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A Study on the English Translation of Plant Metaphors from the Perspective of Embodied-Cognitive Linguistics: Taking Yang Xianyi's Translation of *Wild Grass* as an Example

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Abstract: This study introduces the "Reality-Cognition-Language" tripartite view of Embodied-Cognitive Linguistics into the study of plant metaphors translation. Taking Lu Xun's *Wild Grass* (*Ye Cao*) and its English translation as a corpus, it explores the translation strategies and embodied-cognitive mechanisms of plant metaphors. The results indicate that the translation of plant metaphors at the linguistic level accounts for the highest proportion. Driven by the universality of embodied cognition, literal translation is predominantly employed at this level. Conversely, the translation of plant metaphors at the cognitive and realistic levels is primarily motivated by the differences in embodied cognition between Chinese and English speakers. Specifically, translation at the cognitive level generally adopts the strategy of rendering the prototypical cognitive meaning of the source language while reconstructing the imagery in the target language. Meanwhile, translation at the realistic level employs the strategy of supplementing real-world contextual information.

Keywords: Embodied-Cognitive Linguistics; Plant Metaphor; English Translation; *Wild Grass*

1. Introduction

Following the publication of Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By*, an increasing number of scholars have come to recognize that metaphor is not merely a rhetorical device but a cognitive tool for understanding the world. It is a cognitive process in which humans understand one domain of experience in terms of another. Existing studies on the translation of plant metaphors have predominantly examined plant-related metaphorical expressions and their translations across languages and cultures from the perspectives of cognitive linguistics, hermeneutics, semiotics, and cross-linguistic comparison. For example, drawing on Gadamer's hermeneutic theory, Qin and Chen explored how the method of thick translation can be employed to reproduce the metaphorical meanings and aesthetic values of plant imagery in *The Book of Songs* [1]. Similarly, grounded in Peirce's theory of iconicity and Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Zhang and Xiong discussed methods for reconstructing iconicity in the English translation of plant metaphors in *Li Sao* [2]. In addition, based on a comparison of Chinese and English corpora, Xu analyzed the cognitive motivations behind plant metaphors and translator behavior in *Dream of the Red Chamber* [3].

While previous studies have extensively explored the translation of plant metaphors from various perspectives, research approached through the perspective of Embodied-Cognitive Linguistics (ECL) remains distinctly sparse. Inheriting and expanding the basic ideas of Cognitive Linguistics, ECL holds that language is not only a cognitive phenomenon but also the result of human social activities and cultural accumulation. Therefore, the function of plant metaphors is not only to express ideas in language but also to help human beings construct their inner world and understand the objective world around them. Plant metaphors are often used to present philosophical thoughts on life and arouse people's emotions, and they help people better understand nature and achieve self-expression. In light of the above, this study selects Lu Xun's *Wild Grass* as its corpus and investigates the English translation strategies of plant metaphors and their embodied-cognitive foundations through the tripartite view of "Reality-Cognition-Language" in ECL.

2. Embodied-Cognitive Linguistics and Plant Metaphors

2.1 Fundamental Concepts and Principles of Embodied-Cognitive Linguistics

Pioneered by Wang Yin, Embodied-Cognitive Linguistics (ECL) represents a major theoretical achievement in localizing cognitive linguistics research in China. Based on many years of research in Western Cognitive Linguistics, Wang has integrated materialist and humanistic philosophies to apply them to the study of cognition. On this basis, he clarifies the close relationship among language, reality, and cognition. This theory offers sound explanations for the development of Chinese and is founded on the basic idea of "Reality-Cognition-Language." It holds that language originates from people's "interactive embodiment" with the objective world and their "cognitive processing" of it. Niu Baoyi pointed out that language arises from the interaction of cognition and reality; reality is shown through the interaction of language and cognition, and cognition serves as the essential link connecting reality and language [4].

The principle of ECL can be used to support translation research. As people live in a similar objective physical world and share similar bodily functions across all ethnic groups, there are universal thoughts and expressions, and thus cross-linguistic translation is feasible. However, differences in folk customs and cognitive styles among ethnic groups determine differences in thought and expression, thereby giving rise to linguistic diversity [5]. Consequently, translators must fully understand this dialectical relationship between universality and diversity in the translation process to achieve accurate cross-linguistic transfer.

2.2 Plant Metaphor

The traditional perspective, represented by Aristotle, regards metaphor primarily as a rhetorical device. However, following the publication of Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* in the 1980s, it became widely recognized that metaphor goes beyond a mere linguistic device; rather, it serves as a fundamental mechanism of human thought and cognition. "The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" [6]. Among people's myriad embodied experiences, their interaction with surrounding plants is one of the most fundamental. A tacit understanding and a special emotional attachment have been forged between human beings and plants [7], since plants are constantly providing people with the essential provisions of food, clothing, shelter, and beauty. Over time, people have gathered extensive knowledge and detailed information on the external features, structure, growth habits, and other attributes of many types of plants. Therefore, plant metaphors are one of the representative examples in the overall group of metaphors. The appearance of plant metaphors is based on people's familiarity with and embodied experience of the various features and functions of plants. Their formation process relies on cross-domain mapping, in which multiple features of plants (the source domain) are mapped to a target domain of humans or other entities. Thus, people can construe or reconstrue relatively abstract concepts through perception of the morphological characteristics and experience of growth processes in plants [8]. Finally, plant metaphors serve as externalized symbols for human wisdom and cultural psychology. Rooted in the cultural system and closely tied to direct bodily experiences, they have special cognitive features and cultural connotations.

3. Data Sources and Collection

Wild Grass is the only surviving collection of prose poems by Lu Xun, one of the most famous writers and thinkers in modern China. This collection explores various questions of life and death, as well as the purpose and meaning of human existence, creating a distinctive "plant system" within its text [9]. The system of these natural, lyrical, and cultural elements is not only a setting but also establishes a hierarchy of height and value; finally, it shows the author's strong desire to break free from this hierarchy and return to a "wild grass orientation." Using this plant system, the author explores his inner conflicts and the modern individual, and puts forward an urgent call for brave struggle. Although it aligns with the mainstream tradition of Chinese literature, it is also marked by profound philosophical thoughts and subtle ambiguities. Different readers have different experiences and interpretations of these plant metaphors, which affects how these philosophical ideas are conveyed. Therefore, the plant metaphorical expressions in this anthology warrant particular scholarly attention.

Since the early 20th century, *Wild Grass* has

been translated into numerous languages, yielding over ten authoritative, unabridged foreign-language editions to date. Among these, the English translation by renowned translators Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang is particularly notable for conveying the original work's profound thought and preserving its literary nuances, thereby accurately capturing the austere and profound philosophical ambiance of the source text [10]. Therefore, this study selects both the Chinese source text of *Wild Grass* and the Yangs' English translation as the primary corpus to investigate the translation strategies applied to plant metaphors.

Adopting a combined approach of quantitative and qualitative analyses, this study established a small-scale Chinese-English parallel corpus of plant metaphors. In line with the emerging trend of large language model (LLM)-assisted metaphor analysis [11], an LLM was initially used for the preliminary retrieval and alignment of the parallel texts, yielding a total of 277 plant-related words. On this basis, a manual close reading was further conducted to identify and screen the metaphorical expressions. Ultimately, a total of 96 typical instances of plant metaphors and their corresponding English translations were extracted from the complete text of *Wild Grass*.

Through a systematic analysis, the 96 extracted plant metaphors were categorized into four overarching source domains: plant morphology and structure, living states, life processes, and spatial environment. These domains are profoundly mapped onto seven target domains: ideology, value judgments, social reality, individual destiny, human life states, mental states, and emotional states. In terms of part-of-speech distribution, these metaphors predominantly function as nouns, verbs, and adjectives. Driven by the principle of cognitive economy, nominal plant metaphors account for the largest proportion in both Chinese and English [12]. Consistent with this tendency, the metaphorical instances collected in this corpus are also predominantly nominal.

4. An Embodied-Cognitive Analysis of the English Translation of Plant Metaphors in *Wild Grass*

Embodied-Cognitive Linguistics (ECL) posits that language is the product of human cognitive processing grounded in continuous interactive embodiment with objective reality. Consequently, linguistic expressions often vary across individuals, times, and spaces. In other words, differences in interactive embodiment and cognitive processing among different ethnic and cultural groups give rise to varied linguistic expressions for the same phenomenon. Therefore, translation is not merely a simplistic linguistic replacement; rather, it involves the intricate transformation of meaning across language, cognition, and reality. Based on this theoretical system, Wang Yin proposed the "Three-Level View" of translation and indicated that, according to the circumstances, a translator may take one of the three levels in the "Reality-Cognition-Language" triad as the main basis for conveying meaning [13]. Specifically, some of the meanings of words can be directly transferred at the linguistic level; others need to be transferred at the cognitive level to convey their conceptual meaning; and still others require an examination of the specific descriptions of reality in the context during translation.

Therefore, based on Professor Wang Yin's taxonomy of translation [13], this study systematically analyzes and compares the plant metaphors in *Wild Grass* with their English translations across the three dimensions of language, cognition, and reality. Additionally, it presents the translation strategies and the corresponding embodied-cognitive processes in the English translation of these plant metaphors.

Table 1. Distribution of Translation Levels of Plant Metaphors in *Wild Grass*

Translation level	Quantity	Percentage
Linguistic level	83	86.46%
Cognitive level	12	12.50%
Realistic level	1	1.04%
Total	96	100%

4.1 Linguistic Level

At the heart of Embodied-Cognitive Linguistics (ECL) is the "Reality-Cognition-Language" trinity. Translation is not only the transformation of linguistic forms but also a shift in thought and a change in the conception of reality [14]. In the translation of plant metaphors, these three dimensions are also present. Taking different dimensions as the translation perspective produces different effects. As shown in Table 1, linguistic-level translations account for the highest proportion in the English translation of *Wild Grass* at 86.46%. Therefore, it is necessary to further study the translation strategies of plant metaphors at the linguistic level and their

embodied-cognitive foundations. The three types of translation at the linguistic level are: literal translation, partial literal translation, and integrated lexico-cognitive translation. Translation at the linguistic level mainly uses literal translation, finding corresponding words in the target language based on the literal meaning to keep both the source imagery and the literal sense. Some expressions are supplemented with cognitive adjustments based on literal conversion. When the literal expressions of some phrases cannot convey the deeper artistic conception in the target language directly, translators may integrate linguistic and cognitive levels to adopt an integrated lexico-cognitive approach and address both dimensions simultaneously.

Example 1: Shengming de ni weiqi zai dimian shang, bu sheng *qiaomu*, zhi sheng *yecao*, zhe shi wo de zuiguo.

From the clay of life abandoned on the ground grow no lofty trees, only wild grass. For that I am to blame. (*Wild Grass*, "Foreword")

The author believes that he failed to grow lofty trees from the clay, and instead produced wild grass. These rich and subtle emotions are closely related to the social and historical background of the text's creation. It was in 1927, after the failure of the Great Revolution, that Guangzhou was subject to the White Terror. In the plant system of *Wild Grass*, there is a clear hierarchical difference between "lofty trees" and "wild grass" [9]. "Lofty trees" metaphorically represent the ambitious ideals and pivotal forces that should have taken root in Lu Xun's mind to transform reality. Conversely, "wild grass" serves as a metaphor for the humble yet highly resilient grassroots subjects of resistance that he actually cultivated; these subjects embody not only Lu Xun himself but also the awakened masses. In English culture, people share a similar embodied-cognitive basis with Chinese speakers in their experience of observing the height and size of plants. Specifically, tall and upward-reaching entities are frequently associated with concepts such as "important" and "prominent." Therefore, the translator opted to translate these terms literally, rendering "*qiaomu*" as "lofty trees" and "*yecao*" as "wild grass," thereby preserving both the source imagery and the vertical contrast structure of "lofty trees—wild grass." By leveraging the "UP-DOWN" image schema, this literal translation effectively evokes a sense of physical spatial disparity among English readers, thereby achieving a correspondence between the level of concrete imagery and the level of spatial image schema.

Example 2: Dang shenqiu shi, xianglai yexu you he zhe qunian de muyang xiangsi de *bingye* de ba, dan kexi wo jinnian jing meiyou shangwan qiushu de yuxian.

In late autumn there may have been blighted leaves like last year's; but unhappily, this year I had no time to appreciate autumn tints. (*Wild Grass*, "The Blighted Leaf")

"The blighted leaf" ("*bingye*") serves as Lu Xun's self-portrait, metaphorically representing a weak, devastated, and ultimately withering state of life, while also reflecting the author's introspection regarding his own physical frailty. Here, the translator has adopted an integrated lexico-cognitive approach, a method that combines lexical retention with cognitive adjustment. For the word "*ye*" (leaf), the translator preserved its concrete plant imagery and rendered it as "leaves." For the word "*bing*" (illness), instead of using literal equivalents such as "sick" or "diseased," the translator opted for "blighted." In English, "blighted" literally denotes a plant withering or decaying due to disease, frost, or pests, but it also carries the extended sense of "devastated or ruined." This lexical choice not only retains the imagery of the "leaf" but also captures both the plant-pathological sense of "disease" and the metaphorical sense of being "devastated and ruined." It enables target-language readers to associate plant pathology with life's decay and predicament. Therefore, this simultaneous preservation of the "leaf" imagery and the cognitive transformation of "disease" exemplifies an integrated lexico-cognitive approach that combines the linguistic and cognitive levels.

At the linguistic level, the English translation of plant metaphors in *Wild Grass* is dominated by literal translation strategies. This is primarily grounded in the principle of embodied-cognitive universality [15], which posits that because human beings share similar embodied experiences in interacting with the objective world, they tend to form comparable cognitive concepts. Consequently, translators can employ literal translation to help target readers better comprehend the original text with minimal cognitive effort. However, when differences in embodied-cognitive patterns arise across

different ethnic groups, making it difficult for target readers to grasp the complete cognitive meaning solely from literal translations, translators may supplement literal conversion with cognitive adjustments, thereby forming an integrated lexico-cognitive approach. Although this approach requires balancing both literal and cognitive meaning, it serves as an effective complement in overcoming language barriers and preserving cultural connotations in plant metaphor translation.

4.2 Cognitive Level

Embodied-Cognitive Linguistics (ECL) emphasizes "materialism" and "humanism," positing that human cognition serves as the indispensable mediator between the "real world" and "linguistic expression" [14]. Plant metaphors are products of conceptualizing real plants through embodied experience and cultural models. They reflect the shared embodied-cognitive foundations of humanity while also crystallizing the cognitive experience of a particular ethnic group within culturally loaded plant metaphors. Therefore, translators may also approach plant metaphor translation from a cognitive perspective. Unlike literal translation at the linguistic level, translation at the cognitive level emphasizes transcending concrete plant images to directly convey their prototypical and connotative meanings. Plant metaphors across different languages typically embody distinct cognitive characteristics and cultural connotations; thus, their significance cannot be grasped solely through literal interpretation. This phenomenon arises because the selection of specific mapping domains often stems from how distinct cultural models differentially filter, reconstruct, and conceptualize shared embodied experiences [16]. Language serves as the vehicle for expressing cross-domain mappings between source and target domains. Generally, the source domain is more grounded in concrete experience, whereas the target domain is more abstract and cognitive [17]. At the cognitive level, strategies for translating plant metaphors into English may involve conveying the prototypical cognitive meaning of the source language, or adopting new images or imagery to reflect the underlying cognitive meaning.

Example 3: Yi siren si de yanguang, shangjian zhe luren men de *ganku*, wuxue de dalu, er yongyuan chenjin yu shengming de feiyang de jizhi de dahuanxi zhong.

They feast their eyes, eyes like those of the dead, on the atrophy of the passers-by, their bloodless massacre, and are steeped forever in the transcendent, supreme ecstasy of life. (*Wild Grass*, "Revenge")

The literal image of the Chinese term "*ganku*"(translated here as "atrophy") originates from the wilting and decaying state of plants due to water deprivation. In this specific context, however, Lu Xun uses this plant metaphor to conceptualize the extreme numbness, apathy, and depleted vitality of the spectator crowd. Due to the cognitive differences between Chinese and English speakers, translating the term literally as "withering" or "drying up" at the linguistic level would constrain target readers to its surface plant imagery, triggering merely sensorimotor associations and causing them to miss Lu Xun's profound critique of "spectator culture." Therefore, the translators adopted the strategy of directly conveying the term's prototypical cognitive meaning. Embodied-Cognitive Linguistics (ECL) emphasizes that the emergence of metaphors is deeply rooted in shared embodied experience. Here, the translators keenly captured the commonality in the bodily experience of "vitality loss" between the wilting state of dehydrated plants and the atrophied state of degenerating human functions. Consequently, they decisively abandoned the concrete imagery of "withering and turning yellow due to water deprivation" in the source text and, through cognitive transformation, translated it into the abstract medical concept of "atrophy" (indicating functional degeneration). This translation is concise and comprehensive. By proactively completing the metaphorical mapping from linguistic plant imagery to mental numbness, the translators spare target readers the cognitive burden of cross-domain inference—that is, having to "decipher meaning through literal expression."

Example 4: Dang shenqiu shi, xianglai yexu you he zhe qunian de muyang xiangsi de bingye de ba, dan kexi wo jinnian jing meiyou shangwan *qiushu* de yuxian.

In late autumn there may have been blighted leaves like last year's; but unhappily, this year I had no time to appreciate autumn tints. (*Wild Grass*, "The Blighted Leaf")

The term *qiushu* (autumn tree) literally comprises two images: "autumn" and "tree." Translating it literally as "autumn trees," while faithful to the literal symbols of the source text,

would fail to adequately convey the aesthetic conception and prototypical cognitive meaning embedded in the specific act of "appreciating" (*shangwan*). In the act of "appreciating autumn trees," source-language readers focus not on the physical entity of the "tree," but rather on the colorful autumn hues and aesthetic connotations it presents. Therefore, the translators adopted the cognitive-level strategy of "borrowing new images or imagery to reflect the cognitive meaning." Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang kept the literal seasonal meaning of "autumn" but did not use the concrete plant image of a "tree"; instead, they used the new imagery of "tints" to express the true object of appreciation in the original work. The translators have rightly identified that in the act of "appreciating autumn trees," source-language readers are concerned with the bright colors of autumn leaves, and have directly conveyed the cognitive connotations of this aesthetic experience.

In terms of Embodied-Cognitive Linguistics, these two methods can prevent misunderstandings arising from English readers' lack of corresponding embodied background and historical-cultural knowledge, and also significantly improve the efficiency of their comprehension. Readers can grasp the core idea and aesthetic conception of the original work more easily, thus improving the fluency of the translation and shortening the cognitive distance between the translation and the readers. However, there are also some drawbacks to this approach: in discarding the original plant image, some of the liveliness and poetic rhetorical effects of the source metaphor are lost.

4.3 Realistic Level

Translation at the realistic level should be based on an understanding of cognitive semantics. After learning the literal meaning and prototype of an expression, one can better use it in practice and provide an appropriate translation based on context. Cognitive meaning is generally very abstract; therefore, it is not always feasible to present the author's specific cognitive system and deep thematic consciousness through literal translation or mapping of metaphorical expressions. In some cases, to provide a clear background and help the reader better understand the content of the original work, translators add relevant details from the immediate situational context to reproduce the pragmatic meaning of the source text.

Example 5: Yushi zhi shengxia guangmo de kuangye, er tamen lia zai qijian luozhe quanshen, niezhe liren, *ganku* de lizhe.

Then all that is left is the vast wilderness, with the two of them stripped naked and grasping sharp knives in atrophied confrontation. (*Wild Grass*, "Revenge")

At the linguistic level, "*ganku*" (withered) still carries the image of plants wilting due to lack of water, and "*lizhe*" (standing) is a neutral verb for physical position. At the cognitive level, "*ganku*" is reduced to the prototype of declining vital functions and loss of vitality. If the translator stayed only at the level of language and cognition, and translated the phrase literally as "standing witheredly" or "standing atrophied," although an abstract state would be conveyed, the pragmatic meaning in a specific context would not be brought out. In addition, vital situational details would be left out, making the expression somewhat vague.

Translation at the realistic level requires the translator to combine the literal and cognitive meanings of the text with the actual events in the current context. Contextual anchoring is employed in *Revenge* to show the circumstances under which "the two of them stripped naked and grasping sharp knives" face each other in the vast wilderness. It is not a typical physical "standing" posture, but rather a desperate confrontation marked by a resolve to die and unyielding resistance with exhausted bodies. In the target text, the translator links the concrete and perceivable action of "standing" from the source text with "confrontation" to create a strong sense of subjective tension. Therefore, the translator can present a confrontational relationship that remains implicit in the literal wording but exists within the spatiotemporal circumstances. Cross-domain mapping can elevate the image of a physical pose into a deep reflection on life and the spirit of resistance.

At the realistic level, when translating plant metaphors whose metaphorical meaning is less salient, the translator can incorporate relevant situational details from the scene being described. By connecting the cognitive metaphor of plants to concrete events in the actual situation, the translator directly presents the contextual meaning of the action in the discourse. This contextual anchoring helps target readers grasp both the cognitive sense and the pragmatic effect of the plant metaphor in the original text. Therefore, this approach integrates the target text

with its surrounding context so that readers of the target language can better understand the original work.

5. Conclusion

Drawing on the theoretical system of Embodied-Cognitive Linguistics (ECL) and its "Reality-Cognition-Language" triad, this study examines 96 plant metaphors from *Wild Grass* to explore their English translation strategies and embodied-cognitive foundations through both quantitative and qualitative methods. As the findings show, translation at the linguistic level accounts for the largest share at 86.46%. Because human beings share universal embodied experiences, the translators mainly choose to keep both the literal meaning and the source plant imagery at this level. Translation at the cognitive level comes second at 12.50%. Where embodied cognition differs across cultures, the translation generally sets aside the concrete plant image and directly renders the prototypical cognitive meaning. The realistic level makes up the smallest proportion at 1.04%, in which the translators supplement specific spatial, temporal, or situational details based on the actual context. Overall, these results show that translation goes beyond mere linguistic conversion and requires the transfer of underlying cognition and situational context. The high proportion of linguistic level translation reflects shared human embodiment as well as the translators' effort to keep the original plant imagery intact. Meanwhile, cognitive-level adjustments help target readers overcome cultural barriers in comprehension, and contextual anchoring at the realistic level brings the translation closer to its specific context so that the pragmatic meaning of the source text can be effectively conveyed.

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