

Metaphorical Patterns and Translation Strategies of Business Negotiation Texts from the Perspective of Relevance Theory

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Abstract: Taking Relevance Theory as the core perspective, this paper focuses on the metaphorical patterns and translation strategies of business negotiation texts. The “ostensive-inferential” mechanism of Relevance Theory provides a cognitive logic for metaphor interpretation. By concretizing abstract business concepts, metaphors reduce the mental cost of negotiations and become a key link in cross-linguistic communication. This study examines the cognitive construction function of metaphors in business negotiation texts and proposes targeted translation strategies based on the core principles of Relevance Theory, aiming to enhance the accuracy and effectiveness of translation and facilitate smooth cross-cultural business communication.

Keywords: Relevance Theory; Business negotiation texts; Metaphorical patterns; Translation strategies

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1. Introduction

Business negotiation texts serve as a cross-cultural and cross-linguistic tool for interest mediation in commercial activities. Metaphors in these texts are not merely linguistic decorations but also powerful tools for conveying rich commercial meanings. Abstract topics such as profit distribution and risk avoidance are often expressed through metaphors, yet their interpretation and translation are easily influenced by context and culture, which may affect negotiation outcomes. Relevance Theory focuses on the principle of seeking optimal relevance in communicative activities, emphasizing achieving sufficient contextual effects with the minimum cognitive effort. This aligns perfectly with the contextual needs of effective communication in business negotiation texts. Based on this principle, this study explores the cognitive construction of metaphors in business negotiation texts and proposes targeted translation strategies, aiming to reduce cognitive errors and cultural conflicts in metaphor translation and improve the translation quality and communicative effectiveness of business negotiation texts.

2. Significance of metaphors and their translation in business negotiation texts from the perspective of relevance theory

2.1. Relevance theory provides cognitive logic for metaphor interpretation in business negotiation texts

Relevance Theory holds that linguistic communication is an ostensive-inferential process, where both parties need to find optimal relevance to understand the meaning of utterances. In business negotiation texts, metaphors are not just modifiers but also a way of thinking for expressing complex business objectives. In this conversational context, metaphors visualize abstract business concepts (such as profit sharing, cooperation models, and risk avoidance) into the scope of concrete perceptual experience, reducing the cognitive load of conceptual reasoning. From a relevance perspective, both parties in business negotiations must infer the information implied by metaphors based on the assumptions of the business conversational context to achieve optimal relevance. For example, equating “market” with “battlefield” not only indicates the nature of conflict but also implies deep-seated connotations such as resource plunder and strategic game. This decoding requires negotiators to have a clear grasp of the industry context, cultural context, and mutual needs. Relevance Theory provides a systematic cognitive framework for accurately capturing the meaning of metaphors, enabling negotiators to explore the deep commercial implications behind metaphorical forms ^[1-3].

2.2. Metaphor translation is a key link in achieving relevance transmission in business negotiations

As a form of cross-linguistic communication, metaphor translation is particularly important in business negotiations, directly affecting negotiation outcomes. Relevance Theory serves as the basic criterion for metaphor translation, guiding translation activities. The core of metaphor translation lies in reconstructing the cognitive relationship of metaphors in the target language, minimizing the cognitive effort of target language readers while enabling them to obtain the same potential information as source language readers ^[4]. If the translated metaphors fail to retain the cognitive relationship of the source language metaphors, it may lead to misunderstandings of negotiation objectives, information loss, or commercial confusion. Metaphor translation guided by Relevance Theory requires considering both the imagery of source language metaphors and the presentation methods of the target language, and selecting appropriate translation methods while maintaining contextual coherence. Through accurate metaphor translation, both negotiation parties can communicate based on a shared cognitive environment, avoiding relevance gaps caused by cultural differences and language barriers, ensuring the accurate and thorough transmission of negotiation information, and ultimately laying a good foundation for reaching consensus and establishing cooperation.

2.3. The relevance quality of metaphor translation affects business negotiation decision-making efficiency

In the decision-making link of business negotiations, the relevance quality of metaphor translation directly determines the accuracy of information transmission between both parties, thereby affecting decision-making efficiency. Relevance Theory emphasizes that translation should achieve a balance between cognitive effects and cognitive effort between the source language and the target language, that is, obtaining maximum contextual effects with minimal cognitive effort. When negotiations involve complex issues such as cooperation model innovation, metaphors are often used to simplify abstract logic. If the translation fails to construct equivalent relevance, it may lead to delays in the transmission of decision-making information. For example, if the source

language proposes “We hope to build an ‘ecological partner circle’ to achieve resource complementarity,” a literal translation of “ecological partner circle” may confuse the target language party due to the literal understanding of “ecology”; while translating it as “strategic partnership network for resource complementarity” in accordance with the principle of relevance can quickly help the other party grasp the core decision-making direction of “mutual benefit and resource integration,” reducing the cost of repeated communication. At the same time, high-quality metaphor translation can promote the consensus of negotiation decisions. In business negotiations, both parties often convey potential interest demands through metaphors, and translators need to use Relevance Theory to explore the decision-making intentions behind metaphors. When one party mentions “This cooperation is a ‘win-win chess game’”, the translation should not only retain the imagery of “chess game” (game and cooperation) but also highlight the decision-making orientation of “win-win,” enabling the other party to clearly understand the mutually beneficial nature of the cooperation. If the translation loses this relevance dimension, the other party may mistakenly judge it as a one-sided benefit proposal, delaying the decision-making process. It is evident that metaphor translation guided by Relevance Theory is not only a bridge for information transmission but also an important guarantee for promoting the efficient implementation of negotiation decisions and achieving win-win cooperation.

3. Metaphorical patterns of business negotiation texts from the perspective of relevance theory

3.1. Core connotation of relevance theory and its relevance fit with business negotiation texts

Proposed by Sperber and Wilson, Relevance Theory focuses on the “ostensive-inferential” communicative process, emphasizing the search for effective relevance to achieve smooth information transmission and meaning understanding^[5]. Optimal relevance refers to enabling the recipient to obtain sufficient contextual effects with the minimum cognitive effort. Business negotiation texts are typical social interaction texts, whose core goal is to facilitate the exchange of interests and agreement between both parties in transactions, which fully conforms to the social logic of Relevance Theory. Every piece of information conveyed in business negotiation texts does not exist independently; it can only be correctly interpreted when placed in various communicative contexts, such as negotiation context, mutual interest demands, and industry standards. As a cognitive tool, metaphors can transform abstract concepts to be conveyed by traders (such as profit and loss sharing, cooperation, and risk management) into vivid, concrete experiential domains, enabling both negotiation parties to quickly establish linguistic consistency and reduce cognitive friction in negotiations. For example, using “navigation” to refer to negotiations not only clearly presents the risks and choices faced in the negotiation process but also allows both parties to interpret the negotiation process in a shared cognitive environment, which helps improve the effectiveness of information processing and meets the cognitive requirements of optimal relevance proposed by Relevance Theory^[6].

3.2. Cognitive construction function of metaphors in business negotiation texts

From the perspective of Relevance Theory, metaphors play an important cognitive construction role in business negotiation texts, helping both negotiation parties construct cross-domain mappings. The specific content involved in business negotiation topics is abstract, complex, and prone to misunderstanding, such as “value exchange,” “cooperative competition”, and “compromise scale”. Directly using these terms may confuse the understanding between negotiating parties. The use of metaphors can fix abstract and complex

concepts in familiar concrete domains we have learned, simplifying our cognitive processing through similarity relationships. This cognitive construction is not arbitrary, but based on the principle of relevance; negotiators will select source domains most relevant to their negotiation goals and the other party's cognitive schema for metaphorical mapping. For example, using "partnership" to describe a cooperative relationship can trigger associations of "mutual assistance," "win-win cooperation," and "long-term stability," making it easy for both parties to quickly reach a cognitive consensus on the nature of cooperation; while using "dividing the cake" to metaphorize profit distribution clearly conveys connotations such as "fairness" and "proportionate distribution." In this way, the abstract thinking of negotiation topics is perceived through cognitive schemas, enabling both parties to quickly capture key information based on limited cognitive foundations and achieve an effective cognitive connection ^[7].

3.3. Dynamic adaptability of metaphorical patterns in business negotiation texts

Relevance Theory emphasizes the dynamics of cognitive environments, and the metaphorical patterns of business negotiation texts also need to be dynamically adapted to maintain optimal relevance. At different stages of negotiations, the power demands and core concerns of all parties are changing; adhering to initial metaphor choices may lead to comprehension barriers. For example, using "exploring the path" to metaphorize market research in the initial stage can express a cautious attitude of acting prudently. However, in the actual bargaining stage, the topic has shifted to specific cooperation details, and using metaphors like "exploring the path" will be inadequate. At this time, it is necessary to switch to metaphors expressing a constructive attitude, such as "building the framework" and "laying the foundation," which not only fit the current topic context but also help mobilize the other party's attention to the implementation of detailed clauses. Similarly, this flexibility is reflected in the impact on metaphor intensity. When negotiations reach a deadlock, using metaphors with clear behavioral orientations such as "breaking the ice" and "building bridges" can make both parties understand the need to jointly bear the increased difficulty of consultation and negotiation; after reaching a principled agreement, metaphors such as "irrigating" and "fertilizing" can be used to indicate the softening effect of long-term nurturing and accumulation. The dynamically adaptive metaphorical model actually modifies the mapping relationship between source domains and target domains with changes in the negotiation context, ensuring that each metaphor conveys the most meaningful information with the minimum cognitive cost. This is the ultimate explanation of Relevance Theory for the use of metaphors in business negotiations.

4. Translation strategies of business negotiation texts from the perspective of relevance theory

Language is one of the key factors in cross-cultural communication in business dialogues. The accuracy and precision of translation significantly affect information transmission and benefits. From the cognitive perspective of "epistemological relations" and "linguistic communication", Relevance Theory proposes that translation involves the original author, translator, and reader, and optimal relevance should be found to ensure effective information transmission. From this perspective, exploring translation strategies for business negotiation texts from the perspective of Relevance Theory can enhance the accuracy of language and effective communicative functions ^[8].

4.1. Based on cognitive context overlap, achieve accurate mapping of conceptual meanings

According to Relevance Theory, cognitive context is a synthesis based on three elements: individual encyclopedic knowledge, reasoning ability, and lexical memory, forming a unique cognitive domain. Therefore, whether the translated text can produce corresponding associative effects—that is, whether the recipient can restore a psychological response close to the original author within their cognitive domain—becomes an important criterion for evaluating translation success. Business negotiation documents often contain many terms, industry idioms, and situational attributes. Therefore, translators must first identify the cognitive overlap between negotiating parties to ensure the accurate transfer of conceptual meanings^[9]. When discussing issues involving trade, laws, and finance, the most important task is the deconstructive translation of proper nouns, which affects the smooth progress of the entire discussion. Using professional knowledge, translators identify the semantic orientation of a proper noun within a specific negotiation scenario, avoiding ambiguity or distortion caused by translation misunderstandings. For example, “force majeure” not only means “unforeseeable circumstances” but also requires examining specific industry clauses to clarify the division of responsibilities within the cognitive domain of target language readers.

4.2. Optimize the ostensive-inferential process, strengthen the relevance of information transmission

From the perspective of Relevance Theory, communicative activities consist of ostensive stimuli and inferential processes. The author of the original text conveys textual meaning and communicative intentions through ostensive stimuli, and the reader infers to find and locate the optimal relevance with the original text to understand the author’s implicature. In the process of converting business negotiation texts from one language to another, the translator acts as an “intermediary” to a certain extent. Therefore, translators should optimize the ostensive-inferential process, enhance the relevance of the translated text, and help target language readers obtain maximum benefits with the minimum inferential effort. At the ostensive level, translators need to reasonably arrange the information structure of the original text to make the translated text easy to understand and achieve efficient transmission. Sometimes, conventions or layout in the original language may lead to an unclear information hierarchy. In such cases, translators can split long sentences, adjust inverted structures to positive ones, place key information at the beginning of sentences, or use logical words to indicate the relationship between information. For example, long sentences commonly found in English negotiation texts need to be split into several short sentences, with logical relationships expressed through words such as “firstly,” “secondly,” and “therefore,” allowing readers to clearly grasp the main negotiation objectives and important clauses and reducing the burden of information processing. In addition, from an inferential perspective, translators should predict possible inferential paths based on the target readers’ knowledge reserve and add appropriate contextual cues to the text. For example, when business negotiation texts use business rules or implicit regulations related to a specific culture and business model, translators can incorporate annotations or adaptations to provide readers with a certain inferential foundation. However, additional information outside the main text should be kept concise to avoid increasing readers’ cognitive burden and hindering the coherence of the original text^[10].

4.3. Mediate cultural differences and conflicts, build a relevance bridge for cross-cultural communication

Business negotiations often involve negotiators from different cultural backgrounds, which may lead to

significant misunderstandings and hinder the final success of negotiations. Relevance Theory suggests that translators should be good at handling the tension between the source language and target language contexts, resolving cultural differences, and building cross-cultural communication bridges. In terms of value positions, different cultures have differences in business negotiation objectives and behavioral strategies. For example, Western cultures emphasize rationality and efficiency with straightforward discourse; Eastern cultures advocate interpersonal relationships and “face,” with subtle discourse^[11]. Therefore, translators must comprehensively consider these differences in the translation process and appropriately adjust the linguistic characteristics of individual texts. When translating direct views from English into Chinese, conciliatory or implicit expressions can be added to avoid offending readers with overly direct language. When translating implicit requests from Chinese into English, key content should be clearly expressed to conform to the thinking habits of English readers. Second, there are significant cultural differences in etiquette rules and expression forms^[12]. For example, greetings, thank-you remarks, and refusal expressions in business negotiations have certain cultural backgrounds. Therefore, translators should present the cultural context of the original text in a form familiar to target language readers to achieve the appropriateness of communicative etiquette. For example, the common Chinese expression “Jing qing hai han” in business negotiation documents can be translated into English as “we would appreciate your understanding,” which not only conveys the meaning of apology but also conforms to the communication model of English business negotiations.

4.4. Focus on negotiation goal orientation, and enhance the communicative effectiveness of the translated text

To achieve the goal of business negotiations, seeking a balance of interests and establishing cooperation, the translation of negotiation texts should be oriented towards negotiation objectives. Relevance Theory holds that the success of translation depends on whether the translated text can help readers achieve communicative goals. Translators need to strategically adjust the translated text around the core negotiation objectives to ensure that the translated information is highly relevant to the negotiation goals^[13].

In the initial intention communication stage of negotiations, text translation should be sufficient and directional, enabling participants to quickly understand each other’s cooperation intentions and plans. To this end, methods such as extracting topic sentences and removing redundant sentences can be used to allow participants to grasp the core of the negotiation in a shorter time, thereby laying the foundation for subsequent discussions.

In the mid-stage bargaining phase of negotiations, such as the conflict stage, a large amount of important information related to the interests, demands, and concessions of both parties is involved. Therefore, it is necessary to effectively convey key viewpoints and appropriately emphasize positions to enhance the other party’s acceptance. For example, when dealing with concession conditions in price negotiations, presenting a sincere attitude combined with bilateral trade-offs will help build trust and promote joint consultation between negotiating parties.

In the final contract formulation stage of negotiations, text translation requires higher professionalism and universality to ensure the legality and enforceability of contract clauses. Legal risks of contracts are caused by omissions in core content such as rights and responsibilities, violation disposal, and dispute resolution. Therefore, contract translators should carefully review key parts of the contract to prevent legal risks caused by translation issues. Negotiation goal-oriented translation methods can make the translated text not only a simple

information transmission tool but also contribute to the achievement of negotiation objectives, improving the communicative value of translation ^[14].

4.5. Dynamically adapt metaphorical imagery, retain the equivalence of cognitive relevance

The translation of metaphors in business negotiation texts is a key link in relevance transmission. It is necessary to dynamically adapt metaphorical imagery in the target language to ensure the equivalence of cognitive relevance between the source language and the target language. According to Relevance Theory, the translation of source language metaphors should not only involve their literal meanings but also reveal their deep metaphorical thinking, avoiding relevance breakdown caused by imagery misunderstandings. If the source language metaphorical schema lacks corresponding cognitive counterparts in the target language cultural context, translating the original metaphor directly will cause excessive cognitive effort for readers. In such cases, the “image construction” strategy can be adopted. For example, the English metaphor “to fish in troubled waters” (hun shui mo yu) is literally translated as “zai hun shui zhong mo yu” in Chinese, but Chinese readers may struggle to infer the metaphorical schema of “taking advantage of disorder and getting unjust benefits.” Therefore, translating it as the common Chinese metaphor “hun shui mo yu” not only adheres to the core cognitive schema but also conforms to target language expression habits ^[15]. If the source language and target language metaphors have similar schemas but different connotations, the “content supplement” strategy can be used. For example, the Chinese metaphor “da chi jiu zhan” in negotiations not only has the basic meaning of “long-term tenacity” but also implies the negotiation intention of “strategic consumption” contained in its metaphorical schema; when translated into English as “to fight a protracted war”, contextual supplements such as “to maintain strategic patience in the context of negotiation” should be added to help readers grasp this negotiation intention. This dynamic adaptation, centered on relevance, not only maintains the vividness of metaphors but also enables target language readers to obtain contextual effects equivalent to those of source language readers with the maximum cognitive effort, achieving the accurate transmission of deep commercial intentions implied by metaphors in negotiations.

5. Conclusion

Relevance Theory provides a systematic cognitive framework for the interpretation and translation of metaphors in business negotiation texts. As an important cognitive tool in business negotiations, the effective transmission of metaphors is crucial for achieving negotiation goals. The four translation strategies proposed in this study, based on cognitive context, optimizing ostensive-inferential processes, mediating cultural differences, and focusing on negotiation goals, both follow the core principles of Relevance Theory and fit the actual needs of different stages of business negotiations. By applying these strategies, translators can better handle the metaphorical patterns in business negotiation texts, improve translation accuracy and relevance, and promote the smooth progress of cross-cultural business negotiations.

Disclosure statement

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