

# Applying the Frame Theory to Translating Animal Metaphors in Cantonese Nursery Rhymes into English\*

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From the perspective of the frame theory, with the analysis of animal metaphors in Cantonese nursery rhymes, this paper discusses the feasible translation strategies, suggesting that direct translation can be adopted for animal metaphors that can evoke the similar cognitive frame in both Cantonese and English cultural contexts. As for those without identical frame, translation without the original vehicle can be used for the metaphors of physicalification, while translation with annotation can be applied for the metaphors of personification.

*Keywords:* Cantonese nursery rhymes, frame theory, animal metaphors, translation

## Introduction

Cantonese nursery rhymes, created and spread in the culture and society that produced them, describe life and express the ideas and feelings of people in Cantonese area. The analysis of Cantonese nursery rhymes will provide valuable materials for research in linguistics, literature, or sociology. For the sake of the culture inherent in the rhymes, as an act of cross-cultural communication, the translation of these nursery rhymes can be regarded a cultural carrier. Translation involves the translator and the receptor. The translated rhymes will be passed to audience in another culture with a different cognitive environment, which will exert certain influence on understanding the original meaning of the rhymes.

In the field of cognitive linguistics, as “cognitive instruments”, metaphors are practically a way of thinking about things (Black, 1962, p. 37). In other words, as Lakoff and Johnson (2015) put it, human’s thinking process, to a great extent, is regarded to be metaphorical. It is the use of metaphors that helps to construct the conceptual system in human mind. Possessing the similar purpose to construct the cognitive frame in mind, Cantonese nursery rhymes are of significance not only in passing down the local culture from generation to generation, but also in communicating Cantonese culture to other cultures. In this sense, metaphors, especially animal metaphors in the rhymes taking up an important role are of great help with children as the main audience of the nursery rhymes. In the conceptual system, human beings are also regarded as some kind of animals. According to the psycholinguist Kovecses (2002), animals’ behaviors can be used to interpret human behaviors through metaphors; and in return, with the personified metaphors, human behaviors and activities can be also applied to explain animals’ actions.

Metaphors, as the powerful cognitive tools, can only be understood within the cognitive frame, a

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psychological term referring to schemas for comprehension and memory (Bartlett, 1932). To understand the meaning of metaphors, we draw support from the cognitive frames that have been existing in mind against the local culture; however, to translate the metaphors into another culture, due to diversified cognitive frames inherent in different cultures, we apply the frame theory to maintain the dynamics of the source text so that “the translation is presented in such a way that it will, hopefully, evoke the same response as the source text attempted to evoke” (Larson, 1984, p. 6). With frame theory as the main principle, this paper is to work out ways to translate animal metaphors in Cantonese nursery rhymes into English, hoping to preserve and spread Cantonese culture from a theoretical perspective.

## **Literature Review**

### **Frame Theory**

In computer science, human’s knowledge system is stored in memory in the form of data-structure, a form that is regarded as “frame” (Minsky, 1975). It was also in the 1970s that the linguist Fillmore (1975) introduced “frame” into linguistics. According to the frame theory, the knowledge system from which the used language is derived is associated with the prototypical instances in related scenes. This knowledge system is thus the framework integrating relevant information and concepts that are consistent with human experience (Fillmore, 1985). In another word, a “frame” will reflect knowledge and belief in a certain scene against specific social background. That is to say, when referring to a certain scene or concepts, people living in different nations or in the same nation but in different time periods will hold dissimilarities in their framework for language use. In this sense, “frame” can be seen as cognitive context in the position to provide background knowledge and connections among all the relevant concepts in the frame (Ungerer & Schmid, 1996).

According to the explanation in the field of cognitive linguistics, language expressions are the symbols of the knowledge in the frame. The choice of the language expressions in use will then trigger the relevant concepts in the framework. These concepts are a type of the constituent elements, with images being another type of the constituent elements in the frame. Take “home” as an example in point. In Chinese, when “father” as a conceptual element in the frame of “home” is mentioned, other concepts within this frame, such as mother, brother, sister, dinner, and bedroom, will be easily evoked in mind. Besides, attached to these concepts, images like “warm” and “happiness” will also come out automatically. Obviously, to each of the concept in the frame, there is a corresponding apparent language form; however, with no corresponding language forms, the images triggered by the frame have their meaning termed as the connotational meaning (Wang, 2011), including connotative meaning, social meaning, affective meaning, and reflective meaning, four of the seven types of semantic meaning classified by Leech (1983). As can be seen, the number and range of concepts and images in the frame, which can be reflected and communicated by language forms, are agreed and determined by all the members in the community using the same language based on factors including their daily life, work, resting and entertaining activities, as well as the experience, beliefs, customs, and conventions that are formed in their daily activities. It is the diversities existing in factors which determine the frame that cross-cultural communication should take into consideration. Therefore, as the focus in this paper, translation from Cantonese to English can be realized with the application of the frame theory.

### **Animal Metaphors**

According to cognitive linguistics, metaphors, as the comprehending and communication tool, are a way

for people to get to know the world (Wu, 2013). A metaphor is formed with three elements including the tenor, the vehicle, and the ground (Leech, 1969). As a way to think and interpret concepts in the frame, the metaphor builds up the relationship between the tenor (or the target concept) and the vehicle (or the source concept). From the cognitive perspective, a metaphor is a mapping of the structure of the source concept onto the target concept (Ungerer & Schmid, 2008) with the mapping scope only highlighting a certain aspect of the vehicle, the similarity that exists between the tenor and the vehicle. Being part of the cognitive frame in mind, the construction and the comprehension of metaphors are based on the experience of their creators and receivers affected by the culture involved.

In 1989, Lakoff and Turner in their book *More Than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* proposed “the Great Chain of Being”, which indicates that things in the world are connected in some way restrained by cultural models and cognitive models. Xiang and Wang (2009) applied “the Great Chain of Being” to explain animal metaphors. Based on this theory, the understanding of human features and behaviors can be implied in the characteristics and behaviors of animals and plants. Put in another way, it is possible to interpret human’s features through characteristics of the non-human beings, or the other round. According to the construction of metaphors, the similarity, establishing the connection between human beings and animals in metaphors, should be noticed. With human’s cognition, this similarity can form the mapping from animals onto human beings, or in reverse. This is the mechanism of animal metaphors (Kovecses, 1997). A metaphor that has human’s feature as a mapping onto animals is a way of physicalification, while based on human’s features and behaviors, a metaphor that personifies animals and in return helps to interpret human’s behaviors through the animals is named personification.

No matter what a way of physicalification or personification it is, the similarity, seen as the base of a metaphor, is chosen to construct the metaphor according to how people look at it. With the frame theory in mind, the mapping scope, to a great extent, is affected by the common sense formed in the local group and the cultural context. Martsa (2003) explained animal metaphors in terms of the mapping scope. People’s knowledge system about animal life includes their size, shape, behavior, and the relationship with people, all in a specific cultural background. Only with the same frame in mind can the features of animals like behavior, state of mind, wishes, and emotions be understood as the mapping of the metaphor. With this principle, this paper is to figure out ways to translate the animal metaphors in Cantonese nursery rhymes into English, taking into consideration people’s cognitive frames affected by different language and cultural contexts.

### **Strategies of Translating Animal Metaphors**

Cantonese nursery rhymes were originally created for children living in Guangzhou with Cantonese culture as the local culture. Such a specific context lays a background for constructing the knowledge system including the concepts and images in the cognitive frame in children’s mind. In Cantonese area, it is not uncommon to see cats, dogs, pigs, cows, shrimps, rats, and mosquitoes in life. Rich in imagination and humorous sense, Cantonese people tend to apply physicalification in describing people or to personify animals in way to show the local customs. However, rooted in a different culture, English speaking people hold a cognitive frame containing elements that may not be identical with those in the framework existing in Cantonese people’s mind. It is due to the cognitive differences that confusion and misunderstanding will occur. Translation, as a way of cross-cultural communication, can be implemented. However, it cannot be done successfully without transferring the original concepts and images to evoke the same response as the source text

attempted to evoke, and thus it is essential to lay a psychological construct for a common contextual effect so that the intended interpretation can be inferred and obtained by the hearer without unnecessary effort in the process of translation. According to types of frames about animals, three strategies will be discussed and applied in translating the animal metaphors in Cantonese nursery rhymes in English.

### Direct Translation for Animal Metaphors with the Identical Frame

Even though languages will bring up cognitive frames that may not be identical with each other in terms of elements, there are still elements in common. For example, when cows are mentioned, their shape, size, and behaviors will be evoked in people's mind no matter what cultural context there is.

#### Cantonese Nursery Rhyme Excerpt 1

《骑牛牛》

骑牛牛,  
牛牛走,  
牛牛响前咪回头,  
若然回头就打啰柚<sup>4</sup>。

*Ide on "the Cow"*

Ride on the back of the cow.  
The cow keeps walking and walking.  
Take me forward, and never go backward.  
Otherwise you'll be beaten on the bottom.

This is a rhyme which is sung with a game that children can play with their parent who will pretend to be a cow. The character “牛” means “the cow”. The parent who lets the child ride on his/her back will walk with his/her limbs like the cow. With the same concepts about the cow, the translation of this physicalification, seen as a kind of animal metaphors, can be done with the strategy of direct translation. The translated text is able to evoke the same response from its audience as the source text with the highlighted point—walking like a cow—as the mapping scope in the metaphor.

### Translation Without the Original Vehicle for Animal Metaphors with No Identical Frame

For most of the time, the vehicle and the mapping scope of a metaphor in the source text can be understood with the same cognitive frame among its audience; however, it will cause confusion among audience of the translated text with no proper psychological construct due to different cultural contexts.

#### Cantonese Nursery Rhyme Excerpt 2

《煮饭仔仔》

煮饭仔仔先落米,  
风炉透火柴对齐,  
千其唔好咁拿西,  
我哋唔系细蚊仔。

*Play House*

Let's play house and first add some rice.  
Collect the firewood then light the stove.  
Don't be careless.  
We are not little kids any more.

#### Cantonese Nursery Rhyme Excerpt 3

《月光光，照地塘》

月光光，照地塘，  
虾仔你乖乖瞓落床，

.....

*The Moonlight Shines on the Yard*

The moonlight shines on the yard.  
Our little baby, go to sleep.

.....

In these two rhymes, “细蚊仔” in Excerpt 2 means the little mosquito and “虾仔” in Excerpt 3 means the little shrimp. In Cantonese, these two terms, as the vehicles in the physicalification metaphors, are usually used to refer to little kids and little babies respectively due to the small size of the mosquito that can be mapped onto

the kids and the shape of the shrimp that looks like a baby in the cradle. However, in English culture, the little mosquito and the little shrimp can evoke no images of people. With no identical cognitive frame, the direct translation of the tenor in the target text, such as “little kids” and “little baby”, instead of translating the original vehicle in the metaphor will be adopted.

### Translation with Annotation for Animal Metaphors with No Identical Frame

Personification is another type of animal metaphors applied in Cantonese nursery rhymes. The actions taken by animals in the rhymes are originally supposed to be taken by human beings.

#### Cantonese Nursery Rhyme Excerpt 4

《排排坐，食粉果》

排排坐，食粉果，

猪拉柴，狗烧火，

猫儿担凳姑婆坐，

.....

*Sit Side by Side and Eat the Dumplings with Meat Inside*

Sit side by side and eat the dumplings with meat inside.

The pig is pulling some firewood. The dog is making a fire.

The cat is bringing a chair for the grandaunt to sit.

(All are hospitable to welcome the guest)

.....

In Excerpt 4, the pig (猪), the dog (狗), and the cat (猫) are taking human's actions. They have been personified. They can evoke the similar concept elements in the frame with both the source text and the translated text; however, due to different cultural contexts, these animals and their actions cannot bring up the corresponding image elements in the cognitive frame among the audience of the translated text. Thus, with no other concepts to replace the terms in the source text, the annotation, which has been put in the brackets, is used to indicate the image, arousing the similar response from the target audience.

### Conclusion

Cantonese nursery rhymes were created and sung to comfort and educate children living in the Cantonese culture. Animal metaphors in them help to evoke the relevant cognitive framework in audience mind in order to extend and enrich children's knowledge system. However, when translating these animal metaphors into English, translators should take into consideration the different cognitive frames that will be triggered by the tenor, the vehicle, or the mapping scope of the metaphors in English cultural context.

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