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Article

Imagery and Pragmatic Adaptation in Translating Turkish Proverbs into Chinese

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Abstract: This article compares ten Turkish proverbs with their candidate renderings in Chinese to examine how a translation conveys the source imagery and the speaker's purpose. The proverbs were purposively selected for their concrete images or for the way they link actions to outcomes. The Turkish Language Association's online dictionary of proverbs and idioms is the main reference for their conventional meanings. The seventh edition of the Contemporary Chinese Dictionary guides the interpretation of established Chinese expressions. Each comparison considers core meaning, imagery structure, and pragmatic function. Constructed situations involving classroom cooperation, peer influence, lessons from experience, and household spending show how the speaker's purpose affects the choice of translation. In the cooperation example, the Turkish proverb about clapping encourages students to work together. A Chinese saying with a similar image can suggest that both parties share responsibility for a dispute. For the vineyard proverb, a Chinese saying captures the reward for effort and leaves the consequence of neglect unstated. The findings show how context guides the choice among a Chinese fixed expression, a close translation that retains the Turkish image, and an explanatory paraphrase. The examples can help Chinese-speaking learners of Turkish connect what a proverb depicts with how speakers use it.

Keywords: Turkish proverbs; Chinese fixed expressions; imagery; pragmatic adaptation; Turkish–Chinese translation

1. Introduction

Proverbs often convey a general judgment through a familiar scene. Repeated drops become a lake, a young tree can be bent, and the length of a quilt determines how far someone can stretch a foot. These scenes make the lesson memorable and give readers a way to infer it. A familiar Chinese saying can offer a compact rendering of a Turkish proverb, especially when both draw on similar everyday experiences. That familiarity also brings expectations about when the saying is used. A Chinese expression about the sound of clapping can recall a dispute even when the Turkish expression is used to encourage cooperation. Finding a similar image is therefore only an initial step in choosing a translation.

This study compares ten Turkish proverbs with candidate Chinese translations. The term fixed expression covers conventional Chinese proverbs, idioms, and colloquial sayings. The analysis also considers Chinese paraphrases composed to express a source meaning directly. It asks where the candidates agree with the Turkish proverb, what information or stance changes in translation, and which renderings serve particular communicative purposes. In this study, imagery refers to the concrete objects, actions, and relationships represented in a proverb. The analysis considers cultural or historical information where the wording supports it, as in the reference to a named coin.

2. Literature Review

Wang and Tu examine how five English translations of Wang Anshi's poetry make images and their associations more or less explicit [1]. Their study makes it possible to

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distinguish the named object from the associations the object carries. In proverb translation, a similar distinction helps explain why retaining the noun may leave a reader unsure about the intended lesson. Li and He use the concept of a register of relevance to explain how different assumptions available to source and target readers can lead to cultural loss in translation [2]. This account is relevant when a Chinese expression supplies its own familiar associations, even where its literal scene resembles that of the Turkish proverb.

Liu and Lu study the transfer of metonymic meaning in Howard Goldblatt's English translation of Chinese fixed expressions in Mo Yan's Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out [3]. Their focus on conventional interpretation helps explain why the literal wording of a fixed expression provides only part of the evidence for using it as a translation. Xiong distinguishes translation strategies, methods, and techniques [4]. The present study uses translation approach for the local choice among a fixed expression, a close rendering, and a paraphrase.

In research on teaching Turkish to Polish speakers, Mutlu distinguishes Turkish and Polish proverbs and idioms that are similar in both wording and meaning from those that share meaning alone [5]. That distinction is relevant to teaching because learners can use familiar expressions as points of comparison. In the Turkish–Chinese cases examined here, the comparison also needs to account for the speaker's action and stance. A learner who recognizes two expressions as referring to a similar experience still needs to know whether a particular expression is typically used to encourage someone, offer a warning, or assign responsibility. Bringing these questions together gives the translator a way to assess the expression in the situation where it will be used.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Sources and Selection

The study checked the forms and conventional meanings of the Turkish proverbs primarily against the Atasözleri ve Deyimler Sözlüğü of the Turkish Language Association (Türk Dil Kurumu) [6]. The seventh edition of the Contemporary Chinese Dictionary provided a reference for the meanings of Chinese fixed expressions [7]. The sample consists of ten purposively selected Turkish proverbs. Each conveys a relatively self-contained lesson and features a concrete object or a clear relationship between actions. The selection also required a Chinese fixed expression or a plausible explanatory rendering for comparison. These criteria allow detailed comparison of individual cases. A larger sample would be needed to estimate how often each type of correspondence occurs.

The article presents the source proverbs in Turkish and the candidate renderings in Chinese. English glosses explain the image or meaning discussed in each case. The Chinese candidates include established expressions such as 积少成多 ("small amounts add up") and plain-language proposals such as 相处久了会互相影响 ("people influence each other over time"). The article labels the proposals as suggested renderings. This distinction shows which candidates use a familiar saying and which use wording tailored to a particular case.

3.2. Analytical Dimensions

The analysis starts with the source proverb's conventional meaning. It identifies the relationship readers need to infer, such as a link between conduct and consequences or between a condition and its outcome. The study examines imagery structure by looking at the objects in the scene and the roles of repetition, numbers, and contrasting clauses. A different image can preserve the underlying relationship. A Chinese candidate can also keep the same subject matter and express only part of that relationship. Pragmatic function concerns what the speaker does with the expression and what attitude the wording conveys. A general observation can serve as advice. A saying that assigns blame fits a context that supports that judgment.

The unit of comparison is one Turkish proverb paired with one Chinese candidate. Establishing the Turkish meaning first limits the effect of the candidate's associations on

the initial reading. A pairing can show changes in more than one dimension. A substitute image can also give the rendering a stronger evaluative tone. When several candidates convey the same general lesson, the analysis looks for differences that matter in the passage, such as added blame or an omitted condition. A rendering can serve the speaker's purpose and still convey only part of the source meaning.

3.3. Constructed Situations

The study uses four types of hypothetical situations to examine translation choices. One centers on a teacher encouraging cooperation during a group task. Another shows classmates picking up one another's habits. The remaining situations involve a speaker drawing a lesson from a setback and a household planning its spending. The speaker's purpose is specified where it bears on the comparison. For example, describing how classmates develop similar habits and advising them to choose their friends carefully both involve peer influence. The second purpose makes the evaluative contrast in a Chinese candidate more relevant. Judgments about each rendering are based on the conventional meanings of the expressions and the purpose specified in the situation. The resulting assessments concern contextual fit. Observations of naturally occurring usage or feedback from readers could provide evidence about reception.

4. Findings

4.1. Changes in Imagery with Similar Core Meanings

4.1.1. Ne Ekersen Onu Biçersin.

The Turkish proverb means "Whatever you sow, that is what you reap." Its open wording connects a person's actions with corresponding results. The Chinese saying 种瓜得瓜, 种豆得豆 ("sow melons and get melons, sow beans and get beans") preserves the agricultural setting and makes the correspondence explicit through two crops in parallel clauses. The added detail supplies concrete instances of the general relation. A plain rendering such as 怎样做事, 就会得到怎样的结果 ("the way you act determines the results you get") is also possible when the advice matters more than the farming image. 自作自受 ("suffer the consequences of your own actions") points to an undesirable outcome and places responsibility on the person who brought it about. That evaluative force suits a context of blame. The farming expression is a better fit when the original is used to discuss outcomes in general.

4.1.2. Damlaya Damlaya Göl Olur.

"Drop by drop, a lake forms" describes the effect of repeated small contributions. The reduplicated converb damlaya damlaya, formed from damlamak ("to drip"), presents accumulation as a continuing process. The Chinese fixed expression 积少成多 ("small amounts add up") conveys the result of accumulation in a concise form. The water, the lake, and the repeated action disappear from the wording. In ordinary advice about accumulating small amounts, that compression can be acceptable. If readers are learning how the proverb expresses continuity, 水滴不断汇聚, 终能成湖 ("drops keep gathering and eventually form a lake") makes the process visible. An explanation can then connect the image to the general principle. The choice turns on whether readers need to see the image through which the proverb makes its point.

4.1.3. Ağaç Yaşken Eğilir.

"A tree bends while it is still green" uses the pliability of young growth to express the value of early education and habit formation. The condition marked by yaşken ("while it is still green") explains why the timing matters. The Chinese paraphrase 教育要从小抓起 ("education should begin in childhood") preserves the timing of the advice and makes its human application explicit. The established saying 十年树木, 百年树人 ("it takes ten years to grow trees and a hundred to cultivate people") also links trees with education. Its two time spans emphasize the sustained work needed to cultivate people. If the source passage is about when to begin forming a habit, the paraphrase retains the pertinent distinction.

A close rendering can make the pliability of the tree available for discussion in a lesson about the proverb.

4.2. Shifts in Pragmatic Function and Evaluation

4.2.1. Üzüm Üzüme Baka Baka Kararır.

The scene is one of grapes darkening as they keep looking at one another. The repeated converb baka baka, from bakmak ("to look"), helps represent influence as something that develops over time. The Chinese saying 近朱者赤, 近墨者黑 ("near vermilion, one turns red, and near ink, one turns black") also uses color to represent the influence of one's surroundings. Its two colors establish an evaluative opposition that can support a warning about whom one associates with. A teacher giving advice about choosing friends may find the Chinese saying appropriate. In a description of classmates who have gradually picked up one another's habits, 相处久了会互相影响 ("people influence each other over time") keeps the focus on how the habits develop. The paraphrase leaves the desirability of the habits to be established by the surrounding text.

4.2.2. Bir Elin Nesi Var, Iki Elin Sesi Var.

"What can one hand do? Two hands make a sound." The question and answer link a contrast in number to the greater effectiveness of joint action. 众人拾柴火焰高 ("when many people gather firewood, the flames rise high") draws on a different activity and pictures a group contributing to one result. It can perform the work of the Turkish proverb when a teacher wants students to share a group task. The wording of 一个巴掌拍不响 ("one hand cannot make a clap") is closer to the Turkish scene. In a dispute, the Chinese saying can suggest that each party played a part. This association is consequential in the classroom example because the teacher's purpose is to encourage participation. The firewood expression carries that appeal through a scene of cumulative effort.

4.2.3. Sütten Ağzı Yanan Yoğurdu Üfleyerek Yer.

A person who has burned their mouth on milk blows on yogurt before eating it. The proverb shows a precaution taken because of a prior experience. 吃一堑, 长一智 ("fall into a ditch and gain some wisdom") expresses learning from a setback, with less emphasis on how it changes later conduct. 一朝被蛇咬, 十年怕井绳 ("once bitten by a snake, one fears a well rope for ten years") also depicts a reaction to a different object after a mishap. The ten-year span makes prolonged fear especially salient, so this rendering can fit an account of someone who has become excessively wary. When the speaker simply observes that a person takes greater care after a setback, 吃过一次亏, 以后格外留心 ("after one bad experience, you pay closer attention") makes the new behavior explicit. A close rendering with a short gloss can preserve the milk and yogurt when the two foods matter to the presentation.

4.2.4. Ak Akçe Kara Gün Içindir.

The literal contrast is between a white coin and a dark day. The proverb advises setting money aside for a time of need. 积谷防饥 ("store grain against hunger") retains the relation between saving now and meeting a later need, while changing the resource from money to food. 未雨绸缪 ("prepare before the rain") conveys advance preparation more broadly. In a conversation focused on personal savings, 平日存钱, 以备急用 ("save money regularly so it is available in an emergency") keeps the financial purpose explicit. The noun akçe has a historical referent as an Ottoman silver coin [8]. In a cultural introduction, a close rendering and a brief explanation of the coin can preserve both the color contrast and the monetary reference. A discussion of everyday savings can be served by direct advice alone.

4.3. Changes in Structure and Scope

4.3.1. Ayağını Yorganına Göre Uzat.

"Stretch your foot only as far as your quilt reaches." The length of the quilt sets a limit to the movement. The proverb applies this relation to decisions constrained by the resources or abilities available to a person. In a household budget, 量入为出 ("adjust

spending to income") gives the relevant limit a precise financial meaning. In planning a task, 量力而行 ("act within your capacity") can direct attention to the work someone can reasonably take on. The first expression names both the resource and the activity it limits. The second leaves room for various activities, provided capacity is the relevant measure. 伸脚要看被褥有多长 ("check how long the quilt is before stretching out your foot") can serve as an imagery-retaining translation in teaching. Learners can consider how the relationship between the foot and the quilt applies to both situations, even though the constraint differs in each.

4.3.2. Bakarsan Bağ Olur, Bakmazsan Dağ Olur.

"If you tend it, it becomes a vineyard. If you neglect it, it becomes a mountain." The positive and negative forms bakarsan and bakmazsan place care and neglect in parallel conditional clauses. Their respective outcomes are represented by bağ ("vineyard") and dağ ("mountain"). The suggested translation 用心照料便成葡萄园, 疏于照管则成山野 ("with care it becomes a vineyard, and with neglect it becomes wild hills") makes the consequence of neglect easier to infer in Chinese. 山野 is an interpretation of the image in context, since the basic sense of dağ is "mountain." 一分耕耘, 一分收获 ("the more you cultivate, the more you harvest") keeps the connection between effort and reward. It can be used to encourage continuing effort. When the warning about neglect is also important, the paired conditions and both outcomes need to appear in the translation.

4.3.3. Bir Koltuğa Iki Karpuz Sığmaz.

"Two watermelons cannot fit under one arm." The contrast between one arm and two watermelons gives a physical shape to the difficulty of taking on two substantial tasks at once. 一心不能二用 ("one mind cannot attend to two things at once") represents the limit in terms of divided attention. 贪多嚼不烂 ("take too much and you cannot chew it properly") implies criticism of the decision to take on too much. That criticism is appropriate when the speaker intends a rebuke. A neutral discussion of what can realistically be managed may be better served by a plain rendering such as 多件事同时揽在身上, 往往难以兼顾 ("it is often hard to manage several responsibilities at once"). The close translation has a different purpose in a language lesson, where it allows learners to see the exaggerated physical limit and the numerical contrast that expresses it.

5. Discussion

The cases suggest starting with the conventional meaning of the Turkish proverb and then identifying which part of that meaning the surrounding passage needs. A translator can compare a candidate's image and sentence structure with the source and ask what a speaker would be doing by using it. This step helps distinguish an incidental change of object from a change in the claim or its force. Replacing drops and a lake with the general idea of accumulation can serve a brief piece of advice. Replacing the two clauses of the vineyard proverb with a saying about rewards for effort has a larger consequence when the speaker is warning about neglect.

Substitution with a Chinese fixed expression is useful when the core meaning and the speaker's purpose coincide. The fixed expression can keep the brevity and familiar cadence of a proverb. Its own associations still need to be taken into account, as the cases of clapping and firewood show. A similar check applies when a Chinese candidate is stronger in tone. A more pointed expression may be appropriate if the source passage supplies the relevant judgment, such as criticism of someone for taking on too many tasks. Its additional evaluation can otherwise shift the reader's attention from the constraint to the person's conduct.

A close translation is useful when the reader needs access to the way the Turkish proverb constructs its lesson. The repetition of the dripping verb and the contrast between tending and neglecting a vineyard are features of the wording that can be lost in substitution. A short gloss can make a retained image intelligible, particularly when it includes a historical term such as akçe. The gloss can also identify the intended scope of a

concrete scene. For example, the quilt is a measure of available means, which may refer to money, time, or ability according to the circumstances.

An explanatory paraphrase makes the intended relation or advice explicit. This approach is useful where a familiar expression introduces a stance for which the passage offers little support, or where the target expression covers only part of the source meaning. A paraphrase gives the reader fewer of the figurative details that make the proverb memorable. A cultural introduction can present a close rendering alongside a short paraphrase that explains its meaning.

In teaching Turkish to Chinese-speaking learners, the comparison can form a short interpretation exercise. With the vineyard proverb, students can identify what the two conditional clauses predict and then consider how much of that relation appears in 一分耕耘, 一分收获 ("the more you cultivate, the more you harvest"). They can explain why the expression works for encouragement and propose wording for a warning about neglect. Comparing the candidates in this way connects grammar and vocabulary to the choice a translator faces. It also gives students grounds for distinguishing an established Chinese saying from a gloss composed to explain a particular Turkish proverb.

6. Conclusion

The ten cases show that a plausible Chinese rendering can convey the source proverb's main lesson and still change the way the lesson is framed. An image may be replaced, a description may take on the force of a warning, or a pair of conditions may be reduced to a single positive outcome. Comparing core meaning, imagery structure, and pragmatic function gives translators grounds for choosing among a Chinese fixed expression, a close translation, and an explanatory paraphrase. The relevant choice depends on what readers need from the proverb in a particular passage, including its communicative effect or the details of its linguistic form.

The study is limited to ten purposively selected proverbs, dictionary meanings, and constructed situations. Its judgments describe the suitability of the proposed translations for those situations. Naturally occurring examples of Turkish and Chinese proverb use and feedback from Chinese-speaking readers could help establish how the differences identified here affect interpretation in practice.

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