



Research Article

Methods of translating metaphors from English to Vietnamese in the business textbook “Blue Ocean Strategy”

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Abstract

This study investigates the translation of metaphors from English to Vietnamese in the business textbook *Blue Ocean Strategy* (Kim & Mauborgne, 2005) and its Vietnamese edition, *Chiến lược đại dương xanh* (Kim & Mauborgne, 2007). Business discourse frequently employs metaphors to simplify complex strategic concepts, making their effective translation crucial for global audiences. Using a comparative textual analysis grounded in Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and Newmark’s (1981) taxonomy of translation procedures, this research identifies and categorizes the metaphors used in the original text and analyzes the methods employed in their Vietnamese translation. The findings indicate a strong prevalence of structural (39%) and ontological (34%) metaphors in the source text, demonstrating the authors’ reliance on these types of figurative language to frame abstract business concepts. The dominant translation methods were Direct Image Reproduction (54%) and Conversion to Sense (39%), reflecting a dual approach: preserving original imagery where culturally acceptable and prioritizing clarity where direct translation might lead to ambiguity or cultural irrelevance. The study highlights key translation challenges, including conceptual complexity, cultural divergence, and the trade-off between conciseness and clarity. Recommendations are provided to enhance the translation of metaphors in future business texts for Vietnamese readers, emphasizing the strategic and varied application of translation procedures.

Keywords

Metaphor, metaphor translation, Blue Ocean Strategy, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Newmark (1981), business discourse

1. Introduction

Metaphors are an indispensable element of human communication, particularly within specialized domains such as business, where they serve as essential cognitive tools for conceptualizing and simplifying abstract ideas (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In contemporary business literature,

figurative language helps create memorable frameworks, articulate complex strategies, and persuade readers. However, translating these figurative expressions across languages presents significant challenges due to fundamental differences in linguistic structure, conceptual frameworks, and cultural

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systems.

The book *Blue Ocean Strategy* (2005) is globally renowned for its rich metaphorical language, most notably the central metaphors of “Red Oceans” (crowded, competitive markets) and “Blue Oceans” (new, uncontested market spaces). The effectiveness of this metaphorical framework for Vietnamese readers depends on the accuracy and cultural appropriateness of its translation. This study aims to fill a gap in the literature by providing a systematic analysis of the translation procedures applied to these metaphors and assessing their effectiveness.

1.1. Aims and Objectives of the Study

This research aims to systematically examine the translation of metaphors in the Vietnamese version of *Blue Ocean Strategy* and evaluate the efficacy of the employed translation methods.

The specific objectives are to:

1. Identify and categorize the metaphorical expressions used in the English source text based on the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT).
2. Analyze the translation procedures applied to these metaphors in the Vietnamese target text using Newmark’s (1981) taxonomy.
3. Evaluate the effectiveness of different translation procedures in preserving meaning, clarity, and cultural relevance.
4. Propose recommendations to improve the translation of metaphors in business texts for Vietnamese audiences.

1.2. Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What types of conceptual metaphors (structural, ontological, orientational) are used in the business textbook *Blue Ocean Strategy*?
2. What translation procedures are predominantly used to render the metaphorical expressions into Vietnamese, according to Newmark’s (1981) taxonomy?
3. What recommendations can be formulated to enhance the translation of metaphors in future English business texts for Vietnamese readers?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Metaphor and Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT)

The traditional view of metaphor as a purely rhetorical

device was challenged by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), who proposed the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT). CMT posits that metaphor is primarily a cognitive phenomenon, where we understand one conceptual domain (the target domain, e.g., argument) in terms of another conceptual domain (the source domain, e.g., war).

CMT classifies metaphors based on their underlying cognitive function:

- **Structural Metaphors:** One concept is structured and understood in terms of another. They provide a framework for reasoning. *Example: Argument is War.*
- **Ontological Metaphors:** Abstract concepts are viewed as entities, substances, or containers, allowing us to refer to them, quantify them, and reason about them. *Example: The mind is a container.*
- **Oriental Metaphors:** These relate a set of concepts to spatial orientation (up/down, in/out) that have physical and cultural grounding. *Example: Happy is Up (I’m feeling up).*

The ubiquity of these conceptual mappings in everyday and specialized language underscores the cognitive challenge of cross-lingual translation.

2.2. Newmark’s Taxonomy of Metaphor Translation Procedures

Newmark (1981) provided a comprehensive, practical framework for handling metaphors in translation, moving beyond the simple “literal vs. free” dichotomy. His taxonomy provides seven primary translation procedures, which guide the translator’s decision-making process based on the communicative purpose and the metaphor’s cultural load:

1. **Direct Image Reproduction:** Translating the metaphor literally, word-for-word, where the image and meaning are preserved.
2. **Cultural Substitution:** Replacing the source language (SL) metaphor with a target language (TL) metaphor that has the same sense but is more culturally familiar.
3. **Metaphor to Simile:** Rendering the metaphor as a simile (using ‘like’ or ‘as’) to reduce the figurative force while preserving the image.
4. **Translation of Metaphor by Simile plus Sense:** Using a simile and adding an explanation of the literal meaning.
5. **Conversion of Metaphor to Sense:** Replacing the metaphor with its literal, non-figurative meaning.
6. **Omission:** Omitting the metaphor entirely, typically if it is redundant or deemed too obscure for

the TL audience.

7. **Metaphor with Explanation:** Providing the literal translation of the image followed by a clarification of its sense.

2.3. Metaphors in Business Discourse and Translation Challenges

Business and economic discourse rely heavily on metaphors to simplify complex strategic frameworks, organizational structures, and competitive dynamics (Schäffner, 2017; Yüce, H. K., 2022). For example metaphors such as “market niche,” “corporate ladder,” or the “Red/Blue Ocean” framework itself are essential conceptual tools.

The translation of business metaphors presents two main challenges (Zheng, 2015):

1. **Conceptual Divergence:** While some core human experiences lead to universal conceptual metaphors, the specific linguistic expressions and their cultural connotations differ significantly. For example, a “riverboat gambler” may hold a specific cultural connotation in the US that is lost on a Vietnamese reader.

2. **Pragmatic Constraints:** Business translation prioritizes clarity, persuasiveness, and accuracy. The translator often faces a dilemma: maintain the vividness and persuasive power of the source image (fidelity) or prioritize the clear communication of the underlying business concept (clarity) by converting the metaphor to its sense.

The current study analyzes the translation choices made for *Blue Ocean Strategy* to understand how Vietnamese translators navigate this challenge.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Corpus

This study employs a qualitative, comparative textual analysis design. The corpus consists of parallel texts: the original English edition of *Blue Ocean Strategy* (Kim & Mauborgne, 2005) and its Vietnamese translation, *Chiến lược đại dương xanh* (Kim & Mauborgne, 2007).

The analysis was limited to the core chapters containing the main theoretical concepts of the *Blue Ocean Strategy* framework, which exhibit the highest concentration of metaphorical expressions related to strategy, competition, and market creation. A total of 173 metaphorical expressions were identified and extracted from the English source text for analysis.

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis Instruments

The data analysis was conducted in three systematic stages:

1. **Metaphor Identification:** All linguistic expressions used non-literally in the English text were identified using the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP), ensuring that only conventional metaphors (which are common in specialized discourse) were included alongside novel metaphors.

2. **Categorization via CMT:** Each identified metaphor was categorized based on its underlying cognitive structure into one of the three types: Structural (M1), Ontological (M2), or Orientational (M3), following Lakoff and Johnson (1980).

3. **Translation Procedure Analysis:** The corresponding Vietnamese translation for each metaphor was located and analyzed against Newmark’s (1981) seven procedures to determine the specific translation strategy employed.

Frequencies and percentages were calculated to determine the dominant metaphor types in the source text and the most frequently used translation procedures in the target text.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Categorization of Metaphors (CMT Analysis)

Analysis of the 173 metaphorical expressions revealed the following distribution among the conceptual metaphor types:

Table 1. Conceptual metaphor types

Types of metaphor	Frequency	Percentage
1. Structural metaphors	68	39%
2. Ontological Metaphors	59	34%
3. Orientational Metaphors	31	18%
4. Structural + Ontological	7	4%
5. Ontological Metaphors + Orientational Metaphors	5	3%
6. Structural + Orientational	3	2%
Total	173	100%

The findings showing the dominance of Structural and Ontological metaphors, which together account for 73% of the figurative expressions. Structural metaphors are crucial for framing abstract business processes (e.g., Competition is War), while Ontological metaphors are essential for treating abstract concepts as measurable, manageable entities (e.g., “breaking through cost barriers”, treating ‘barrier’ as a

physical object).

4.2. Analysis of Metaphor Translation Methods (Newmark’s Taxonomy)

The examination of the Vietnamese translations showed a clear preference for two primary translation procedures:

Translation Procedure (Newmark, 1981)	Frequency	Percentage
1. Direct Image Reproduction	93	54%
2. Cultural Substitution	8	4 %
3. Metaphor to Simile (Image Retained)	0	0%
4. Translation of Metaphor (or Simile) by Simile plus Sense	0	0%
5. Conversion of Metaphor to Sense	66	39%
6. Omission	3	1.5%
7. Metaphor with Explanation	1	0.5%
8.Others (1+2; 5+6)	2	1%
Total	173	100%

The results indicate that Direct Image Reproduction (54%) was the most favored method. This suggests that the translator deemed over half of the English metaphors to be highly conventional and/or universally comprehensible enough to be translated literally, thus preserving the author’s voice and rhetorical force.

However, the second most frequent method, Conversion of Metaphor to Sense (39%), is equally significant. This strategy was employed for metaphors that were either too specific to the source culture (e.g., US business context) or whose literal translation might have obscured the core strategic meaning for the Vietnamese audience. The frequent use of Conversion to Sense strongly confirming that clarity and conceptual equivalence were prioritized over mere fidelity to the source image.

4.3. Discussion of Translation Challenges and Effectiveness

The analysis reveals that the translator successfully employed a dual strategy, effectively balancing fidelity and clarity:

- Success with Direct Reproduction: The highly conventional and central metaphors, such as “Red Ocean” (Đài dương đỏ) and “Blue Ocean” (Đài dương xanh), were translated literally. This was highly effective because the conceptual mapping

(market as an ocean) is cross-culturally relevant, and the image is central to the entire book’s framework.

- Necessity of Conversion to Sense: For less conventional or culturally loaded expressions, the translator opted for Conversion to Sense. For example, a metaphor used to describe an abstract process might be rendered as a non-figurative Vietnamese phrase describing the action. This pragmatic choice ensures that the strategic message, which is the primary goal of the textbook, is not lost in linguistic ambiguity.

- Cultural Specificity: The low frequency of Cultural Substitution (4%) and Omission (1.5%) indicates that the translator primarily relied on either literal translation or demetaphorization, suggesting a cautious approach to introducing new target-culture images.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1. Conclusion

This study systematically analyzed the translation of metaphors in *Blue Ocean Strategy*, the source text is characterized by a high reliance on Structural and Ontological metaphors, serving a crucial cognitive function in framing abstract business ideas. The Vietnamese translation, guided by pragmatic considerations, utilizes a dominant dual strategy of Direct Image Reproduction and Conversion to Sense. This approach effectively balances the need to preserve the persuasive imagery of the source text with the need to ensure maximum clarity and conceptual understanding for the Vietnamese business audience. The findings highlight the critical role of the translator as a cultural and conceptual mediator, constantly navigating the trade-off between metaphorical vivacity and informational transparency.

5.2. Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

The study's primary limitation is its focus on a single business text, limiting the generalizability of findings across the entire domain of Vietnamese business translation. Furthermore, this research did not include an empirical investigation into how Vietnamese readers perceive and interpret the translated metaphors.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are provided for professional translators and academic training programs in Vietnam:

- Strategic Application of Newmark’s Taxonomy: Translators should move beyond the two dominant methods and strategically utilize a broader

range of Newmark's procedures, such as Metaphor to Simile or Metaphor with Explanation, especially for novel or culture-bound metaphors, to provide necessary clarity without completely sacrificing the rhetorical impact.

- **Prioritize Cultural and Conceptual Equivalence:** For culture-specific metaphors, translators should conduct thorough pre-translation analysis to determine the functional equivalence in the Vietnamese context. If a literal translation is conceptually misleading, a culturally relevant substitution should be considered over simple demetaphorization, provided it maintains the required academic tone.

- **Enhance Translator Training:** Translation curricula should incorporate training modules focused on CMT and its application, enabling future translators to identify and manage the cognitive challenges embedded within specialized discourse, such as business language.

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