

The Cultural Differences Between English and Chinese Idioms and Translation

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ABSTRACT

Due to distinct geography, history, customs and religious beliefs between China and West, English and Chinese idioms are obviously different in the performance, also form obstacles in translation. Through analyzing the cultural differences between English and Chinese idioms and their specific performance, this study provides the corresponding translation strategies, which can help to deal with the obstacles in the translation of English and Chinese idioms and achieve the effect of cross-cultural communication.

Keywords: *English and Chinese; idioms; Cultural differences; translation*

1. INTRODUCTION

Idioms are an important part of language. Different national languages have diverse written expressions, and in the process of people using them for a long time, they have gradually refined idioms as fixed phrases or sentences. Both English and Chinese languages have a long history and therefore contain a large number of idioms. Most of the English-Chinese idioms come from daily life, so they reflect the living environment, historical background, customs and religious beliefs of Chinese and Western countries. They can be simple and easy to understand, subtle and serious, or lively and humorous. Because English and Chinese idioms carry different cultural and ethnic characteristics of China and the West, translation often becomes a difficult task. It is not only necessary to translate the basic meaning of the original idioms, but also to translate their national and local characteristics. Therefore, in order to fully express the original meaning of the idioms and interpret them appropriately, it is vital to have a thorough understanding of the differences between them and master the correct translation method.

2. ENGLISH-CHINESE IDIOMS AND THE CHINESE AND WESTERN CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Language is a carrier of culture, and idiom is the essence of language. The so-called idiom refers to a

form of language refined by people in the long process of life practice, which has a fixed structure and a semantic implication. Moreover, it is often given a specific cultural connotation. Chinese idioms generally include proverbs, idioms and sayings. English and Chinese idioms have some common features: the authenticity and specificity of expressions; highly colloquial and metaphorical; diversity in structure, etc. But more importantly, due to the different cultural backgrounds between Chinese and Western cultures, the idioms they form have distinct characteristics.

3. THE SPECIFIC PERFORMANCE OF ENGLISH-CHINESE IDIOMS ON THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CHINESE AND WESTERN CULTURES

3.1. Differences in the Environment of the Soil and Water

The emergence of English-Chinese idioms is the result of people's long-term production practices in a certain region, and thus the idioms have regional imprint. Britain is an island country with relatively limited resources, but because it is in a superior location surrounded by water, its seafaring business has been very developed since ancient times. Many of its idioms are often related to the sea. For example, "To keep one's head above water", which means struggle for survival; "a cold fish", meaning a cold person; another example is "Living without an aim is like sailing without a

compass”, indicating that individual must have an aim in life. China is a country in mainland Asia, where people have a long history of farming, so the idioms formed are often related to agriculture. For example, “面朝黄土背朝天” (meaning farmers' hard work in farming); “拔苗助长” (meaning be anxious for success); and “顺藤摸瓜” (meaning following the trail to pursue the results), etc. Some connotative idioms related to bamboo in Chinese, such as “罄竹难书” (describing as too many crimes to write about); and “胸有成竹” (describing as doing things with a complete plan), etc. [1].

3.2. Differences in Historical Allusions

A nation leaves valuable historical and cultural heritage in its development. Historical allusions are the treasures with its distinctive cultural personality, profound historical and cultural information as well as strong national style in this process. Therefore, the formation process of idioms is deeply branded with these historical allusions. For example, in the history of Britain, it was invaded by the Romans and Teutons and later established colonies in North America, so this can be reflected in the idiom of “All roads lead to Rome”, which means everything has more than one solution. In the same way, idioms such as “说曹操，曹操就到” have been developed and passed down in Chinese history and are closely related to war stories, which means while talking about someone, someone just arrives. These idioms about historical allusions not only have a special structure, but also have deep and evocative meanings. The idioms of English allusions are mainly from the Bible, Greco-Roman mythology, Shakespeare's masterpieces and Homer's *Odyssey*. For example, a Pandora's box, which translates as the source of trouble, disaster and misfortune, etc.; meet one's Waterloo, which means a failure; The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak, used to show that a person would like to do something, but cannot because of lack of strength or energy [2]. The Chinese allusions are generally from *the Book of Songs, the Records of the Grand Historian and the Four Great Books of China*. For example, “四面楚歌” (meaning be besieged by all sides), “叶公好龙” (meaning professed love), and etc..

3.3. Differences in Customs and Habits

Customs and habits are formed by an ethnic group during its long-term social and communicative activities, and thus there are obvious differences in terms of appellation, food, and attitudes toward animals, which are also expressed in a great difference in idioms. In terms of appellation, Chinese people are used to ask each other when they meet acquaintances, “Where are you going?” and “Have you eaten?” Westerners avoid doing so, as they feel that food, clothing, housing and

transportation are purely personal and cannot be asked. For eating habits, Chinese people mainly eat rice and noodles, supplemented by vegetables and tea drinks, so their related idioms include “粗茶淡饭” (meaning a frugal life) and “小菜一碟” (meaning it's easy), etc.; Westerners mainly eat bread and cheese, which is expressed in the idioms of “big cheese” (meaning big man) and “earn one's bread” (meaning to earn money to support the family). The differences between Chinese and Westerners in their attitudes toward animals are manifested in idioms, most typically dogs and cats. The Chinese consider dogs to be a lowly animal, so dog-related idioms generally have a pejorative sentiment, such as “狐朋狗友” (describing friends who're sluggards), “狗急跳墙” (the metaphor of bad people who're in desperation do things recklessly), “狗眼看人低” (meaning despising others). The Westerners, on the other hand, regard dogs as friendly friends, used to guard the door or hunting, and have a strong affection for them [3]. In the idiomatic expressions, there are “love me, love my dog”, “a top dog”, “a sea dog”, “every dog has his day” and etc.

3.4. Differences in Religious Beliefs

Religious culture, as an important part of human culture, is a culture composed of national religious beliefs and consciousness, and different religious cultures implicitly penetrate into the formation of idioms, so there are many idioms reflecting religious culture. The religious culture of the Chinese people has been greatly influenced by Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism, and there are also “阎王” (king of hell) in Buddhism and “玉帝” (the jade emperor) in Taoism. In addition, the formation of Chinese idioms is also influenced by myths such as “东海龙王” (the king of the sea) and “盘古” (a mythological figure who opened up the sky and the earth). For example, Buddhism has been introduced to China for more than two thousands years since the end of the Western Han Dynasty, and people worship the “Buddha”, which is expressed in idioms such as “借花献佛” (meaning offering a present to a guest with other people's things), “临时抱佛脚” (hinting dealing with things in a hurry). The idioms of “放下屠刀立地成佛” (persuading evildoers to stop doing evil) and “苦海无边，回头是岸” (meaning as long as evildoers completely repent, there is a way out) are also related to Buddha. The idioms related to mythology include “Jingwei reclaims the sea”, “eight immortals cross the sea, each showing their magic powers”, etc. In Western countries such as UK, people believe in Christianity and believe that there is a God, and that everything in the world is arranged by God, so there are many idioms related to God. For example, “God helps those who help themselves”. In addition, the Bible is the source of Western culture, and is the source of many English idioms, such as “as wise as Solomon”,

expressing the meaning of wise people; “Noah’s ark” is used as a metaphor for a place of refuge [4].

4. TRANSLATION BARRIERS OF ENGLISH-CHINESE IDIOMS UNDER THE CHINESE AND WESTERN CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

In order to translate English-Chinese idioms accurately, we must overcome the obstacles caused by the cultural differences between Chinese and Westerners. The translator Fu Lei once pointed out that there are differences in the ways of thinking of Chinese and Westerners. Chinese is a language with a strong expressive power of meaning, while English is a discursive and logical language. The barriers to translation caused by the specific cultural background of China and the West are mainly manifested in word equivalence and semantic meaning, etc. As Chinese and Western nations have different backgrounds and histories in the development process, it is often difficult to find suitable corresponding words for the same things or phenomena in Chinese and English. For example, Kungfu and Taiji originated from China, but Westerners do not know them, so they cannot find corresponding words in English. In terms of the semantic meaning, it is also different in China and the West. Take numbers as an example, in Chinese tradition, both 8 and 9 are auspicious numbers, while in the West there is no such difference; Westerners are taboo about the number 13, while China does not. Therefore, due to these barriers, it is necessary to be flexible and adopt appropriate methods in the translation process.

5. TRANSLATION METHODS OF IDIOMS UNDER THE DIFFERENCE OF CHINESE AND WESTERN CULTURES

Some translators have put forward some views on the standards of translation. According to Yan Fu, the translation should be “faithful, expressiveness and elegant”; according to Lu Xun, the translation should take into account both the ease of interpretation and the preservation of the original style. In this regard, the author believes that in order to achieve faithfulness and accuracy in the translation of Chinese and Western idioms, and to convey the meaning and style of the original text as much as possible, translators need to flexibly adopt direct translation method, liberal translation method, naturalization translation method or other translation methods according to the different characteristics of English and Chinese idioms.

5.1 Direct Translation Method

There are many idioms with the same or similar literal and figurative meanings in English-Chinese idioms, so the method of direct translation can be

adopted. The so-called direct translation method is a method that preserves the cultural background and meaning of English-Chinese idioms without violating the linguistic norms of Chinese-English translation and without causing ambiguity in understanding. It can be subdivided into the following cases according to different circumstances. If the form and meaning of the English-Chinese idioms are the same, the direct translation method can not only reproduce the form and meaning of the original, but also preserve the original expression. For example, “Easy come, easy go” in English and “来得容易, 去得也快” in Chinese; for example, “Practice makes perfect” in English and “熟能生巧” in Chinese [5]. When the implied meaning of the original idiom is obvious or easy to infer, and the reader can understand its meaning by its literal meaning, the direct translation can also be used. For example, the English phrase “All roads lead to Rome” in English, “条条大路通罗马” is the same meaning in Chinese. If the metaphorical meaning of some idioms is relatively rusty but has obvious cultural background, the original idiom can be retained in the direct translation. For example, “The Troian horse” in English and “特洛伊木马” in Chinese; “Eight-legged essay” in English and “八股文” in Chinese, etc.

5.2 Liberal Translation Method

Some English-Chinese idioms cannot be translated accurately by the direct translation method, so the translator can try to use the liberal translation method. The liberal translation refers to the translation method that only conveys the implied meaning of the original idiom without preserving its form and rhetorical method [6]. If it is difficult to retain the literal and figurative meanings of some idioms, the original image can be transformed into a familiar image for the reader, so as to translate the implied meaning of the original. For example, a typical example is “When in Rome, do as the Romans do”, if it is translated literally, it is difficult for readers to understand its implied meaning. Another example is that since “dragon” has different meanings in Chinese and Western cultures, Chinese people regard dragon as a symbol of “solemnity and nobleness”, while Westerners regard the English equivalent dragon as the embodiment of “monster”. Therefore, when translating “望子成龙”, it would be wrong to translate it as the original idea, i.e., “To hope that one’s son will become dragon”, which should be translated as “To hope one’s children will have a bright future”. In addition, if you translate the phrase “天有不测风云” in “A storm may arise from a clear sky”, it is difficult for Westerners to understand its meaning, so you should translate it as “Something unexpected may happen any time”, which is much easier for readers to understand.

5.3 Naturalization Translation Method

Some English and Chinese idioms are different in content and form, but their moral meanings and expression effects are similar. If the direct translation method is still adopted, its moral significance will be inappropriate and the accurate expression of the original text will be affected. In this case, the translator can adopt the naturalization translation method. For example, "A contented mind is a perpetual feast" is obviously inappropriate if translated directly in Chinese, but it would be appropriate to use the idiom of "know that one is content and always happy", Chinese idiom in "知足常乐". Therefore, when the idioms are not suitable for translation by the direct translation method or the liberal translation method, using the naturalization translation method is a good translation method.

5.4. Other Translation Methods

In the translation of English-Chinese idioms, apart from the three translation methods introduced above, there are also the negation translation method, the combination of direct and liberal translation method, and the amplification translation method.

5.4.1. Negation Translation Method

The negation translation method refers to the method of translating the original language by adopting the inverse thinking according to the opposite side of the English-Chinese idiomatic expressions. For example, "Not get rid of it too early" can be translated as "The earlier the better"; and "may or may not be needed" can be translated as "Not essential" [7].

5.4.2. Combination of Direct and Liberal Translation Method

When it is difficult to achieve good results with direct translation or liberal translation, the combination of them can be adopted. For example, if a Chinese idiom "男儿无性，纯铁无钢" is translated as "A man with no guts, pure iron without steel", the word will not reach the meaning, if it is translated as "A piece of poor iron, it never makes steel", then it can express the original meaning perfectly [8].

5.4.3. Amplification Translation Method

When the above-mentioned translation methods cannot meet the translation requirements, then use the amplification translation method. For example, "Teach the dog to bark" can be directly translated as "Teach the dog how to bark - superfluous". In addition, "He can be relied on, he eats no fish and plays the game" can be liberally translated as "he is reliable and loyal", with the following comment: "to eat no fish" is an allusion to the

time when the Jesuits in England refused to obey the Roman Catholic custom of eating fish only on Fridays as a sign of loyalty to the government during the time of Queen Elizabeth [9].

6. CONCLUSION

The translation of English-Chinese idioms is an important element in English-Chinese translation, and the appropriate use of idioms can increase the expressive power of language, make the language more touching and play the role of finishing touches. In cross-cultural communication, the difference of cultural background is an indelible chasm, and in order to eliminate this chasm, comprehension and translation are the most important means. The English is a very logical thinking nation, so the English language is a logical and rigorous language. In the translation of English and Chinese idioms, it is necessary to understand the characteristics and expression habits of Chinese and Western languages, and to understand the meaning of the idioms while using accurate words and expressing them in a refined manner. In this way, it can improve the translation level of English and Chinese idioms and achieve better language effects.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

The author Ran Wang conceived this study and completed the article.

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