

Category Shifts in the Chinese–English Translation of Animal Idioms in *Journey to the West*

Lulu Deng

Department of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia,
Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia;
Foreign Language College, Xiangnan University, Chenzhou, Hunan, China

Muhammad Alif Redzuan Abdullah

Department of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia,
43400, Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia

Abstract—Idioms are important elements of language and culture, forming the essence of language and the core of vocabulary. Animal idioms naturally have different connotations in the Chinese and Western cultures, which can pose a tremendous challenge for translators. Thus, the reasons for translators' choices in this context are significant. To better understand this subject, this study investigates the cognitive category shifts in the translations of animal idioms in *Journey to the West*. Through the theory of cognitive category shifts, the paper finds that translators' choices are influenced by cognitive concepts derived from their living environments, cultural backgrounds, and knowledge reserves.

Index Terms—Animal idioms, translation, cognitive category shifts

I. INTRODUCTION

Idioms are fixed phrases and lexical units whose forms cannot be altered arbitrarily (Zhong, 1998). Animal idioms are idioms referring to animals or animal body parts and which have specific cultural connotations. Animal-idiom translation has great practical and theoretical significance (Nie, 2019). In view of this, many scholars (Fu, 2014, 2017, 2018; Yin, 2015; Zhang, 2017; Nie, 2019; Zhao & Han, 2019; Abudula, 2021) have studied animal idioms from various perspectives, but few have done so from the perspective of cognitive category shifts. Many scholars have studied the translation strategies employed with animal idioms (e.g., Nie, 2019; Zhang, 2017; Zhao, 2013), but few have analyzed the reasons for translators' choices.

There are 121 articles on animal-idiom translation in the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) from 1995 to 2023, but only 8 articles on Chinese–English animal-idiom translation. This study concerns animal-idiom translations from Chinese into English, and all the samples are taken from the translation of the classic novel, *Journey to the West*.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

A. Category Shifts of Catford

The concept of category shifts in translation is influenced by “first-generation” and “second-generation” theories in the cognitive science. “First-generation” theories conceive of the mind as based on abstract, propositional representation, while “second-generation” pertains to a specific aspect within contemporary cognitive science, highlighting the embodiment of mental process and their expansion into the world via material artifacts and sociocultural practice (Karin & Marco, 2014). With “first-generation” theories, the founder of category shifts in translation is J. C. Catford, whose theory is greatly influenced by the discussion of generative grammar, first proposed by Avram Noam Chomsky. Chomsky writes that, “Originality is nothing more than the innate and insurmountable mental components stored in the brain in the form of unconsciousness...” (Tan, 2018). Catford put forward four types of category shifts in translation—namely, structure shift, class shift, unit shift, and intra-system shift. Many scholars—such as Liang (2020), Du (2020), He (2021), and Pan (2014)—have since used Catford's category shifts to analyze translated texts. However, Catford's theory focuses only on linguistic category shifts, with no examination of the macro levels of culture, psychology, and subject consciousness (Yu, 2020). The first to apply category theory to translation studies was Neubert (1985), who classified text-type with the help of prototypical analysis. Snell Hornby (1988) used this theory to explore the classification of target discourse. Halverson (2000) conducted empirical research to confirm that the prototype effect does indeed exist in translation—that is, there is no absolute translation equivalence or translation principles. Thelen

(2008) discussed the significant role of category in translation, noting the processes and modes of category shifts. In addition, many Chinese researchers (Li & Zhang, 2003; Wang & Zhang, 2004; Liu & Li, 2005; Zhang & Zhang, 2010; Long, 2011; Tan, 2011; He, 2016; cited in Yu, 2020) have begun to study translation between Chinese and other languages with the help of category theory. With “second-generation” theories, Wen and Xiao (2020) proposed cognitive category shifts, including linguistic and non-linguistic category shifts, which differ from Catford’s theory. According to Catford (1965), translation is viewed as a linguistic transformation involving the substitution of linguistic materials and shifts in linguistic categories. On the other hand, Wen and Xiao (2020) assert that language is a cognitive product intricately linked to human cognition and thought. Therefore, they suggest that translation is essentially the transformation of cognitive categories.

B. Cognitive Category Shifts (Wen & Xiao, 2020)

According to Wen and Xiao, in the process of translation, one category is transformed into another. These transformations are shifts of cognitive categories. There are four types of category shifts in this theoretical framework:

1) Shifts between categories: In translation, the names of the animals in the idioms are different, but their referential meanings in English and Chinese cultures are the same. Therefore, Animal A in Chinese and Animal B in English belong to different categories and can replace each other.

2) Shifts between category members: In translation, the names of the animals in the idioms are different but the animals belong to the same categories, and their referential meanings in English and Chinese cultures are the same. Therefore, Animal A in Chinese and Animal B in English belong to the same category and can replace each other.

3) Shifts between category prototypes: In translation, the same animal has different referential meanings in the English and Chinese cultures, or an animal in one culture has no referential meaning in the other. Therefore, the Chinese prototype of Animal A is replaced by the English prototype of Animal B, or the Chinese prototype of Animal A is replaced by the English prototype of Animal A, with their different referential meanings.

4) Shifts between category levels: In translation, the names of the animals in idioms are different and the animals are in different category levels, but their referential meanings in the English and Chinese cultures are the same. Therefore, Animal A in Chinese as an upper or lower category is replaced by Animal B in English as a lower or upper category.

III. RESEARCH PROJECT

A. Data Collection

The corpus of this study is the original work, *Journey to the West*, written by Wu Cheng’en (1368-1644 AD) in China’s Ming Dynasty and two English translations. As one of the four most-famous novels in China, *Journey to the West* recounts a myth contains numerous animal idioms. Of the 64 English translations of *Journey to the West*, the two selected for this study are integral translations. One is the Chinese-English version by Chinese translator Anthony C. Yu, and the other is English version by English translator W. J. F. Jenner. These texts were chosen to ensure that the comparison would be representative. The Chinese original text referred in this study is also from Yu’s version. Additionally, theses and articles from academic journals, such as CNKI and Scopus, will be consulted.

B. Research Questions and Methods

This study investigates the category shifts in the translations of animal idioms in these texts. The following questions will be posed:

QR 1: What are the cognitive category shifts?

QR 2: How are category shifts reflected in the translation of animal idioms?

QR 3: What are the factors that influence translators’ choices in the translation of animal idioms?

This is a qualitative case study, involving content-analysis and comparative-analysis methodologies.

1. Content analysis. The animal idioms in this study have been classified into four categories: beast and four-footed animal, bird and fowl, insect, and arthropod. Each category has its own members shown below in Chart 1.

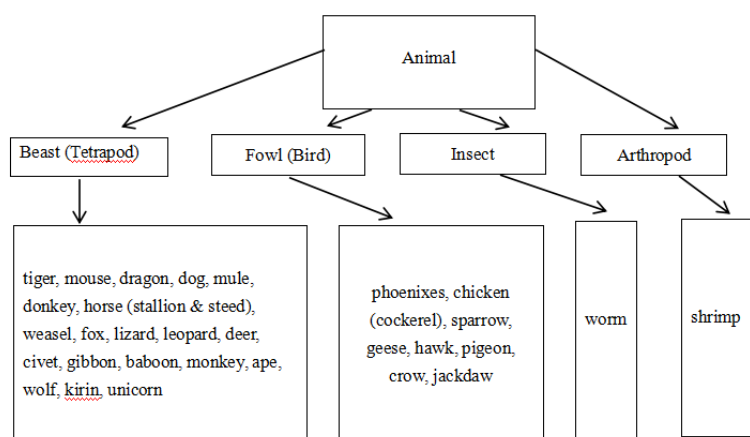


Chart 1. Classification of Animals in Different Categories

Note: Tetrapod is in the lower category of beast. Bird is in the lower category of fowl. Stallion and steed are in the lower categories of horses. Cockere is in the lower category of chicken.

2. Comparative analysis. With its comparison and analysis of the original and translated texts, this study summarizes various cognitive differences between the Chinese and Western cultures and explores the factors that influence translators' choices in these areas.

C. Data Analysis

RQ 1 & 2: What are the types of cognitive category shifts, and how are these reflected in the translation of animal idioms?

If a translator tasked with translating animal idioms has the same cognition of the animals as the author, the category of the animals will remain the same by literal translation. What is more, if the image of the animals in the original text is difficult to transfer, the translator will use liberal translation without retaining the animals in the translation. However, animals do not always have the same cognition in one language as in another, thus category shifts are inevitable.

(a). Original Category Retained or Omitted in Animal-Idiom Translation

1. Literal Translation to Retain Original Category

Original Chinese version: 龙游浅水遭虾戏，虎落平原被犬欺。(Vol 2, p. 68)

Yu's translation: The dragon in shallow water teased by shrimps, the tiger on level ground mocked by dogs. (Vol 2, p. 69)

Jenner's translation: A dragon in shallows falls victim to shrimps; a tiger on the plain can be put upon by dogs (Vol 1, p. 519).

In this idiom, the animals “龙,” “虾,” “虎,” and “犬” are translated as “dragon,” “shrimp,” “tiger,” and “dog” by the two translators, thus retaining the original categories.

Original Chinese version: 真个有沉鱼落雁之容，闭月羞花之貌。(Vol 1, p. 210)

Yu's translation: Her features were striking enough to sink fish and drop wild geese, and her complexion would cause the moon to hide and put the flowers to shame. (Vol 1, p. 211)

Jenner's translation: Her charms would have made fish sink and wild geese fall from the sky, and her beauty put the moon and flowers to shame. (Vol 1, p. 153)

In the idiom “沉鱼落雁之容，闭月羞花之貌”，the animals are “鱼” and “雁.” In both translations, the categories remain “fish” and “wild geese”.

2. Liberal Translation to Omit Category

Original Chinese version: 你贼头鼠脑的，一定有变作个甚么东西，跟着我听的。(Vol 2, p. 124)

Yu's translation: You are something of a crook and a shakedown artist! You must have changed into some kind of creature and followed me. (Vol 2, p. 125)

Jenner's translation: With the devilish head of yours, you must have changed yourself into something or other to listen to what I said. (Vol 1, p. 559)

In the original sentence, the animal idiom is “贼头鼠脑,” which suggests that someone has a “sneaky” look and would like to steal something. The animal “鼠” (mouse) is very cunning and sneaky, with a desire to engage in mischief. Thus, both translators use liberal translation to omit the reference to this category.

Original Chinese version: 我家是清凉瓦屋，不像这个害黄病的房子，花狸狐哨的门扇！放我出去！放我出去！(Vol 1, p. 300)

Yu's translation: Ours is a clean, cool house of tiles, not like this one, yellow as if it had jaundice, and with such gaudy appointments! Let me out! Let me out! (Vol 1, p. 301)

Jenner's translation: My home is simple tiled house, not like this jaundiced, yellow place with its flashy doors. Let me out, let me out. (Vol 1, p. 559)

In the original text, the idiom “花狸狐哨” is used to describe colorful things. The animals in the idioms “狸” (yellow weasel) and “狐” (fox) are omitted in the liberal translation.

(b). *Category Shift in Animal-Idiom Translation*

1. *Shift Between Categories*

Original Chinese version: 与狼虫为伴，虎豹为群，獐鹿为友，猕猿为亲。(p. 6)

Yu's translation: He made his companions the tiger and the lizard, the wolf and the leopard; he befriended the civet and the deer, and he called the gibbon and the baboon his kin.(Vol 1, p. 7)

Jenner's translation: He made friends with the wolves, went around with the tigers and leopards, was on good terms with the deer, and had the other monkeys and apes for relations. (Vol 1, p. 2)

In Yu's translation of the idiom “狼虫为伴,” “虫” (insects) is translated into “the lizard.” As a lizard belongs to the category of animal, this is a category shift between categories. Furthermore, in the idiom “獐鹿为友,” “獐” (roe deer) is translated into “the civet.” As “roe deer” and “civet” belong to different species, this is also a category shift.

Original Chinese version: 精细鬼道：“师父，我跟你去。”伶俐虫道：“师父，我跟你去”。(Vol 2, p. 192)

Yu's translation: Sly Devil said, “Master, I'll follow you,” while Wily Worm also said, “Master, I'll follow you”. (Vol 2, p. 193)

Jenner's translation: “I'll go with you, Master,” said Dexterous Ghost. “Me, too,” said Skillful Beast. (Vol 2, p. 29)

In the original text, “精细鬼” and “伶俐虫” are idioms referring to people who look intelligent but are actually very stupid. In Yu's translation, “伶俐虫” is translated as “Wily Worm,” while in Jenner's translation, it is translated as “Skillful Beast.” “虫” is “worm” in English, but in this context, the character “伶俐虫” is a beast, so Jenner's translation is also reasonable. However, “worm” and “beast” belong to different categories, so the translation of “虫” as “beast” is a shift between categories.

2. *Shift Between Category Members*

Original Chinese version: 骑着驴骡思骏马。(Vol 1, p. 20)

Yu's translation: Riding on mules, they long for noble steeds. (Vol 1, p. 21)

Jenner's translation: Those who ride donkeys long for stallions. (Vol 1, p. 13)

In the original idiom, “骏马” means a large, strong horse used for riding, while “stallion,” in Jenner's translation, refers to a male horse used for breeding. “骏马” and “stallions” belong to the category of horse, so this is a shift between category members. Yu's translation of this idiom is thus different to that of Jenner.

Original Chinese version: 鸟鹊怎与凤凰争，鸚鵡敢和鹰鹞敌？(Vol 1, p. 530)

Yu's translation: How can sparrows quarrel with the phoenix? Dare pigeons oppose the eagles and hawks? (Vol 1, p. 531)

Jenner's translation: How can a crow or jackdaw fight a phoenix? What chance has a pigeon against a hawk? (Vol 1, p. 384)

In the original text, “鸟鹊” refers to a magpie, a small and weak animal. However, Yu and Jenner translate this as “sparrows” and “a crow or jackdaw,” respectively. Though magpies, sparrows, crows, and jackdaws are all members of the category “bird,” they are different species. Similarly, “鹰鹞” refers to “hawks and harriers,” which are raptors, while Yu and Jenner use “eagles and hawks” and “a hawk,” respectively, to translate the term. In short, the translators are using certain members of a category to refer to other members, thereby performing a shift between category members.

3. *Shift Between Category Prototypes*

Original Chinese version: 丹崖上，彩凤双鸣；削壁前，麒麟独卧。(Vol 1, p. 4)

Yu's translation: Atop the crimson ridge, phoenixes sing in pairs; before precipitous cliffs, the unicorn singly rests. (Vol 1, p. 5)

Jenner's translation: On the red cliffs, phoenixes sing in pairs; lone unicorns lie before the beetling crags. (Vol 1, p. 1)

In the animal idiom “彩凤双鸣,” the image and referential meaning of “凤” in Chinese and the image of “Phoenixes” in English are quite different. In China, “凤” is a symbol of auspiciousness. In ancient times, the dragon was the symbol of the emperor, and the phoenix was the symbol of the queen. Ancient Chinese books do not describe the rebirth of the phoenix. In contrast, the Western phoenix comes from ancient Greek and Roman mythology. It is an immortal bird that can be reborn from nirvana. Similarly, the image and referential meaning of “麒麟” (Kirin) in Chinese and the image of the “unicorn” in English are also quite different. In Western mythology, unicorns are similar in appearance to white

horses, albeit with horns on their foreheads, representing nobility, arrogance, and purity. A “shu” (疏), in *The Classic of Mountains and Rivers*, is a kind of oriental unicorn. “Kirin” is an auspicious beast in ancient Chinese mythology, born from the scattering of the stars of the year. It is one of the four auspicious beasts, together with the Chinese dragon, the Chinese phoenix and turtles.

According to the *Ruiying Picture*, the Kirin has a sheep’s head and wolves’ hooves. Its head is round and its body is multi-colored. It is approximately two meters tall. *Origin of Chinese Characters* records that the Kirin has a body like a musk deer, a tail like a dragon tail, dragon scales, and a horn. Therefore, the translation of “凤” as “phoenix” and “麒麟” as “unicorn” represent category prototype shifts. Yu’s translation of this idiom is the same as that of Jenner.

4. Shift Between Category Levels

Original Chinese version: 古云：“禽有禽言，兽有兽语”。(Vol 1, p. 9)

Yu’s translation: As the old saying goes, “Fowls have their fowl speech, and beasts have their beast language”. (Vol 1, p. 10)

Jenner’s translation: There is an old saying: “Birds have bird language and animals have animal talk”. (Vol 1, p. 1)

The range of fowl is larger than that of birds, as fowl include birds. Generally speaking, the main species of fowl are pheasants and poultry, such as chickens, ducks, and geese. There are also birds of other families, such as turkeys, pigeons, quails, and all kinds of songbirds. The main species of birds are divided into six categories: swimming birds, wading birds, climbing birds, land birds, raptors, and songbirds. These six categories are collectively referred to as “ecological groups.” Thus, Jenner’s translation is a shift between category levels. The upper category of the original text, “禽” (fowl), is translated into the lower category of “bird” in the translated version. Similarly, “兽” (beasts) is translated into its upper category, “animals.” Yu’s translation of the idiom is different from that of Jenner.

Similarly, the translation of “禽” and “兽” in the sentence “禽有生而兽有死，反复雌雄” (Vol 1, p. 78) is another example of a shift between category levels.

Yu’s translation: Fowls are born and animals die; male and female, they multiply. (Vol 1, p. 79)

Jenner’s translation: Birds and beast are born and die; male and female alternate. (Vol 1, p. 55)

Original Chinese version: 常言“嫁鸡逐鸡，嫁犬逐犬”。(Vol 4, p. 474)

Yu’s translation: There is a proverb which says, “if you wed a chicken, you follow a chicken; if you marry a dog, you follow a dog”. (Vol4, p. 475)

Jenner’s translation: As the saying goes, “Marry a cockerel and follow a cockerel; marry a dog and follow a dog”. (Vol 3, p. 492)

In feudal China, when a woman married a man, she was obliged to stay with him for the rest of her life. Thus, “鸡” and “犬” in the idiom refer to men. However, in literal terms, “鸡” (chicken) includes “hen” and “cockerel.” In Yu’s translation, “鸡” is translated as “chicken,” while Jenner translates “鸡” as “cockerel,” referring to the male. Thus, in Jenner’s translation, there is a shift between category levels.

IV. FINDINGS

RQ3: What are the factors that influence translators’ choices in the translation of animal idioms?

A “category” is a mental process by which human beings classify things, and there are three factors that influence category classification.

A. Environment

According to Labov’s (1972) investigation, for Americans, the prototype of a bird is a robin; while for the Chinese, the prototype is a swallow. What causes this difference? The environment. Due to their environment, Americans see robins in their daily lives, while Chinese people see swallows more often. Over time, people’s sensory experiences influence their cognitive classifications.

B. Culture

National culture is inherited, and nationalities have their own cultures. For example, for Chinese people, the strongest animal is the buffalo because these were used to cultivate land during China’s agricultural history; while for Western people, the strongest animal is the horse because these were used to pull carts during occidental industrial history. Therefore, the animal idiom “力大如牛” (as strong as a buffalo) should be translated as “as strong as a horse.” As the Chinese word “buffalo” has the same connotative meaning as the English “horse,” the translation should exchange “buffalo” for “horse”.

C. Changes of Prototype

As mentioned above, a prototype category changes with a change in context and time. In ancient China, the prototype of the dog was a rural breed whose main function was to prevent theft and to be eaten by people as meat. Thus, the connotations of dog idioms are pejorative. Today, with more varieties of dog breeds and many being kept as pets, the

prototype is no longer a rural dog, and the main function is often to be kept as a family member. What is more, the eating of dog meat would be offensive to dog owners.

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper has analyzed the category shifts that occur in the translation of animal idioms, using examples from *Journey to the West*, translated by Anthony C. Yu and W. J. F. Jenner. When a translator has the same cognition of the animal in an idiom as the original author, the category of the animal need not be changed. However, if the translator has a different cognition, translation will result in a category shift. Moreover, differences between individual translators in terms of their cognitions of animals will also result in differences in their translations. In some cases, categories will remain the same in literal translation or be omitted in liberal translations, while in other cases, the categories will be shifted.

Categorization is a cognitive–psychological process, and a category is a cognitive concept preserved in the brain. As people originate in different living environments, have different cultural backgrounds, and possess different knowledge reserves, they also have different cognitive concepts; thus, category shifts are inevitable in translation. There are four general kinds of category shift: between categories, between category members, between prototypes, and between category levels. By analyzing the category shifts seen in the translation of animal idioms, the paper explains the substitution of animals in the translation of animal idioms. It also explains the factors that cause these category shifts—namely, living environment, cultural background, and knowledge reserves. Furthermore, it explains how these factors can influence translators' choices. In summary, this notion of category shifts offers a novel perspective for further studies on animal-idiom translation.

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Lulu Deng, MA, is currently a lecturer of Foreign Language College at Xiangnan University, Chenzhou, Hunan, China. She was born in Xinshao County, Hunan Province, China, in January 1986. In 2010, she obtained a master's degree in translation practice and theory from the Sichuan International Studies University, Chongqing, China. Her bachelor's degree in English language and literature was obtained from Huaihua College, Hunan, China, in 2007.

Between 2010 and 2012, she taught Chinese at South Warren High School in Kentucky, U.S.A. Since September 2012, she has been teaching in Foreign Language College at Xiangnan University. She primarily teaches courses in English–Chinese translation and Chinese–English translation, as well as translation workshops. She has published more than 10 articles related to translation studies for the Chinese National Knowledge Infrastructure and was chief editor of the book, *A New Course Book on Translation*. Since 2021, she has been working on a PhD in translation and interpretation at Universiti Putra Malaysia, Serdang, Malaysia. Her research interests are translation theory and practice.

Muhammad Alif Redzuan Abdullah (corresponding author), PhD, is currently a senior lecturer in the Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia. He has published articles in research journals in the area of his studies. His research interests include Translation, Interpretation, and Applied Comparative Linguistics (E-mail: muhammadalif@upm.edu.my). ORCHID ID: 0000-0002-8684-0769