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Iconicity in Yuan Kejia's English Translations of Xu Zhimo's Modern Chinese Poetry: A CSAT Perspective

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Abstract: From the perspective of cognitive stylistics in translation studies, this study explores the iconicity in the English versions of Xu Zhimo's poems *Farewell to Cambridge* and *The Snow* translated by Yuan Kejia. Iconicity is defined as the perceptible correspondence between the linguistic form and the action, experience or cognitive process depicted in the text. This study examines quantitative, sequential, and marked iconicity, focusing on how repetition, parallel structures, word order, line breaks, phonological patterning, semantic incongruity, and identity transformation contribute to meaning construction. The results show that Yuan Kejia's translations preserve substantial formal correspondence, particularly in lexical repetition, parallel structures, and the overall progression of action. Nevertheless, lexical substitution and syntactic reconstruction often change or weaken the effect of interpretation. In some cases, local phonological and rhythmic features partially compensate for these losses. This study argues that poetry translation should not only consider semantic content, but also take into account the inference function of stylistic form, and explains how translation can retain, reconstruct or weaken the relationship between form and meaning.

Keywords: Cognitive stylistics; Iconicity; Xu Zhimo; Yuan Kejia; Poetry translation

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1. Introduction

The interaction between form and meaning is an important stylistic resource in poetry. In addition to conveying propositional meaning through lexical choice, poetry also shapes readers' interpretation through sound, rhythm, lines and syntax. Boase-Beier points out that the form of poetry can reflect the action, feeling or psychological process it describes [1]. Recent studies in cognitive poetics further suggest that poetic meaning is not produced by semantic content alone, but emerges through the interaction of formal patterning, embodied experience and readers' cognitive construction of affective and conceptual representations [2,3].

Therefore, translation must consider whether this relationship between form and meaning can be preserved in the translation. Empirical research on Chinese poetry translation has also shown that differences in translation strategies may influence readers' mental imagery and emotional responses, especially when culturally loaded visual words and poetic images are involved [4]. Stylistic prominence also stems from deviations from conventional language, such as repetition, inversion and cross-line continuity, which may produce different interpretive effects through perceptual prominence. Therefore, poetry translation requires more than semantic accuracy. The translator must also reconstruct the stylistic cues through which target readers may form comparable cognitive and affective representations.

In this study, iconicity is understood as the perceptible correspondence between language form and the action, experience or cognitive process it represents. The patterns of sound, repetition, and linear arrangement may influence how readers perceive duration, repetition, and progression, while unconventional syntactic or written forms may highlight cognitively complex content. Therefore, iconicity can be understood as a way for form to participate in meaning construction, not just a decorative means. This study examines Yuan Kejia's English translations of Xu Zhimo's *Farewell to Cambridge* [再别康桥] and *The Snow* [雪花的快乐], published in Robert Payne's *Contemporary Chinese Poetry* [5]. It examines the quantitative, sequential, and marked iconicity in the original poems, and considers how Yuan's translation preserves, transforms, compensates for, or weakens these stylistic clues. Accordingly, the study addresses two questions:

(1) How do quantitative, sequential, and marked iconicity function as stylistic clues in the two original poems?
(2) How do Yuan's translations retain, transform or weaken these clues, and where do they compensate for their losses?

2. Theoretical framework

For the purposes of this study, Boase-Beier's cognitive-stylistic approach to translation is referred to as the Cognitive Stylistic Translation Approach (CSAT) [6]. Its central premise is that style is an integral part of meaning construction and interpretation, rather than a detachable layer applied to pre-existing content. The observable features such as lexical choice, syntax, sound patterning, repetition, and typography provide textual evidence for interpretation. Some of these choices may be deliberate, while others do not need to be consciously motivated. In either case, their stylistic significance emerges from their function in the text and from the interpretations that readers construct in context. From this point of view, meaning is not considered to be fully encoded in the text and then recovered by simple decoding. On the contrary, it comes from the interaction between textual evidence and readers' cognitive context, including linguistic knowledge, cultural knowledge, historical knowledge and individual knowledge. Therefore, literary texts may support several context-based interpretations rather than a definite meaning. This understanding is consistent with recent research on literary translation reception, which demonstrates that readers evaluate translated texts through cognitive-evaluative templates involving salience, affect, norms and expectations [7]. Consequently, the interpretation of a translated poem depends not only on the formal features retained in the target text, but also on the cognitive and cultural resources activated by target readers.

CSAT also treats the translator as both reader and writer. As a reader, the translator interprets the stylistic choices of the source text; as a writer, the translator selects linguistic and literary resources available in the target language. Translation is therefore an interpretive and creative process shaped by the translator's

reading of the source, target-language conventions, and assumptions about target readers [1]. The present study uses preservation, transformation, compensation, and weakening as analytical categories. These categories can also be related to recent discussions of stylistic interference in poetry translation, in which omission, transformation and the introduction of new stylistic deviations are regarded as forms of creative rewriting rather than merely as failures of formal equivalence [8]. These terms describe what happens to a source-text iconic relation in translation; they are not presented as a fixed classification proposed by Boase-Beier. A translation preserves an iconic relation when a comparable formal and interpretive effect remains available. It transforms the relation when a different target-language resource produces a related but modified effect. It compensates for a loss when an added or substituted feature supports an inference relevant to the source text. It weakens the relation when the target text reduces the formal prominence or interpretive potential of the source feature. Evaluation must therefore consider both formal change and its likely effect on interpretation. Accordingly, the analysis follows three stages:

(1) Reading for style by identifying perceptually salient features;
(2) Reconstructing the mental representations that readers may form from these features;
(3) Evaluating whether the relevant cues are preserved, transformed, compensated for, or weakened in translation.

3. Analysis

This part selects examples from Yuan Kejia's English versions of Xu Zhimo's *Farewell to Cambridge* and *The Snow* for analysis. Quantitative iconicity, sequential iconicity and marked iconicity are used as descriptive categories to determine the significant relationship between linguistic forms and the represented experience. These categories are completely different in analysis, but they are not mutually exclusive. A single formal feature may simultaneously promote repetition, temporal progression, sound pattern and semantic salience.

The analysis is carried out at two levels. Firstly, it considers the formal relationship between the source text and the target text, including repetition, syntax, underlining, lexical selection and sound pattern. Secondly, it examines the possibility of interpretation that these formal features may provide to readers. Therefore, the use of terms such as "preservation", "conversion", "compensation" and "weakening" is descriptive rather than an absolute judgment of translation quality. They show how an iconic relation is reconstructed in the target text.

3.1. Quantitative iconicity

Quantitative iconicity concerns the correspondence between the amount of linguistic coding and the quantity, unpredictability, or informational importance of what is represented. Givón proposes that more information or less predictable information tends to receive more coding material [9]. In poetry, repetition and parallel structures may consequently foreground duration, recurrence, insistence, or successive exclusion. Their function, however, must be established contextually rather than assumed solely from formal repetition.

(1) Source Text	Target Text
轻轻的我走了， 正如我轻轻的来； 我轻轻的招手， 作别西天的云彩。[10]	Silently I go, As silently I came. Silently I wave my hand And bid farewell to the western clouds.[5]

The repetition of the word “silently” connects the three movements of leaving, arriving, and waving in a unified rhythm and perception mode, which may help us understand these behaviors as controlled and emotionally controlled, rather than sudden. Yuan’s translation reproduces this quantitative pattern by “silently” repeating it three times, thus preserving the original parallel structure and quiet rhythm. However, “silently” does not exactly correspond to the semantic scope of “ 轻轻 ”, which may refer to being light, gentle, or soft, rather than just soundless. The translation maintains the formal relationship between repetition and gentle movement while transforming part of the sensory meaning of the source text.

(2) Source Text	Target Text
不去那冷寞的幽谷， 不去那凄清的山麓， 也不上荒街去惆怅 ——[10]	Not in some hidden vale, Not in a lonely dale, Nor alone on an unknown road—[5]

The cumulative three-stage negative verb structure “ 不去 … 不去 … 也不上 …” shows a cumulative rejection of the destination, and may indicate that snowflakes deliberately avoid space associated with loneliness and depression. Through “Not… Not… Nor…”, the translation reproduces this quantitative mode, retaining the rhythm and formal symmetry of the original work. However, the source text uses dynamic verbs such as “ 去 ” and “ 上 ” while the translation mainly relies on prepositional phrases, making the three destinations more static. Lexical changes also occur: “ 荒街 ” becomes “an unknown road”, transforming the image from a desolate street into an unfamiliar road. The rhyme between “vale” and “dale” provides phonetic iconicity.

(3) Source Text	Target Text
飞飏，飞飏，飞飏，—— 啊，她身上有朱砂梅的清香！ [10](p. 174)	Flying, flying, flying— Breathing the crystal perfume of the plum-tree![5]

The threefold repetition of “ 飞 飏 ” prolongs the movement of snowflakes and may evoke a continuous, suspended sense of movement. The comma and dash further delay the closure, allowing the action to unfold gradually before the next sensory exclamation. Yuan maintains this quantitative pattern by repeating the word segmentation “flying, flying, flying”, while the dash maintains the impression of continuity. However, the interjection “ 啊 ” in the source text is omitted, reducing the sudden emotional intensity of the transition. In addition, “breathing the crystal perfume of the plum-tree” gives snowflakes a positive sensory ability, while the original version mainly links it to the fragrance of plum blossoms.

3.2. Sequential iconicity

Sequential iconicity involves the correspondence between the linguistic order and the order of the represented events or experiences. Givón formulates this relation as the semantic principle of linear order: the order of clauses in coherent discourse tends to correspond to the temporal order of the events represented [9]. In poetry, sequences of verbs, clauses, and lines may guide readers through unfolding action, perception, and imagined experience. The analysis must therefore consider not only order but also agency, aspect, direction, and the relation between an action and its result.

(4) Source Text	Target Text
①揉碎在浮藻间， ②沉淀着彩虹似的梦。[10]	①Shattered among pondweeds, ②Falling at last into rainbow dreams.[5]

The continuous process of the source text from physical fragmentation in “ 揉碎 ” to “ 沉淀 ” creates

a sequence from interference to stillness and fantastic accumulation. Yuan's translation retains this overall process through "shattered among pondweeds" and "falling at last into rainbow dreams". However, "falling at last into" introduces a more directional and end-point-oriented movement than "沉淀", which underscores an ongoing process of resolution. Translation also changes the relationship between action and dream image: the source text presents the rainbow-like dream as a stable thing, while the English version suggests entering the dream as a destination.

(5)	Source Text	Target Text
	①寻梦?②撑一支长篙， 向青草更青处③漫溯， 满载一船星辉， 在星辉斑斓里④放歌。[10]	Who ①seeks dreams? ②Poling a long pole, ③Roving through places greener than green grass, A boat fully loaded with starlight ④Sings beneath splendid stars.[5]

The implied lyrical first-person subject in the source text, who performs the successive actions "寻梦 / 撑篙 / 漫溯 / 放歌", is displaced in the target text, where only the boat bears the attribute "loaded". The source-text rhetorical self-question "寻梦?" is rephrased as "Who seeks dreams?", which introduces an impersonal interrogative frame and transforms the intimate monologue into an outward-directed query. The suspended participles "Poling…" and "Roving…" are syntactically anchored to "a boat", which is then made the implicit agent of "sings" across a line break. The spatial relationship changes from immersion to externality: "向…处" (toward) becomes "through", "在...里" (in the midst of) becomes "beneath". "斑斓" (dappled light) is reduced to the evaluative "splendid". Formally speaking, "greener than green grass" and "poling a long pole" are symbolic compensation, but the lyrical existence embodied is materialized as a ship.

(6)	Source Text	Target Text
	①沾住了她的衣襟， ②贴近她柔波似的心胸—— ③消溶，消溶，消溶—— ④溶入了她柔波似的心胸！[10]	That I ①can fall against her dress, ②Creeping close to her heart, ③Melting, melting, melting— ④Melting into her soft breast![5]

The sequence "沾住→贴近→消溶→溶入" represents a gradual movement from physical contact to complete integration. The repeated "消溶" prolongs the transition phase and delays the outcome expressed by the "溶入" so that the boundary between the speaker and the lover gradually dissolves. To a large extent, Yuan maintained this process by "fall against", "creeping close", "melting, melting, melting" and "melting into". However, "fall against" emphasizes unexpected shocks, while "沾住" emphasizes attachment. Similarly, "creeping" introduces an ambiguous association between invisibility and low motion in "贴近". Translation retains the sequential iconicity of the source text and changes the physical quality, initiative and emotional tone of the movement.

3.3. Marked iconicity

Marked iconicity refers here to a possible correspondence between cognitively less predictable or more complex content and formally more salient or elaborate coding. Givón's meta-iconic markedness principle proposes that cognitively marked categories tend also to be structurally marked [9]. In poetry, inversion, ellipsis, semantic incongruity, identity shifts, line breaks, and visual pauses may serve as marked cues. Formal markedness and semantic markedness must nevertheless be distinguished: an unusual form does not automatically produce a specific interpretation, and a conventional form may express an unexpected semantic relation.

(7)	Source Text	Target Text
	软泥上的青荇， 油油的在水底招摇； 在康河的柔波里， 我甘心做一条水草！ [10]	Green weed in soft clay, Greenly tossing beneath the water: In the soft waves of Cam I am content to be a weed.[5]

The passage shifts from the description of aquatic vegetation to the speaker's declaration, " 我甘心做一条水草 ", expressing his deep affection and reluctance to part with Cambridge. The final exclamatory tone cognitively highlights this blend. The target text accurately replicates this marked category transposition through direct declarative equivalents of "I am content to be a weed". In addition, the translation creates an intra-textual lexical connection by framing "green weed" at the beginning and "a weed" at the end, thus strengthening the conceptual integration between the external landscape and the speaker's transformation of identity.

(8)	Source Text	Target Text
	但我不能放歌， 悄悄是别离的笙箫； 夏虫也为我沉默， 沉默是今晚的康桥！ [10]	Now I cannot sing aloud, And silent are the farewell flutes: Even the insects are silent for me On this silent Cambridge night.[5]

The source text creates two obvious metaphorical relations by linking silence with the farewell flutes and linking with silent Cambridge. These equations convert abstract sound loss into music and geographic images. Yuan retained the first relationship to a certain extent through the poetic inversion of "silent are the farewell flutes", so that "silent" has a strong perceptual prominence. However, the second metaphor is reorganized as "on this silent Cambridge night". Translation does not regard silence and Cambridge as grammatical equivalents, but turns "silent" into a modifier of "night".

(9)	Source Text	Target Text
	假如我是一朵雪花， 翩翩的在半空里潇洒， 我一定认清我的方向 —— 飞呀，飞呀，飞呀 ——[10]	If I were the snow Fluttering to and fro, I must know where to go, Flying, flying, flying—[5]

The source text constructs an obvious counterfactual mixture, in which the snowflake has conscious intentionality and teleological initiative. As expressed by " 认 清 我 的 方 向 ", Yuan follows a free-floating trajectory in " 飞呀，飞呀，飞呀 ", retaining the counterfactual structure and triple repetition through "flying, flying, flying", and retaining the connection between language repetition and continuous movement. The rhyming between "snow", "fro", and "go" increases the phonological cohesion and partially makes up for the differences in other forms. However, "to and fro" means unstable oscillations, with "I must know where to go" generating cognitive tension, which means purposeful navigation. In addition, "the snow" is not as specific as "a snowflake". Translation retains repetition and rhythm, but transforms the coherent integration of freedom, identity and spiritual direction in the source text into a more contradictory image of spatial roaming.

4. Conclusion

This study examines the translation of iconicity in Yuan Kejia's English translations of Xu Zhimo's *Farewell to Cambridge* and *The Snow* within the framework of Boase-Beier's cognitive stylistics. The findings show that iconicity is realized through repetition, syntactic parallelism, event sequencing, sound patterning, and marked semantic relations. Yuan's translation generally retains the quantitative iconicity and sequential iconicity of the original poem: the repeated words and parallel structures reproduce their rhythm and emotional accumulation, while the progression of action and perception is largely maintained. However,

aspect, agent, lexical choice and syntactic transformation can sometimes change the cognitive effect of the original poem. Marked iconicity is particularly susceptible to normalization, although phonetic compensation can sometimes help maintain formal salience. The findings from these two poems suggest that poetry translation involves not only the transmission of propositional meaning; it also requires reconstructing the relationship between form and meaning to guide readers' interpretation and emotional response.

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