives a detailed depiction to the spring scene, creating a mutual cognitive context for readers to grasp the optimal relevance of the original author. Compared with Hu’s, Wang’s translation is terser for the provided information is sufficient for readers inferring to catch the original meaning. From the point of relevance translation theory, Wang’s translation can realize the process of ostensive-inferential communication.

忽见陌头杨柳色， 悔教夫婿觅封侯。
Sudden she sees the willow-trees, their newest green put on,
And sighs for her husband far away in search of glory gone.
(Lu, 2002) (Tr. By Herbert A. Giles)

Suddenly seeing green willows by the roadside,
She sighs for her husband seeking fame far away.
(Xu, 1988)

The willow trees growing green again means that a new year start, but the lady’s husband is still outside far away from home. The lady saw green willows, a symbol of spring, causing her sensation of yearning for her husband. These two cited translation versions both reflect the allusive meaning of willows, thus they are in consistency with the principle of relevance.

杨柳阴阴细雨晴
The green colour of willows looks darker
When it becomes clear after drizzling.
(Tang, 2005)

Poplars and willows are fair after fine rain;
(Zhang, 2009)

A scene of late spring was depicted in this poem, and here the poet employed the colour of willows growing darker green to manifest the time flies to late spring. For Tang’s translation, it has given the ostensive stimulus “The green colour of willows looks darker” as a symbol of late spring, and the readers also need to make some processing efforts to achieve mutual manifestness. While the same mutual manifestness needs more processing efforts in Zhang’s rendering for that the target readers cannot get the time late spring clear.

3.6. Willow as an Image of Mourning for Native Country

The willow is the symbol of spring. Willows swaying in the spring wind, it always produces a feeling of prosperity. When some deserted scenes and the newborn willow shoots appear at the same time, the poets usually employ the willow in poems to express their lament and mourning for declined country. A poem 《苏台览古》 written by Li Bai can be mentioned here.

旧苑荒台杨柳新， 菱歌清唱不胜春。
In the deserted gardens willows swing;
Sweet water-nut songs fail to praise the song.
(Wang, 1997)

Deserted garden, crumbling terrace, willows green,
Sweet notes of *Lotus Song* cannot revive old spring.
(Xu, 1988)

In this poem, “旧苑” refers to the old imperial palace of Wu dynasty of Six Dynasties. After depicting the desolation of the old palace and gardens, and the willow sprouts in spring year after year. The willow symbolizes the new thing, and the palace and gardens stand for the old thing. It makes a sharp contrast between invariant scenery and invariant changes in social environment, leading to a mourning for the past. For Tang’s English version, it didn’t make the willow image clear and the target text readers have the difficulty to share the contrast that original writer intends to show in the cognitive context of them. In Xu’s version, It presents a striking contrast between the new thing “green willows” and the old things “deserted garden, crumbling terrace”. Besides, Xu applied three polarization phrases, which reproduce the rhythmic beauty of the source text. Therefore, when translating the uncommon meaning of the image willow, it is better to give a stimulus for generating more contextual effect. Besides, Wei Zhuang uses the willow as an image of mourning for native country in his poem 《台城》.

无情最是台城柳，依旧灯笼十里堤。

The most unfeeling is Jinling Town’s willow tree,
Still growing misty by the three miles banks in glee.

(Wang, 1997)

For miles around the town unfeeling willows stand,
Adoring like a veil of mist the lakeside land.^[11]

(Xu, 1988)

Taicheng, namely Jinling city, is flourishing and bustling once, and now have been dilapidated. While the willow is still green for miles, and this prosperous natural scene is in sharp contrast to the barren and dilapidated historical relics. Seeing this, the poet raised a mourning for his native country. Mr. Wang and Mr. Xu both applied direct translation to render these two verses, which manifests the source text writer’s informational intention, realizing contextual effect.

Let’s take a look at Xu Hun’s 《咸阳城西楼晚眺》:

蒹葭杨柳似汀洲

To those growing south of the Yangtze River
Are here similar reeds and willows.

(Tang, 2005)

Reeds and willows here recall the southern coastal plains.

(Zhang, 2007)

In this poem, the poet ascended the Xianyang City Tower, then saw the willow, and recalled his hometown in the south of the Yangtze River. Here, the willow was full of concern, and gave birth to the boundless sorrow of the Tang Empire in ups and downs. In Tang’s translation, “similar” is the key factor for readers to associate reeds and willows with the author’s lament. In Zhang’s rendering version, “recall” is obviously a stimulus to link where the poet stand and south China. The two words generate more contextual effect for the goal to seek optimal relevance.

4. The Translation Principles of Willows in Tang Poetry under the Guidance of Relevance Theory

4.1 To Seek Optimal Relevance

The willow image in poetry is a key factor for readers to interpret the poet’s unique emotional and psychological activities. However, Chinese and Western poems are rooted in different cultures and national psychology, and it is quite different for poets to apply the images. In the process of translation, how to realize the optimal relevance of translation and description of poetry images is the target that the translator strives to achieve, and is also one of the principles for the poetry translation and appreciation. The formation of the image exists in the cognitive mechanism of the brain of the original author, the translator and the target readers. Firstly, the translator receives and processes the original image information, and then assumes the role of communicators in the next process. This image is presented to the target readers so that the expectation of the latter can be most effectively matched with “the original author’s intention”. For instance, Xu Yuanchong rendered Li Bai’s “杨花落尽子规啼” in《闻王昌龄左迁龙标遥有此寄》as “All willow-down has fallen and sad cuckoos cry” (Xu, 2007), while Zhang Tingchen translated it as “The poplar catkins have all fallen; the cuckoo’s begun to cry.” (Zhang, 2007). In Chinese ancient times, there was no difference between poplar trees and willow trees because the poplar tree refers to the willow tree. Xu fully understood this point and translated “杨花” into “willow-down”. It is better in accordance with the original author’s intention that he wants to express his detainment to

Wang Changling. Besides, it needs less processing effort for target readers to consider why the writer employ the image poplar here. While “poplar catkins” was used by Zhang Tingchen in paraphrasing “杨花”, which takes target readers a lot of processing efforts to achieve optimal relevance.

Thus, from the viewpoint of relevance translation theory, the effect pursued by image translation in poetry is actually the extent to which the translation can reach the optimal relation with the original image. Willow has many allusive meanings in Tang poetry, and before the translation, the translator must have a deep study on the cognitive environment of target reader in view of the willow image.

4.2 To Realize the Mutual Manifestness

Because of the differences existing in cognitive environment between Chinese poets and target readers, a translator has to use some techniques in order to increase communication efficacy. The willow image enjoys many cultural connotations in China, such as reluctance to separate or detainment, homesickness, and mourning for the poet’s native land etc., which do not exist in Western culture. The translator needs to give stimuli to manifest its allusive meaning for readers to catch the original author’s informational and communicative intentions, thus realizing the mutual manifestness. Take a look at Xu Yuanchong’s translation of “笛中闻折柳，春色未曾看” in 《塞下曲六首·其一》 written by Li Bai: “Songs on the flute are heard of *Willows Green*, but nowhere is the vernal colour seen.” “*Willows Green*” and “vernal” can be seen as the stimuli in the poem to give the target readers a feeling of spring.

In addition, the background of the story should be used to make up the insufficient information, then generating more contextual effect. As above cited, when translating Wang Wei’s 《送元二使安西》, Tang Yihe presented the poem’s background that the poet sent his friend off, which is helpful to create contextual effect for target readers.

Besides the two principles, we can also abide by the principles of foreignization and domestication. Generally speaking, translators mainly use foreignization strategy to translate the plant words, especially flowers; translators use domestication strategy when they deal with the structure of a verse (Tan & Tian, 2018).

5. Conclusion

The willow images can be classified into five categories based on the different functions, namely: an image of reluctance to leave each other, homesickness, mourning for native country, a symbol of spring and a symbol of female figure. Then case studies of the comparison between different translated versions from translators both in China and abroad are discussed to explore how each kind of willow image is translated with the criterion of consistency of optimal relevance. The willow can also have different cultural connotations when it is used with other words, for example, puliu (big catkin willow). It means being frail in health or being fragile (Rong & Duan, 2021).

It is found that only translators have a careful evaluation to the cognitive environment or expectations of the original author and the target audience, can they achieve a successful translation ensuring their intention consistent with the relevance principle. In addition, translators should follow the two principles from the perspective of relevance theory: to seek optimal relevance and to realize the mutual manifestness, because they are conducive to obtain a rendering version that resembles the original text’s meaning and its conveyed implicature, which is more acceptable for target readers.

For the translation of willow images in Tang poetry, the first suggestion is that the translators illuminate the background of the story because Tang poems are terse, omitting some important information helpful for the target readers’ comprehension on the original author’s intentions. Since there are so many differences of the willow images between Chinese and English cultures, the translators can use omission: if the image has no equivalent in the target language, it sometimes can be omitted. If the semantic meaning is absent in the target language, the translator can find a substitute image in the target language in order to represent the meaning of the vivid and key image in the source text.

The second suggestion is that the translator’s careful and thorough estimation and assessment of the mutual cognitive environment between the author and target audience should be done before translation. Once any “default” of the mutual cognitive environment are present, various linguistic techniques should be taken to make compensations for the cognitive context difference, including note-adding, explication, deletion, substitution, etc., in order to generate optimal relevance for the target readers to capture the author-envisaged informative and communicative intentions.

Through the study on the English translation of willows in Tang poetry, it is found that relevance theory has a great use and help in the translation of Tang poetry. When translating willow images in Tang poetry into English, the translator has to grasp the informative intention of the original author by analyzing the combination of semantic representation of willow images, their contextual assumptions and the author-envisaged cognitive environment.

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