

Metaphors of Pedagogical Approaches in *The Analects*: A Descriptive Study of Their English Translations

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Abstract: *The Analects*, widely regarded as a pinnacle of traditional Chinese intellectual heritage, embodies rich educational insights through abundant metaphorical expressions. Based on Conceptual Metaphor Theory, this study systematically investigates metaphors related to pedagogical approaches in the text. Using the English translations by Xu Yuanchong and James Legge as reference corpora, it analyzes corresponding translation strategies. The findings show that these translations effectively retain the metaphorical and philosophical essence of Confucian educational thought via targeted linguistic adaptation, thus promoting the cross-cultural communication of Confucian pedagogical ideas.

Keywords: *The Analects*, Pedagogical approaches, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Translation of metaphors.

1. Introduction

Chinese classic educational texts frequently encounter expressive challenges when concretizing abstract concepts in their explication of educational processes, given the inherent complexity, tacitness, and gradualness of pedagogical activities. The essence of education resides in the formation of human subjects, an abstract process that eludes complete and precise articulation through literal language. Metaphorical expression thus emerges as an essential mechanism to transcend linguistic limitations and communicate educational thought (Li, 2024) [1]. However, when these metaphor-laden educational ideas traverse cultural boundaries, disparities in cultural cognition between the source and target languages readily precipitate deviations in meaning transmission. In this context, translators bear the critical mandate of bridging cultural divides and effecting the cognitive-functional transfer of metaphors, rendering their adopted translation strategies and methods of paramount significance in the cross-cultural dissemination of education metaphors.

The Analects [2] stands as a quintessential exemplar of Confucian educational classics, crystallizing the pedagogical wisdom of Confucius and his disciples. The text transforms abstract educational philosophy into vivid imagistic expressions, thereby imbuing timeless educational thought with enduring vitality across millennia. Grounded in Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) [3], this study systematically investigates the metaphorical mapping mechanisms beneath the underlying conceptualizations of pedagogical approaches within *The Analects*. Meanwhile, drawing upon the English translations by Xu Yuanchong (2013) [4] and James Legge (2014) [5], the corresponding translation strategies of these metaphorical expressions of pedagogical approaches are also analyzed.

2. Metaphor of Pedagogical Approaches in *The Analects*

2.1 Introduction to Conceptual Metaphor Theory

In 1980, the book *Metaphors We Live By* co-authored by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, was published, marking the formal establishment of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory. In this seminal work, they proposed that metaphor is not merely a linguistic rhetorical device, but a fundamental mode of human thought, action, and cognition. Humans achieve understanding of complex phenomena by mapping concrete, perceptually grounded experiences from source domains onto abstract, less directly graspable concepts in target domains. Grounded in Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the following section examines metaphorical expressions concerning pedagogical approaches in *The Analects*.

2.2 Case Analysis of Mapping Mechanisms in Pedagogical Approaches

2.2.1 An ecological, student-development-centered pedagogical philosophy

Case 1: 君子之道，孰先传焉，孰后倦焉，譬诸草木，区以别矣。（《论语·子张》）

Based on Conceptual Metaphor Theory, this utterance constitutes a systematic conceptual mapping from the source domain of botanical cultivation onto the target domain of pedagogical cultivation (君子之道). The metaphor PEDAGOGICAL CULTIVATION IS FLORAL CULTIVATION establishes foundational correspondences wherein soil and nutrients represent foundational knowledge, root systems signify prior learning, and foliage denotes advanced competencies. The phrase “区以别矣” (distinctly differentiated) instantiates the secondary mapping, LEARNERS ARE TAXONOMIC CATEGORIES OF PLANTS, suggesting that just as herbaceous plants and woody perennials require differential cultivation techniques, learners possess distinct cognitive profiles necessitating differentiated instructional scaffolds. Furthermore, the query regarding sequential transmission (孰先传焉，孰后倦焉) activates the GROWTH IS SEQUENTIAL DEVELOPMENT metaphor, wherein root establishment must precede foliar

expansion, corresponding to the principle that foundational review must ground advanced knowledge acquisition in a spiral learning trajectory. Collectively, these mappings encode three critical pedagogical principles: (1) sequentiality, which mandates hierarchical progression akin to irreversible biological growth stages; (2) differential cultivation, which requires teachers to function as gardeners who diagnose learner “species” characteristics and calibrate scaffolds accordingly; (3) developmental timeliness, which conceptualizes teaching opportunities as agricultural seasons possessing optimal intervention windows where premature instruction risks cognitive “transplant shock” and delayed intervention misses growth cycles. Thus, the Confucian pedagogical philosophy operates through an ecological metaphor system that conceptualizes education not as mechanical transmission but as organic cultivation, naturally encoding the necessity of patience, differentiation, and sequencing through the botanical source domain.

2.2.2 A heuristic pedagogy centered on students’ intrinsic cognitive states

Case 2: “不愤不启，不悱不发。举一隅不以三隅反，则不复也。”（《论语·述而》）

This utterance operates through a system of interacting metaphors that conceptualize cognitive development as physical-spatial processes and pedagogical intervention as targeted energetic manipulation. The states of “愤” (perplexity) and “悱” (expressive blockage) instantiate the metaphor COGNITIVE BLOCKAGE IS PHYSICAL OBSTRUCTION, wherein the learner’s mind is construed as a pressurized system or blocked conduit wherein comprehension seeks release, akin to accumulated force behind a valve, rendering abstract thinking difficulty as tangible resistance requiring specific conditions for discharge. The pedagogical actions “启” (enlightening) and “发” (articulating) activate the secondary metaphor TEACHING IS OPENING OR RELEASING MECHANISMS, positioning the teacher not as a fountain of knowledge but as a catalyst that triggers the release of the learner’s own cognitive kinetic energy precisely when the “pressure” of “愤” and “悱” reaches critical threshold. Furthermore, the phrase “举一隅不以三隅反” employs the KNOWLEDGE IS SPATIAL ARCHITECTURE metaphor, wherein the “隅” (corner) represents a bounded region of understanding and “反” (analogical inference) constitutes autonomous cognitive movement across conceptual territories, thus instantiating the REASONING IS MOVING metaphor that requires learners to independently navigate from the given coordinate to unexplored regions without further guidance (则不复也). Collectively, these mappings encode heuristic teaching as sensitive monitoring of cognitive pressure systems: the instructor must perceive the liminal threshold where internal cognitive “stress” (the desire to breach conceptual barriers) is optimally intense, then intervene to open the passageway for release, while the “three corners” requirement privileges analogical transfer as autonomous spatial exploration. This construes education not as information transmission but as the management of cognitive potential energy, wherein learning emerges only when internal “force” (the frustrated desire to know) meets precisely timed external “opening” operations,

thereby triggering self-sustaining cognitive navigation.

2.2.3 A generative spiral epistemology: knowledge as cumulative yet non-reductive

Case 3: “温故而知新，可以为师矣。”（《论语·为政》）

This utterance implies interconnected metaphors that conceptualize knowledge as substance, learning as spatial movement, and cognitive development as organic growth. The phrase “温故” (reviewing the old) instantiates the metaphor KNOWLEDGE IS SUBSTANCE/TEXTURE wherein “故” is construed as archival material requiring reheating (温) to restore its cognitive potency, suggesting that knowledge possesses degradable accessibility and must be periodically reactivated to maintain utility. Simultaneously, “知新” (knowing the new) activates the metaphor COGNITION IS SIGHT, where “knowing” constitutes the illumination of previously unperceived cognitive objects; crucially, this “新” emerges from the “故” through the SOURCE-PATH-GOAL schema, construing learning as sequential spatial navigation wherein the known constitutes the platform for launching novel understanding. The conjunction “而” (while/thereby) encodes the metaphor COGNITIVE TRANSFORMATION IS CHEMICAL RECONFIGURATION, implying that the relationship between “温故” and “知新” is not merely additive but transformative. The process of reviewing catalyzes a qualitative change wherein the “故” substance is reconstituted into “新” understanding, embodying a spiral structure wherein each return generates higher-order synthesis. Finally, “可以为师” (can become a teacher) activates the metaphor PEDAGOGICAL AUTHORITY IS VERTICAL ELEVATION, wherein the capacity to instruct is conceptualized as having ascended to a higher cognitive plateau. One becomes a source (师) only when one has achieved generative competence to produce novelty from retrospection, establishing hermeneutic creativity rather than information retention as the criterion for pedagogical legitimacy. Collectively, these mappings encode a spiral epistemology wherein knowledge is cumulative yet non-reductive, and teaching authority derives from the demonstrated capacity to make the “故” perpetually “新” through interpretive reheating.

3. Case Analysis of Translating Metaphors of Pedagogical Approaches in *The Analects*

As Conceptual Metaphor Theory matured, scholars devoted considerable attention to the practice and theoretical construction of metaphor translation, giving rise to diverse research trajectories. This section appreciates the classical translation versions of the above three metaphor cases by Xu Yuanchong and James Legge as reference corpora to analyze their translation strategies.

Case 1

ST: 君子之道，孰先传焉，孰后倦焉，譬诸草木，区以别矣。

TT 1: In regard to an intelligentman’s ways, which should

be learned first? And which may be learned later? Disciples may be compared to plants and trees; they may be classified. (translated by Xu Yuanchong)

TT 2: According to the way of the superior man in teaching, what departments are there which he considers of prime importance, and delivers? What are there which he considers of secondary importance, and allows himself to be idle about? But as in the case of plants, which are assorted according to their classes, so he deals with his disciples. (translated by James Legge)

According to the conceptual mechanism analysis demonstrated in chapter two, the ST conceptualizes education as organic cultivation rather than mechanical transmission, naturally encoding the necessity of patience, differentiation, and sequencing through the botanical source domain. This represents essentially an ecological, student-development-centered pedagogical philosophy.

Xu's rendition presents the educational metaphor in a lucid and unmediated manner. The source text employs “草木” (plants and trees) as a vehicle to emphasize that disciples, like flora, exhibit taxonomic diversity, thereby metaphorically underscoring that education should proceed hierarchically and sequentially according to individual differences. Xu preserves this metaphor of hierarchical differentiation through the formulation “Disciples may be compared to plants and trees; they may be classified.” Here, “compared to” explicitly signals the metaphorical relation, while “classified” corresponds to the original “区以别矣”, effectively conveying to anglophone readers the metaphorical significance of differentiated instruction and stratified pedagogy. In terms of translation methods, Xu deploys a combined strategy of literal rendering and strategic adaptation. For instance, his coinage “intelligenteleman” for “君子” ingeniously fuses the attributes of wisdom (“intelligent”) with social status (“gentleman”), capturing the semantic complexity of the Confucian concept while conforming to English morphological conventions. Furthermore, the conversion of “孰先传焉，孰后倦焉” into “which should be learned first? And which may be learned later?” adapts the interrogative structure to enhance logical fluency in English, simultaneously preserving the inquiry regarding educational sequencing. Collectively, Xu's translation achieves an organic equilibrium between semantic fidelity and formal accommodation, adequately respecting English grammatical conventions and rhetorical logic while maintaining the source text's metaphorical integrity.

Legge's translation adheres to a principle of strict fidelity to source-text logic. Through the employment of “prime importance” and “secondary importance,” it accurately reconstructs the semantic contours of primacy and secondariness (先后), while “assorted according to their classes” constitutes a literal rendering of the original “草木区以别矣”. While preserving the metaphorical imagery, this rendition leverages “assorted” to foreground the objectivity of the classificatory act. Such translation not only encodes the ordered progression of pedagogical advancement but also comprehensively transmits the dual educational insights of sequential learning (循序渐进) and differentiated instruction

(因材施教). Furthermore, Legge reinforces the analogical logic through “as in the case of plants” and specifies the pedagogical object via “his disciples.” The use of “classes” implies that the prerequisite for differentiated instruction resides in the apprehension of learner diversity, thereby accomplishing the explicitation of latent educational logic and constructing a cognitive bridge for Western readers. However, Legge's use of “idle” subtly betrays a Western preoccupation with teacher burnout, an individual psychological concern, and unwittingly embeds the text within Western institutional frameworks and individualistic orientations, creating a sharp contrast with the Confucian ethical imperative of “诲人不倦” (tireless instruction).

The two translations function as a bifocal prism, simultaneously refracting the divergences and convergences between the essences of Chinese and Western educational cultures, while furnishing pluralistic perspectives for the modern exegesis of classical texts.

Case 2

ST: 不愤不启，不悱不发。

TT: “I will not instruct,” said the Master, “those who are not eager to learn, nor enlighten those who are not anxious to discover.” (translated by Xu Yuanchong)

According to the analysis of section 2.2.2, the ST represents a heuristic pedagogical philosophy centered on learners' intrinsic cognitive states, emphasizing timing sensitivity and autonomous transfer capacity, which reconceptualizes pedagogical intervention as “opening the valve” at the precise moment to release students' own cognitive energy.

To accurately transmit the essential import of “withholding instruction absent students initiative” and “timely pedagogical intervention” in Confucius's educational philosophy, Xu Yuanchong strategically deploys the “not... nor...” syntactic structure, transforming the latent conditional logic of the original 不..... 不..... (not... not...) formulation into an “only... can...” epistemic framework. This conversion accommodates the cognitive patterns of English readers while distinctly foregrounding the pivotal significance of learner-driven inquiry as a prerequisite in Confucian pedagogy. At the lexical level, Xu adopts a literal translation strategy, employing “instruct” to correspond to “启”, emphasizing the heuristic action in knowledge transmission, and “enlighten” to correspond to “发”, highlighting the educational process of guiding students toward self-realization. The selection of these verb pairs directly echoes the semantic content of the source text while forming a symmetrical syntactic structure in English, thereby preserving the core tenet of “guidance rather than indoctrination” inherent in Confucian educational thought. However, the term “enlighten” carries distinct cultural imprints of Western rational Enlightenment, diverging semantically from the Confucian notion of “点拨” (suggestive prompting or tacit guidance). Yet precisely this discrepancy generates a productive tension between Chinese and Western educational interpretations, creating a fascinating interdiscursive interaction between traditional pedagogical philosophy and modern Western intellectual frameworks.

Moreover, regarding the core concepts of fen (愤) and fei (悱), Xu Yuanchong innovatively employs “eager to learn” and “anxious to discover” to render these terms through interpretive equivalence. This approach transmutes the implicit cultural contextual information, specifically, the student’s heightened epistemic desire and liminal cognitive state of active perplexity, into discursive expressions accessible to English readers. Thus, it preserves the rich semantic connotations of the ST while accommodating anglophone interpretive frameworks. By representing the student’s psychological state as intrinsic motivation, it subtly aligns with the motivation-behavior model of modern educational psychology. Notably, the deployment of “eager/anxious” carries significant theoretical implications. It implicitly resonates with Dewey’s emphasis on intrinsic drive in “learning by doing,” while simultaneously evoking the Chinese educational priority of timeliness (时机): teachers must acutely perceive student readiness, respect their self-cultivating rhythms of growth, and thereby accomplish complementary contextualization in the process of cross-cultural transmission.

Case 3

ST: 温故而知新，可以为师矣。

TT 1: One who can learn something new while reviewing what he has learned, said the Master, is fit to be a teacher. (translated by Xu Yuanchong)

TT 2: If a man keeps cherishing his old knowledge, so as continually to be acquiring new, he maybe a teacher of others. (translated by James Legge)

The ST represents an interpretive, generative spiral epistemology wherein knowledge is cumulative yet non-reductive, and pedagogical legitimacy is grounded in the demonstrated capacity to perpetually renew the “old” through interpretive reheating.

Xu’s translation (TT 1) converts the implicit subjectless construction of the source text into an English complex sentence with an explicit subject. By adding “One” to specify the agent and employing “is fit to be a teacher” to articulate the outcome, he constructs a clear logical nexus between the actor and the result. Culturally, Xu’s rendition manifests a distinct application of the cultural filtering strategy. This strategy denotes the translator’s deliberate attenuation, adaptation, or modification of highly culturally loaded elements, such as specific ethical tenets and historical allusions, to accommodate the target audience’s cognitive frameworks and reception patterns, thereby bridging cultural divides. Specifically, Xu’s translation filters the ethical connotations embedded in the Confucian notion of “师” (teacher). In the source text, “师” signifies not merely a knowledge transmitter but encapsulates the moral imperative of “imparting the Way, instructing in skills, and resolving perplexities” (传道授业解惑), bearing distinct Confucian cultural specificity. By rendering “为师” as “is fit to be a teacher,” Xu reduces the concept to a generic criterion of professional competence, substantially watering down the ethical and moral dimensions inherent in the ST.

For the phrase “温故而知新”, Xu employs a literal translation

strategy, rendering it as “learn something new while reviewing what he has learned.” This rendition preserves the juxtaposed structure of “故” (the old) and “新” (the new) and the imagery of deriving novel insights from prior learning, while the conjunction “而” instantiates the synchronic interaction between extant and new knowledge. By collocating “温故” and “知新”, Xu foregrounds a dialectical mode of thinking, wherein learning occurs within the process of reviewing, thereby metaphorically encoding continuous intellectual growth. Legge, conversely, employs “continually acquiring,” shifting the focus of “知新” from a terminal outcome to a gradual, incremental process. The use of “so as to” forges a causal chain between cherishing prior knowledge (“温故”) and continuously gaining new understanding. This expression aligns with the Western process philosophy of education as cumulative accumulation, replacing the ST’s implicit logic of moving from “故” to “新” with the target culture’s familiar metaphor of dynamic growth. Such substitution manifests a domestication strategy that accommodates the cognitive patterns of target-language readers.

Overall, both TT1 and TT2 adequately preserve the metaphorical structure and semantic content of the source text. Through judicious lexical choices and syntactic constructions, they accurately convey the metaphorical connotations to anglophone readers.

4. Conclusions

The Analects employs numerous educational metaphors rooted in Chinese cultural heritage. These conceptual metaphors, as culturally-specific cognitive constructs, necessarily entail the decoding and reconstruction of cultural symbols during cross-linguistic transfer. This process serves as a bridge between distinct cognitive systems, enabling readers from diverse backgrounds to access the educational philosophies embedded therein.

This study examines metaphors of pedagogical approaches in *The Analects* based on Conceptual Metaphor Theory. We argue that these metaphors encode a systematic pedagogy grounded in three interlocking principles: adaptation to individual differences, timing of instructional intervention, and recursive knowledge development. First, adapting to learner differences is conceptualized through the cultivation metaphor (因材施教). Teachers function as experienced gardeners who recognize that learners, like plants, have distinct growth patterns requiring differentiated care. Effective instruction thus respects developmental sequences and optimal timing, avoiding premature demands that might disrupt natural learning progress. Second, timing instructional intervention operates through the force-dynamic metaphor (启发诱导). Teachers monitor students’ cognitive states, withholding assistance until learners encounter specific difficulties in comprehension (“愤”) and articulation (“悱”). At these critical moments, teachers provide minimal guidance to trigger independent resolution, rather than delivering complete explanations. This approach trains students in analogical transfer: presenting a single case and requiring students to extend the underlying principle to new situations, thereby building autonomous reasoning capacity. Third,

enabling knowledge regeneration draws on the transformation metaphor (温故知新). Prior learning is treated not as fixed content but as raw material susceptible to qualitative change. Through structured review, students reinterpret existing knowledge to generate novel insights, with each revisit producing higher-level syntheses. Collectively, these three metaphors construct teaching as responsive cultivation: a practice requiring continuous attunement to learner variability, readiness states, and the generative potential of prior knowledge.

The study also draws on English translations by Xu Yuanchong and James Legge as reference corpora to examine their translation strategies. Analysis reveals that both translators flexibly employ the translation strategies of domestication, cultural compensation, and cultural filtering, alongside specific translation techniques including literal translation, interpretive rendering, and scholarly notes. These strategies and techniques have helped the translators effectively balance the cognitive restoration of metaphorical mappings with cross-cultural contextual adaptation. These approaches effectively preserve the core metaphors and philosophical substance of Confucian educational thought, specifically an ecology of student-centered development, a heuristic pedagogy attuned to learners' intrinsic cognitive states, and a generative, spiral epistemology, throughout the cross-linguistic transfer process.

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