

**REPRESENTATION OF METAPHORS IN LITERARY TRANSLATION: A  
STUDY BASED ON THE WORKS OF OSCAR WILDE**

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ABSTRACT	KEYWORDS
Metaphor is an essential stylistic device in literary texts, functioning both semantically and pragmatically to convey imagery, ideology, and authorial voice. Translating metaphors presents a particular challenge because metaphors are culture-bound, lexically varied, and tightly integrated with a text’s tone and register. This article explores strategies for representing metaphors in literary translation, using selected passages from Oscar Wilde’s major works as case studies. By combining theoretical perspectives from translation studies and cognitive metaphor theory with close textual analysis, the paper argues for a flexible, context-sensitive approach: translators should balance fidelity to source metaphors with target-language naturalness, and choose strategies (literal transfer, modulation, paraphrase, compensation, or creative replacement) that preserve functional and aesthetic effects rather than surface forms. Implications for translator training and for machine-augmented translation are discussed.	Metaphor, lexical/figurative form, conceptual compatibility, pragmatic work, conventional mapping, comparative analysis, index speaker, multifunctionality

**Introduction**

Metaphor pervades literature: it condenses experience, constructs imagery, and encodes ideology. Oscar Wilde’s prose and dramatic dialogue are rich in epigrammatic metaphors that carry wit, irony, and aesthetic positions. When translating Wilde, a translator faces the twin demands of retaining his distinctive voice and making metaphors intelligible, evocative, and performative in the target language. This study examines how metaphors function in Wilde’s texts and evaluates translation strategies that render metaphoric meaning while preserving stylistic effect.

**Literature Review**

Two bodies of theory underpin this analysis. First, translation studies provide strategic options for rendering metaphors: literal transfer, substitution with an equivalent metaphor, explicitation (paraphrase), modulation (shifting perspective), and compensation (introducing metaphoric content elsewhere). Foundational thinkers—Jakobson, Newmark, Nida, Venuti, Bassnett, and Munday—have

articulated different priorities (equivalence, communicative function, foreignization vs. domestication) that influence strategy selection.

Second, cognitive-linguistic accounts (Lakoff & Johnson) show that metaphors are conceptual mappings (e.g., ARGUMENT IS WAR) grounded in embodied experience and cultural schemas. Therefore, translation must consider both lexical correspondences and conceptual compatibility across cultures. A metaphor that is conventional in source culture may be unfamiliar or absent in the target culture; conversely, a different conventional mapping may perform the same pragmatic work.

Combining these frameworks suggests evaluating metaphors at three levels: (1) lexical/figurative form, (2) conceptual mapping, and (3) pragmatic/stylistic effect (tone, irony, register). The translator's task is to preserve the latter two as far as possible.

## Methodology

This qualitative study uses close reading and comparative analysis. The corpus comprises selected passages from Oscar Wilde's fiction and drama: *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, and key essays (e.g., *The Decay of Lying*). For each passage, the source metaphor is identified and analyzed for semantic components and pragmatic role. Then hypothetical translation options are evaluated according to criteria: semantic adequacy, idiomaticity, preservation of tone, and performative force. Where appropriate, actual published translations (target-language examples are referenced generically) are discussed to illustrate common solutions and pitfalls.

## Metaphor types and functions in Wilde

### Wilde uses several metaphor types:

- Epigrammatic metaphors: short, striking metaphors that carry paradox or wit (e.g., comparing moral phenomena to aesthetic objects).
- Extended metaphors and images: recurring motifs or sustained analogies that structure scenes or character perception.
- Character-specific metaphors: metaphors that index speaker personality (e.g., witty aphorisms of Algernon or Lord Goring).
- Philosophical/metatheatrical metaphors: metaphors in essays that articulate Wilde's aesthetic theories.
- Functions include irony, characterisation, aesthetic argumentation, and social satire. This multifunctionality informs translation choices: an epigram's lexical compactness and shock value must be protected; an extended image may allow more adaptive rendering.

## Discussion

### *The Importance of Being Earnest* — Epigrammatic Wit

Consider a hypothetical line where Algernon says something like, "The truth is rarely pure and never simple." (a real Wilde epigram). The sentence's power lies in its compact paradox and formal balance.

Translation strategies:

Literal transfer preserve's parallel structure and paradox if target language permits similar syntactic balance.

- Equivalent metaphor substitution might use a culturally resonant antithesis that retains paradox but shifts imagery.

Paraphrase/explication risks losing the epigrammatic punch.

Recommendation: Prioritise preserving concise antithetical structure (form) and paradox (function). If literal transfer yields awkward phrasing in the target language, recreate a similar short paradoxical clause rather than explicate.

- The Picture of Dorian Gray — Extended Aesthetic Metaphors

Wilde frequently frames moral degeneration in art metaphors (the portrait, color, decay). Here metaphors are woven into thematic architecture. Translation must keep image coherence across the text. Strategies:

Consistent metaphorical mapping: retain the same domain across occurrences (e.g., decay-as-color/fade).

Naturalisation of lexical items: choose target-language terms that allow the same semantic field (e.g., “pallor,” “tinge,” “stain”).

Avoiding over-literalism that could produce incongruent register.

Recommendation: Translate central metaphors with stable equivalents and preserve collocations; where exact lexical overlap is impossible, prioritize imagery that sustains the theme.

- Comedic Metaphors in Dialogue — Pragmatics and Timing

In Wilde’s comedies, metaphors are often timed for a punchline. Translators must consider speech rhythm and audience response. A metaphor that reads well on the page may fail when performed. Strategies include:

Rhythmic adaptation: adjust word order or syllable counts for performative timing.

Locally resonant metaphors: when a culture lacks a direct metaphor, use a different metaphor that elicits a similar laugh or ironic effect.

Recommendation: For dramatic texts, test translations aloud; if possible, collaborate with performers to calibrate comedic timing.

- Culturalized Metaphors — Untranslatable Images

Some metaphors rely on cultural or historical knowledge (e.g., references to British social rituals). Here, strategies vary:

Explication: add a brief clarifying phrase (use sparingly).

Footnoting or paratextual support: for scholarly editions.

Substitution: choose a target-culture metaphor that reproduces the pragmatic effect.

Recommendation: In general readership translations, prefer subtle substitution or slight expansion; in academic editions, retain source metaphor and add notes.

- Strategic Framework for Translators

From the above, a practical decision tree emerges:

Identify function: What does the metaphor do? (image, ideation, characterisation, irony)

Assess translatability: Is there a close lexical or conceptual equivalent?

Select strategy:

If the metaphor’s form is crucial (epigram), prefer literal transfer or crafted equivalent.

If conceptual mapping is crucial (cognitive metaphor structuring theme), prioritise conceptual equivalence even if lexical change is required.

If performative/timing is crucial (comic dialogue), prioritise rhythm and audience effect.

Consider compensation: If a metaphor cannot be preserved, introduce a metaphoric effect elsewhere to maintain textual balance.

Review for voice consistency: Ensure metaphors across the text preserve character voice and register. This framework aligns with a functionalist orientation in translation studies: preserve function and effect over word-for-word equivalence.

- **Practical Recommendations & Translator Ethics**

Anchor decisions in the target audience: literary translators must balance fidelity with readability.

Document choices: readers and editors appreciate translator notes explaining significant departures or substitutions.

Collaborate with editors/performers: especially for drama.

Maintain ethical transparency: avoid “domestication” that erases source cultural markers unless justified.

- **Implications for Machine Translation and CAT Tools**

Current machine translation systems struggle with literary metaphors due to literal bias. Post-editing by skilled translators remains essential. However, CAT tools can help by maintaining consistent rendering of recurring metaphors and storing chosen metaphoric equivalents in translation memories. Training bilingual lexicons enriched with conceptual mappings can improve suggestions, but human judgement is indispensable for aesthetic decisions.

## Conclusion

Translating metaphors in Wilde requires sensitivity to multiple levels of meaning: lexical form, conceptual mapping, and pragmatic effect. No single strategy fits all cases. Translators should prioritise preserving functional effects—tone, irony, aesthetic arguments—using literal transfer when possible, but employing modulation, substitution, and compensation where necessary. Documenting the rationale improves scholarly transparency and reader appreciation. Ultimately, well-handled metaphors allow Wilde’s wit and insights to resonate across languages without becoming either opaque or domesticated.

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