

A Study into the Translation of Chinese Euphemism from the Intercultural Perspective

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Abstract—The euphemism was created since ancient times and has been widely existed in various languages. It is branded with distinct cultural imprint since produced, which is often regarded as an effective tool to coordinate interpersonal relationship. Euphemism is not only a common language and culture phenomenon, but also a language reflection for the area of culture and society, which mirrors the uniqueness and commonness of social development, social values, moral values, national individuality and commonality of culture. As a specific form of language, euphemism is an elegant, agreeable and amicable speech or expression to substitute some harsh, vulgar or offensive words. Meanwhile, translation is a crucial medium for cross-cultural communication, and the essence of euphemism translation is a behavior of intercultural communication. Therefore, euphemism translation plays an indispensable role in cross-cultural communication. With the enhancement of intercultural communication, Chinese euphemism translation has become increasingly important. However, the studies about Chinese euphemism translation from the intercultural perspective are far more less. Thus this paper analyzes Chinese euphemism and its translation from the intercultural perspective, which aiming at diminishing the communication barriers between countries, and promoting the intercultural communication successfully.

Keywords—Chinese euphemism; translation; cross-culture

I. INTRODUCTION

Undoubtedly, different countries have different cultures and languages. Although language and culture distinguish to each other, they relate to each other intimately. Language is not just a slice of culture, but also the crystallization of culture. Language is a significant carrier of culture, which mirrors the history reforms, changes of politics, economies and cultures in a particular aspect. The development of culture can overwhelmingly drive the development of language to the largest extent. Meanwhile, the abundance of language is the radical premise for the development of culture. It is fairly known that euphemism is a common language form as well as a culture appearance. In daily communication, people are prone to adopt relatively vague, implicit and tactful expressions in order to avoid employing those impolite, vulgar or tabooed terms. Euphemism is an important weapon to soften interpersonal relationships. As a specific language form and culture phenomenon, euphemism has long been regarded as the "lubricant" of language communication and bridge to erect harmonious international

relation. It is deeply rooted in language environment, which has been widely utilized by all levels of society. D.J. Enright (1985: 113) once pointed that "Without euphemism, the world will cease revolving due to frictions and will brim with hostilities". Therefore, as a language phenomenon, euphemism plays an indispensable role in intercultural communication. It is not only the transformation of two languages, but also the transplant of two cultures. In addition, translation is a communicative behavior of cross-culture. The businessman should handle euphemism with great carefulness when it is rendered into another language because it is a culture-loaded figure of speech. With the enhancement of intercultural communication, Chinese euphemism translation has become increasingly important. As for the Chinese euphemism study, although euphemism expressions have been used by Chinese since the ancient times, however, many businessmen found that Chinese scholars study Chinese euphemism mainly from the perspective of rhetoric and the studies about Chinese euphemism translation in the angle of cross-culture are far more less. It is necessary for scholars to analyze the differences between Chinese euphemism and English euphemism so as to make cross-cultural activities smooth. Thus this paper analyzes Chinese euphemism and its translation from the intercultural perspective, proposing some translation strategies, aiming at reducing the communication barriers between countries, and promoting the intercultural communication successfully.

II. EUPHEMISM AND CULTURE

As is known to all, language is a symbol of culture. One famous linguist once said that "Language expresses, embodies and represents cultural reality." The meaning transmitted by euphemism is not just a language form but also a cultural phenomenon. People have different restrictions and standards in different cultures, and those restrictions and standards influence the process of translation, hence we need to employ euphemisms to express something that are inconvenient to voice. Meanwhile, different euphemisms signify different cultural backgrounds, which reflect disparate cultural connotations and cultural differences. It is important to understand euphemism and analyze its cultural connotation. The aim of learning language is to communicate; however, the ultimate purpose of learning language is to boost the ability of cross-language communication so as to realize the goal of successful

communication. Admittedly, cross-language communication is actually closely connected to cross-cultural communication, so the acquisition of this communication ability involving both language and culture these two basic aspects. Therefore, cultural factors must be taken into consideration while learning a language. The following three aspects introduce the connections between euphemism and culture, from which are definition, the current situation of Chinese euphemism translation and analysis of differences in Chinese and English euphemism from the intercultural perspective.

A. Definition

As a figure of speech, euphemism originated from ancient Greek eu (means good or elegance) and peme (means speech) (Zhou, 2003: 118). There are many dictionaries give definition of euphemism. For example, Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary gives such definition: "employ of delighted soft and tactful speeches or terms to substitute those harsher or director expressions" (Hornby, 2009: 681). Apart from dictionary, many scholars also stated their opinions about euphemism. Ayto once said (1993: 1): "Euphemism is a suit of communication tactics we have developed to indicate that the topic people involved without actually obeying its expressions". Allan defines euphemism as: "A type of comfortable expression to replace those uncomfortable terms, which aim to avoid possible loss one's own face or avoid giving rise to offend the audience" (1991: 11). To sum up, euphemism is an elegant, agreeable and amicable speech or expression to substitute some harsh, vulgar or offensive facts.

B. The Current Situation of Chinese Euphemism Translation

With the increasingly enhancement of China's status in the world, the usage of Chinese euphemism has become increasingly important. Though study on Chinese euphemism has made great contribution and achievement, however, we can clearly find that studies into Chinese euphemism translation from the aspect of cross-cultural are once in a blue moon. In the previous study on Chinese euphemism translation, there arises one main problem: lack of cultural knowledge. Euphemism is imbued with characteristic in different cultures and they have distinct rhetorical features. Provided that we do not have knowledge of cultural connotation of source language, we are likely to lose the rhetoric color of the source language and give rise to plain translation. Quiet a few expressions are euphemistic in our Chinese culture, but they become common expressions when they are translated into another language. This is because there are no corresponding equivalents in the target language. This kind of euphemism often loses its original euphemistic flavor when translated. Take character "贵" for example, in China, when people want to show their respect to those people who they are communicating to, they are tend to put "贵" in front of other terms. Therefore, when two people who never met with each other before, they may often employ "您贵姓" to greet each other at the first time in order to present their respect. Take another example, when someone who boosted high social position once got ill,

others who under his level were likely to care for his condition by saying "您贵恙" in the past (Luo, 2010: 14). Nevertheless, when these two Chinese sentences are interpreted into English, they become "What is your name?" and "How are you?" respectively. It goes without saying that the primary periphrastic flavor got lost. Therefore, without deeply understand the cultural meanings and lack of relevant knowledge may give rise to pale, tedious and sterile translation. And translators must make efforts to supply certain ornaments as much as possible so as to maintain the euphemistic effect in the target language.

From the study on Chinese euphemism translation above, it is easily for us to discover that previous researches for Chinese euphemism translation are far from satisfaction. However, euphemism plays crucial role in inter-cultural communication. It can transmit a mass of cultural connotations. The proper employ of euphemism can avoid hurting others' feeling, eliminate unfavorable association, cover up the cruel or disagreeable fact, and achieve politeness. Most importantly, it can lead to successful cross-cultural communication. On the other hand, it may trigger communication obstacles even unsuccessful communication if one is void of knowledge in euphemism translation. In the modern world, countries around the world are becoming closer and closer than ever before. Therefore, having well knowledge on euphemism translation is overwhelmingly significant as a result euphemism may be frequently applied. In the previous studies, many experts and scholars have implemented researches on Chinese euphemism, even have carried practical translation on Chinese euphemism. However, owing to the profound impact of the school of linguistics, they primarily begin from the aspect of linguistics and keep their eyes on the meaning of euphemisms. Furthermore, they totally neglect the cultural connotations and extensions of euphemism. Therefore, it is extremely essential to study Chinese euphemism translation from the cultural perspective.

C. Analysis of Differences in Chinese and English Euphemism from the Intercultural Perspective

With the flourish of cultural linguistics in China, we increasingly realize that language is not only the symbol of sense, but also the emblem of culture. As a matter of fact, language system is a sort of cultural system. Owing to both Chinese euphemism and English euphemism possess profound humanistic attributes; there are remarkable differences between these two kinds of euphemisms. In cross-cultural communication, people must grasp the disparities between Chinese and English euphemism so that can promote the communication smoothly. Thus the following four aspects analyze the differences between Chinese and English euphemism, from which are political environment, religious beliefs, thinking modes, sentiment and value orientations.

1) *Political environment*: The Chinese Communist Party who represent the supreme interests of the Chinese people lead the whole country, thus there are few euphemisms about officer in China. And in recent years, there appears

some euphemisms with the development of China's economy, such as "解雇" (laid-off), "待岗工人" (laid-off workers) and so on (Zhang, 2009: 82-83). However, most western countries implement the two-party or multiparty systems. Just as the great linguist Liu Chunbao put forward, "Western politics is a rich land of euphemism" (2001: 556). In western society, euphemisms often employed in journals, books, television and other public media where often carry with political complexion, because politicians want to preserve their interests. For example, serious unemployment phenomenon is called "without utilization" or "human resources less development", and slum area is called "substandard tenement", "inner city" or "center city".

2) *Religious beliefs*: As is known to all, China has a variety of religious sects, among which have far-reaching influence on Chinese nation are Buddhism and Taoism. Buddhism is the pursuit of "Nirvana" into "Buddha", so there appear numerous euphemisms about death in Chinese, such as "上西天" (go to the heaven), "坐化" (pass away while sitting cross legged), "圆寂" (parinirvana), "归真" (back to original), "解脱" (moksa) and so on. Taoism is a local religion in China, which mainly originated from Taoist thought of Laozi and Chuang-tzu. They strove for immortality in order to surmount life and death and then lived an immortal life in fairyland, so Chinese euphemism about death also have "羽化" (ascend to heaven and become immortal), "仙逝" (pass away), "得道" (enlightenment) and so on (Zhang, 2012: 14). This kind of euphemism stemmed from Taoism, which reflects the optimistic spirits that people hope to exceed life and death and find the sustenance of life through their own efforts. Nevertheless, Britain, America and other western countries mainly believe in Christianity. There are a number of euphemisms derived from Christianity, especially from Bible. Take death for example, only people die could their souls be served and taken into heaven because Christianity consider that man was born with sin, and man's life was given by God. Consequently, "be with the god", "to go to heaven", "safe in the arms of Jesus", "to go to a better land" and other words about death are invented.

3) *Thinking modes*: Influenced by thousands of years of traditional thought, modesty has been regarded as a virtue by Chinese people since the ancient times. Chinese people tend to unwilling to make a showy display of their abilities in the communication. They prefer to use complimentary words when talking with senior or peer, otherwise will considered as impoliteness. But when the topic involving themselves, they often use self-effacing words. For example, they called their presents as 'little keepsake (小意思)'. From the perspective of Chinese people, modesty performed in speech will give others a sense of respect so that other person involved are take delight in listening and accepting. When heard something express praise and respect, Chinese tend to use "客气了", "过奖了", "区区小事何足挂齿" and other modest words (Zhang, 2012: 14). However, complimentary

words in English are far less than Chinese. Westerners like to express directly, and they will be pleased to accept when been praised. They use "It's very kind of you to say so", "I'm very glad you like it" and so on to voice their pleasure. Thus it can be seen that different expressions between two languages reflect two kinds of national styles, from which one is implicit and another is straightforward.

4) *Sentiment and value orientations*: When people look at the same thing with different emotions and values, it will produces differences in expression. Take "poor" as an example. There are few euphemisms about "poor" in Chinese, only "拮据", "手头紧", "囊中羞涩" and other few words can be seen (Zhang, 2009: 83). In the national consciousness of the Chinese people, "poverty" is a sense of shame and money is a taboo. When it comes to someone who is "keep talking about money", people often use a tone of disdain. So there are many euphemisms about "money", such as "老人头", "腰里货", "阿堵物" and so on (Zhang, 2009: 83). In the western society, money is omnipotent and wealth means success. The more wealth you possess, the more power in your hand. The social reality that poor people do not have any social status makes the "poverty" become a fertile soil of English euphemism. The "poor people" is called as "have-not", "a man of modest means" and "negative saver". The English euphemism about "poor" including "less well off", "down on one's luck", "economically disadvantaged", "culturally deprived" and so on.

III. STRATEGIES FOR TRANSLATING CHINESE EUPHEMISM

During the cultural communication, people are inevitable to involve the application and translation of euphemism. Translators should have knowledge of the connections and differences between two kinds of euphemisms based on cultures so as to give veracious translation. So far, many translators and scholars have presented various translation theories, such as Nida's "Dynamic Equivalent Principle", Yan Fu's "Trinity Principle of Translation and so on. Since euphemism has strong cultural implications, a number of euphemisms' meanings need translators understand and comprehend through the language surface, and deep into the cultural background behind the language. So translators can not simply translate the literal meaning; otherwise the translation may only retain the language form, and lose the original euphemism effect and mislead the cultural connotation. In the translation of euphemism, we should grasp one translation principle, i.e. profoundly grasp the language distinctions of the source language and the cultural context behind it. As a result, the cultural information and cultural color can be retained to maximum extent in the translation, which further fertilizing the culture of the target language, guaranteeing the smooth communication and integrating two languages and cultures. Therefore, in the translation of euphemism, translators must apply flexible translation principles and strategies to guarantee the exact transfer the information in the text or context as well as make sure the accurate transmit of cultural communication. The

most often employed translation strategies of euphemism are literal translation, free translation, omission and addition.

A. *Literal Translation*

Literal translation refers to transform the message of the text or context from a kind of language to another language while transmitting the meaning of the original with the same structure, meaning and rhetoric. It is a kind of translation method, which translates the sentence originally and maintains the form as original, including structure of the sentence, sense of the original word, figure of speech and so on. In addition, the translation version of literal translation must smooth and easy to understand for target language readers. Literal translation chiefly concentrates on formal equivalence of the language (Yan, 2005: 146). Although there are numerous cultural differences between countries, they also have similar customs and psychologies. Literal translation can preserve euphemistic color of the source language to the maximum extent. Once we can find corresponding expressions in target language, the literal translation should be regarded as the first choice to translate the Chinese euphemisms. Here are some examples:

袭人本是个有智慧的女子，年龄又比宝玉大两岁，最近也渐渐通人事。(Cao, 1983: 29)

Version 1: Xiren was a clever girl, and being a couple of years older than Baoyu she already understood the facts of life at present (Yang, 1999: 54).

Version 2: Xiren was, for anything, a year or two older than Baoyu and had recently begun to have some comprehension of the facts of life now (Hawkes, 1977: 61).

Since culture in these two contexts of euphemism is consistent and we can find the corresponding expressions in the target language, so here "通人事" is literally translated into "understood the facts of life" and "have some comprehension of the facts of life", both Yang and Hawkes employ literal translation, which keep the meaning of source message originally and translation versions are easy for Chinese people as well as foreigners to comprehend.

赵姨娘说："我不是鸳鸯，她早已到仙界去了……" (Cao, 1983: 612)

Translation: "I'm not Yuan-Yang," said aunt Zhao, "She is long since gone to the fairyland..." (Yang, 1999:1208)

This example also applies literal translation, which preserve the euphemistic effect of original messages to the largest extent and carry the death information at the same time. In a word, if original messages are suitable for applying literal translation, translators should employ this translation strategy as much as possible, which not only keep the language structure and style of the source language, but also maintain the euphemistic color of the source language to the maximum extent. In addition, translators must deliberate the cultural connotation of the source message and strive to express emotion properly and make the style consistently during the practice of cross-cultural communication.

B. *Free Translation*

In the practice of translation, we can usually find that something in the source language culture endows so strong cultural features that it is hard to search equivalents in the culture of target language. When the target language does not have the corresponding euphemism in source language, free translation can be regarded as first choice. Free translation refers to reproduce the general sense of the source language, which may or may not exactly keep the form or structure as the original. Free translation satisfies the needs of language and culture for the target language, which makes translators not bound to the form of the original text and get rid of the literal meaning in order to ensure the target language and source language enjoy the same connotations and similar language functions. Nida's "Dynamic Equivalence Theory", Newmark's "Communicative Translation and Semantic Translation Theory" all supporting the feasibility and effectiveness of free translation from the different aspects. There are some examples:

贾夫人等听了消息后，忙问发生了什么事，一位女仆解释说："南院的马棚走了水，没什么事了，已经控制住了"。(Cao, 1983: 32)

Version 1: They asked what had happened after hearing the news. One lady stated that there was a fire flare up suddenly in the stables of the south court, but there is no danger now because it is under control (Yang, 1999: 53).

Version 2: "What's matter?" they asked in worry after hearing the news. One of the maids answered that there was a fire in the south court stables; but take it easy, it isn't serious now owing to it was already under control (Hawkes, 1977: 62).

In China, especially in the feudal society, people always avoid mentioning disease or disaster and use tactful words to express life and death. There was a fire in the south court obviously while the maid reported that "走了水", which is a typical taboo for disaster. Just because water and fire are completely incompatible, so people prefer to say "走了水" rather than "走了火". However, there is no connections between water and fire, so the example adopt free translation, which present the true meaning of "走了水" and "a fire had broken out" to foreigners.

宝玉说："难以言喻"。说着就将梦到的情景详细说给袭人听。当说到警幻所授云雨之情，袭人害羞得掩面扶身而笑。(Cao, 1983: 5)

Version 1: "It's hard to speak," said Pao-yu, and then told His-jen what he dreamed in detail. When it came to the point of disillusionment into the "sport of cloud and rain", His-jen covered her face and doubled up in a gale of giggles after hearing this (Yang, 1999: 12).

Version 2: After a while hesitation Pao-yu begun to give Aroma a detailed illustration of his dream. But when the topic came to the part of it where he made love with two-in-one, Aroma covered her face with a burst of laughter (Hawkes, 1977: 17).

As there is not corresponding word with '云雨之情' in English, Hawkes applies free translation in order to transmit the true connotations to foreigners and make them understand easily, while Yang keeps the literal meaning of '

云雨之情' may make foreigners feel confused against the cultural background. Therefore, against the background of extensive and profound of Chinese culture, there are some Chinese euphemisms hard to understand for western countries, which require us utilize the free translation.

C. Addition and Omission

Addition is to add some necessary instructions or explanations in the target language in order to make translation version more accurate, idiomatic, readable, and clear and better reproduce the content of the original text. As people from different cultural backgrounds have different language expressions, sometimes no matter common thing or particular thing in China this particular culture are difficult to understand by foreigners. Under this case, apply addition is the most proper. However, omission is contrary to addition, which refers to some words of source language do not need translated because the meaning of those words in the target language is self-evident. They will become wordy words if translated. Thus adopting omission method sometimes can produce more euphemistic effect owing to the different structures and habits of Chinese and English languages. Here are some examples:

宝玉听到后, 不想让自己丢脸尴尬, 只好羞怯地笑着说: "难怪他们拿姐姐您和杨贵妃做比较, 原来是因为你们都体丰怯热啊。" (Cao, 1983: 145)

Version 1: When Pao-yu heard this like a mirror on him. In his shame, he said with an embarrassing laughter: "No wonder they compare you as Lady Yang, the reason is that you're both 'slightly plump and easily affected by the hot'." Notes: Lady Yang, the most favorable lover of Ming-huang Emperor at the Tang Dynasty who was regarded as slightly plump. (Yang, 1999: 183)

Version 2: "That is the point" thought by Bao-yu; but he cover his shame with a silly smile, "No wonder they compare you as Yang Gui-fei, sister. You are just like Yang Gui-fei, because they always believe that plump people scare the hot." (Hawkes, 1977: 291)

In example (5), "杨妃 (yangfei)" (Lady Yang) was a full-figured woman and the favorite lover of Ming huang Emperor at the Tang Dynasty in Chinese culture. It will not give rise to any obstacles in understanding for the Chinese people as they are familiar this historical figure, but the result will quite different for those foreigners who are not completely comprehend the relevant background, because it is difficult for them to discover the underlying connotations that Bao-yu expressed. In addition, it is no easy for them to learn the profound Chinese culture. Yangs' translation version with the ample footnotes, which transmits the implication to the readers, and the Chinese history will be known to foreigners. While Hawkes' translation version may make foreigners feel confused because he didn't give any explain about "Yang Gui-fei".

北静王看他言行爽快, 举止端庄, 于是笑着对贾政说: "犬子真是龙驹凤雏, 如果不是犬子在世翁面前有所冒犯, 未来'雏凤清于老凤声', 前途不可估量啊。" (Cao, 1983: 60)

Version 1: "Your son is indeed like a dragon's horse and a young phoenix. Could I try to guess that this young phoenix timely arise may likely overcome the elder"? (Yang, 1999: 376)

Version 2: Greatly pleased that all Bao-yu talked was so obvious and get the theme, the infante looked at Jia Zheng and said that 'the young phoenix was really match his prince'. (Hawkes, 1977: 289)

In China, "龙" (dragon) is an imperial emblem of power and good luck, which transmits positive connotations. For example, "龙凤吉祥" (the dragon and the phoenix bring in lucky and richness as well as health) is often used to wish somebody good luck, especially during the New Year. However, "龙" (dragon) has quite different meanings in the western countries. It has rather negative implications concerning the vicious monster, which often regarded as a vicious figure deeply rooted in western culture. Therefore, Hawkes applies the omission translation, which translates "龙驹凤雏" as "the young phoenix was really match his prince" in order to avoid mentioning the "dragon" and make the translation version accord with the western culture.

王夫人站起来回答说: "他母亲前天没了, 因有热孝, 不方便过来。"

Translation: Lady Wang stood up and answered, "It's inconvenient for her to come, madam, because she's recently in lamenting for her mom."

In the translation version, the context constrains the meaning of speech, while the meaning of speech exists depending on context. The euphemism of death "没了" is omitted during translation, and "因有热孝" is translated into "newly in mourning" in order to explain the reason why Xi-ren couldn't come. This translation utilizes the context meaning of word "mourning" to convey the death information, which avoids implanting the distinct Chinese local color into the target language. Therefore, we should adopt addition and omission reasonably under the different contexts.

IV. CONCLUSION

In a word, euphemism is a common language phenomenon in the world. Euphemism is an indispensable part of language, which permeates affluent cultural connotations and details. It is created by different cultural backgrounds, ethical concepts, and values, which reflects the different cultural connotations. What's more, it is not only a type of phenomenon about language, but also a particular phenomenon reflects culture. People from different cultural backgrounds may transmit wrong information and even cause obstacles in cross-cultural communication for the reason of euphemism differences. Therefore, people always try to avoid mentioning something that will discomfort or hurt others. Whether it is "avoidance" or "euphemism" makes communicators' verbal behaviors conform to the politeness principle, which is conducive to promote interpersonal relationship, strengthen exchange and communication, and achieve successful communication. For foreign language learners, having deeply understand cultural

differences attached on euphemism is contribute to applying what they learn more comfortably in the intercultural communication and reduce the passive influence on intercultural communication brought by euphemism. Admittedly, as the "lubricant" of interpersonal communication, euphemisms plays exceedingly crucial role in the cross-cultural communication. Therefore, under the background of intercultural communication, translators must utilize reasonable translation strategies and skills. With the enhancement of intercultural communication, Chinese euphemism translation has become increasingly important. Through the study into translation of Chinese euphemisms from the intercultural perspective, foreigners can more profoundly understand Chinese euphemisms conveying cultural connotation, comprehend national features of euphemism, diminish semantic errors and further reduce obstacles in the cross-cultural communication. In the practice of Chinese euphemisms translation, absorbing and drawing some reasonable and excellent western cultures will enrich our national language and enhance the construction of spiritual civilization. Only in this way can businessman successfully communicate with others in the intercultural communication.

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