Application of Figure and Ground Theory to Translation in Single Clause

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Abstract—**Language is an important carrier of the national spirit and cultural heritage in inter-state communication, while translation bridges the international exchanges. Cognitive linguistics explains how we organize our cognitive structure, including the experiential view, the figure/ground theory and the attentional view. The positive impact process of figure and ground theory to translation will be employed in this paper to illustrate the single sentence translation, which explains such frequently encountered questions as why a noun or sentence is often chosen as the subject, while the verb as a predicate, which are difficult to make a reasonable explanation with previous theories.**

Index Terms—**figure/ground segregation, translation, single clause**

I. INTRODUCTION

Figure and ground theory is an important theory in cognitive linguistics. To consider the picture of the well-known face/vase illusion shown in figure 1, it can be noticed that between the two possibilities of perceiving the picture (as two faces or as a vase), you can only see one at a time. What's more, you can easily switch between the two ways of looking at the picture，especially after longer inspection. What lies behind our inability to see both the vase and the faces at the same time is a phenomenon called figure and ground segregation. This notion was first introduced into Psychology by the Danish Psychologist Rubin in 1951 and later integrated into the more comprehensive frame work of perceptual organization by the gestalt psychologists (Ungerer & Schmid, 1996), and introduced into cognitive linguistics (Talmy, 2000).
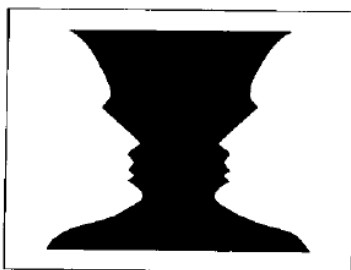

Figure 1 The face/vase illusion (after Rubin)

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Before the analysis of the application of figure and ground theory into the translation of single clause, some of the relevant previous studies concerning figure and ground theory and single clause translation will be illustrated.

A. Main Characteristics of the Figure and Ground Theory

Here it is listed four major characteristics of the figure and ground theory.

Firstly, the figure in salience is different. As we illustrate in the notion of salience, the semantic value of an expression lies in neither the ground nor the figure alone, but in their combination. The figure can express a "relationship" in analyzing sentence structure.

Secondly, the components of salience, also called figure, in sentences are different. In cognitive psychology, this is the difference between figure and background.

Thirdly, there exist two kinds of meaning: ambiguous meaning and obvious meaning. When we mention one thing, we always focus on one part of the things. The part we focus on is called figure, while the part we ignore is called ground. In our daily expression, there are several ways to express the same thing. Some expressions shadow some information about this word while the other expressions illustrate the information clearly.

Fourthly, it is hypothesis and expectation. Hypothesis and expectation, one of the imagery meanings, refers to the "prior knowledge which the speaker owns and expectation which he shows when he speaks, writes or translates". When

other people express something, sometimes, we are likely to catch the meaning between the lines.

B.   The Rationale of Considering Single Clause as the Translation Unit

According to Fang (2002), the selected text translation unit is actually a selected text translation method. If mainly regarded words are as the translating unit, the translation level is lower. It is literal translation of the word of word. It has limitation greatly that the word layer is translated. Only some words can find the corresponding equivalence word while translating in most sentences. So it is of very small possibility to choose to regard words as translating unit. Translating unit has relations to translating level. If the interpreter generally only involves thinking, semantic, the interpreter roughly regards sentence as the unit. If we choose words as translating unit, we are not able to express exactly what we want to express. The translation base unit to the language page is a sentence, which emphasize: to conceive it in the language section and express it in the sentence. The big translation unit often includes the small translation unit. While regarding sentence as translating unit, it is some in word not to repel either, in the phrase or transliteration. Therefore sentence is the most proper translation unit (Jiang, 2007).

III.   APPLICATION OF FIGURE AND GROUND THEORY IN THE SINGLE CLAUSE RESEARCH

The pioneering work of understanding figure-ground theory in languages was done by Talmy (1972; 1988; 2000), and after him the cognitive linguists began to adopt figure-ground theory as one basic cognitive principle by which language organizes its conceptions. Talmy (1972; 1988; 2000) used figure-ground relation to explain the expressions of locative prepositions in natural language and identified the definitional characteristics and associated characteristics to objects functioning as figure and ground in language. He (1996) also researched figure-ground relation in simple and complex sentences and between events, concluding that in complex sentences the relation of figure and ground is decided according to the following five principles: sequence principle, cause-result principle, inclusion principle, contingency principle and substitution principle.

A little different from Talmy, and to distinguish the static and dynamic figure and ground relation, Langacker (2004, p.411), introduced another pair of "figure and ground", namely "trajector and landmark", in which a trajector is a moving object/figure and the landmark is the ground of the moving figure, and the figure moves along the "path" to the Ground. Trajector and landmark may vary in size and shape and the trajector can be in contact with the landmark or a part of the landmark (Ungerer & Schmid, 2001).

What's more, Langacker also seeks different way of treating traditional simple clauses by using figure-ground principle. In traditional grammar, a simple clause is said to normally consist of three key elements: a subject, verb (predicate) and a complement (an object or an adverbial) (Ungerer & Schmid, 2001). But the divergent uses of subjects or complements are difficult to be explained by traditional grammarians and modern linguistic schools. In Cognitive Grammar developed by him, Langacker (1990, 1991) suggests to explain the syntactic diversity of subjects and objects by understanding the simple transitive clause subject +verb +object (complement) as a reflection of figure and ground segregation. To put it more pointedly, subject corresponds to figure, object to ground and the verb indicates the relation between subject/figure and object/ground (Ungerer & Schmid, 2001) transmission in action chains, the Furthermore, according to Langacker's energy agent, as energy initiator, is the most prominent element in a situation and is given the status of subject while the patient, as the tail of the action chain, is object ground and the transitive verb is to show how the energy is emitted from subject to object (Ungerer & Schmid, 2001).

Ungerer & Schmid (2001, p.188) very much prefer Langacker's term of "trajector and landmark" and his explanation of simple transitive clause. In terms of simple clause, very similarly, they (2001, p.206) put forward the terms of "syntactic figure" and "syntactic ground" to refer to subject and object respectively, postulating that the verbs can account for the degree of prominence between subject and object or complement in syntactic clause patterns like SVC or SVO.

As a result, we can understand verbs can relate figure and ground segregation in both lexical aspects and grammatical structures like SVO or SVO of language. It's Langacker (2004) who has so far extended and refined the notions of figure and ground and has developed the most comprehensive cognitive conception (Ungerer & Schmid, 2001).

Based on western cognitive linguists' research on figure-ground theory, Chinese scholars have recently investigated a lot into this theory and its application into linguistics, especially in syntactic aspect: Chinese scholars Kuang & Wen (2003) complemented two associated characteristics to Talmy's characteristics of figure and ground in language, i.e. time length and predictability, assuming that ground lasts longer than figure does and ground is more predictable than figure. And they (2003) comprehended the realization of this theory from both spatial and temporal events, giving us a comprehensive understanding of this cognitive theory and the explanatory power. Wen & Liu (2004, p.438-443) examined English inverted sentences, postulating that the use of inverted sentence is in fact a bind of figure-ground to ground-figure reversal by speakers in cognitive process. By convertingnatural sentence "subject/ figure-predicate-object / ground" into marked sentence "object / ground-predicate-subject / figure", a salient end focus can be formed so as to draw more attention. Jiang & Liang (2007) examined the formation and structures of idioms English and Chinese) according to the prominence view and attentional view of cognitive linguistics that the most interesting parts of the expressed information are given prominence by linguistic structures and the way how a clause is expressed involves and reflects the speaker's intentional selection and arrangement of the information to be voiced. They prove the realization

of figure and ground relation in English and Chinese idioms and it is a good way to unfold the image representation of idioms semantically (Zhao, 2009).

IV.   APPLICATION OF FIGURE AND GROUND THEORY TO THE TRANSLATION OF SINGLE CLAUSE

When we observe the outside world, since the objective input to our visual system does not change, this choice remains entirely up to the observers. Owing to different cognitions, different people may put different pictures as figures. From the linguistics perspective, it is valuable to use the figure-ground relation to account for the expressions of spatial relations in natural language. This principle of figure-ground segregation is one of the basic cognitive principles according to which space is organized. Every kind of language has its corresponding description of spatial organization; therefore, languages can reflect this principle. That is to say that it can be realized in Chinese and English. When we describe the scene of a picture on the wall, we usually tend to prefer the picture as the figure, while the table as the reference point or ground, because the picture is smaller and more movable according to the principle of Pragnanz. Therefore, we would like to say "The picture is on the wall". That is to say that there exists a concrete spatial relation between picture and wall in "The picture is on the wall" and the location preposition "on" can reflect the relation of figure and ground (Chen, 2008, p.36).

The relationship between figure and ground can be seen in terms of locative relations, which are usually rendered by preposition; or to put it other way round, the meanings of locative prepositions can be understood as figure/ground relationship (Ungerer & Schmid, 2001). Spatial consciousness is a main means to consist artistic conception besides temporal consciousness. The principle of figure-ground segregation is one of the basic cognitive principles according to which space is organized. In English, the spatial relations are expressed by prepositions or adverbial phrases, which shows the orientational relationship, such as on/above/over, inside/outside, under/below, etc.. According to this orientational relationship, the meaning of this kind of preposition can be illustrated from the perspective of the prominence view. For example:

1). a. The pen lay on the table.

b. The pen fell off the table.

In the above two sentences, the pen specifies the object that functions as the Figure, and the table the object that functions as the Ground. In their linguistic usage, they have the following specific characterizations: the Figure is a moving or conceptually movable entity whose path, site, or orientation is conceived as a variable; the Ground is a reference entity, one that has a stationary setting, with respect to which the figure's path, site or orientation is characterized (Talmy, 2000).

2). The ball rolled past the lamp.

In this case, the combination of the linguistic figure object and the ground object together functions as a psychological figure, while the background now functions as a psychological ground.

The category of figure and ground can be clearly classified within a motion event where one object is moving and the other is stationary. But if they also appear in the locational event where both objects are stationary, can we observe which one is figure and which one is ground? Of course, the answer is positive. We undertake such a demonstration here. For example:

3). a. The bike is near the house.

b. The house is near the bike.

In the former sentence, the house has a set location within a reference frame and is to be used as a reference object by which to characterize the other object's (bike's) location. But the latter implies the bike has a set location. So in the former sentence, the bike is figure and the house is ground, while in the latter one, the house is figure and the bike is ground.

Even though the author does not want to indicate anything about the difference between these two sentences, language inescapably imposes the difference on the semantic meaning in these two sentences. Main factors must be introduced to explain why the reversal sentences have such a big difference. The following two sentences like

4). a. John is near Harry.

b. Harry is near John.

are also reversed, but they do not differ from each other so dramatically and both are semantically ordinary. In the above example (b), "John" is set up as a reference point with known location for establishing the location of "Harry". There are certain additional characteristics that render one entity more suitable for functioning as ground or another entity as figure. Such characteristics can be considered the "associated characteristics" of figure and ground. From these "associated characteristics", the judgment of figure and ground will be clearly found.

The method of reversing the nominal in a sentence to highlight the existence of figure and ground roles in lo6ative event has so far used about "near". The same rule is in the inverse pair of "above/below", as in the following examples:

5) a. Susan resembles my sister.

b. My sister resembles Susan.

In this case, subject and object can be exchanged. Just as in the case of the face and vase illusion. The choice of one sentence constituent as the dominant element is up to the speaker. Linguistically, the way to manifest salience is to put the preferred element into subject position. Once this decision has been made in favor of Susan or my sister, it is clear

that which one is the figure and is more salient than the other. In the first sentence, it is Susan that is more salient with reference to my sister, while in the second sentence, the situation is reversed. But if we change the sentences into:

6). a. My mother resembles my sister.

b. My sister resembles my mother.

The same structure like the former one, we cannot accept both two sentences, because the power relation of the two people is illogical. So the sentence (a) is wrong. The reason is mainly due to our cultural knowledge. In the previous two examples, Susan and my sister have no hierarchical structure and their status probably is much closer to the speaker.

Either of them as the subject is acceptable. However, in the last two examples, my mother and my sister have a hierarchical structure in my family. The status of my mother is obviously higher than the status of my sister. So according to our cultural knowledge, the sentence (a) is acceptable while the sentence (b) is unacceptable.

V. CONCLUSION

From the above analysis, it can be concluded that the figure and ground theory is a cognitive process or cognitive structure stored in our mind, which is important in representing the salient objects or information, or indicating the object or information we paid more attention on. And we get to know that the process of how to apply the figure and ground theory in translation: the translator must have enough knowledge to learn the figure and ground in a sentence. Although the translator is not aware of the process of judging the figure and ground, he still uses this principle unconsciously. In the target text, on one hand, only when the readers can understand the sentence structure, can the translation be considered as a successful one. On the other hand, a translation version is used by a certain readership. Once the translation version is used beyond this kind of readership, the value of this version disappears, because it is beyond the reader's experience or belief.

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