Functional Equivalence in the Process of English Translation Chinese Idioms from a Social Semiotic Translation Approach

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ABSTRACT

Idioms contain rich meanings. Translating the idioms of a language into a target language accurately is a complex problem. Adopting the functional equivalence theory under the framework of social semiotics, this research discusses potential translation methods and strategies and the significance of functional equivalence in the English translation of Chinese idioms. Existing literature points out that pragmatic meaning is the most critical meaning of Chinese idioms. Translators should prioritize the accurate transmission of practical meaning. On this premise, both intralingual meaning and referential meaning should be considered. Some thoughts on the strategies of translating Chinese idioms into English are put forward using comparative and inductive research methods.

Keywords: **Chinese-English Translation; Idioms; Social Semiotics; Functional Equivalence**

1. INTRODUCTION

There is a direct connection between languages and cultures as languages take the responsibility of spreading cultures. Idioms are particular forms of expressions gradually formed by all nationalities and countries [1]. Although English and Chinese are two different languages, they have similar characteristics in some aspects [2]. The most remarkable one is that both languages contain rich and colorful idioms, highlight the charm of their tongues, absorb the essence of languages and cultures, and represent their own national and historical backgrounds, cultural attributes, customs, and religious beliefs. As idioms are unique language forms, translators should first understand and master relevant idioms, clarify idioms' meanings, and uncover the essential cultural information behind them [3].

Idioms are fixed forms of language expressions that have been used for a long time. Owing to their concise and comprehensive meanings, they are regarded as the essence of a language and frequently serve to organize it [4]. The Chinese language has a long history, and there are many idioms in Chinese. Delivering the profound meaning of its idioms accurately is a complicated issue for translators. This research intends to discuss the meaning transmission of Chinese idioms during translation from the perspective of social semiotics by

reviewing related literature and adopting the methods of comparative research and inductive analysis.

2. SOCIAL SEMIOTICS AND NIDA'S FUNCTIONAL EQUIVALENCE

2.1. Three Meanings of Social Semiotics

From the perspective of semiotics, language is a symbolic system. The American philosopher C.S. Peirce was the first person who proposed semiotics' concept and research scope. Charles Morris and other American logicians and philosophers developed a semiotic theory based on Peirce's research [5] and presented three aspects of symbols.

The first is the grammatical relationship between various units in language symbol systems. The second is the semantic relationship between language symbol systems and the external world. The third is the pragmatic relationship between language symbol systems and symbol users. These three relations reflect three language levels: grammar, semantics, and pragmatics. These three relations are three semiotic meanings: intralingual meaning, referential purpose, and pragmatic meaning.

Intralingual meaning is the relationship between language symbols. Language symbols have intralingual

meaning in phonology, grammar, vocabulary, sentence, and discourse. Referential meaning refers to the relationship between linguistic symbols and the entities and events of the subjective and objective worlds that depict or describe them. Pragmatic meaning is the relationship between language symbols and their users. These three meanings constitute the overall meaning of discourse. A translator should convey the three meanings of discourse as much as possible in translation and realize the equivalent transformation of grammar, semantics, and pragmatics [6].

2.2. Functional Equivalence

The so-called "functional equivalence" is not to deliberately pursue the equivalence of text form but to achieve functional equivalence in source languages and targeted languages. The translation should show the original meaning of an article, retain its author's original style, and reflect the original appearance of works [9]. Nida Eugene highlights that if only one side pays attention to the formal equivalence of translation, the real connotation contained in a source language will be buried to a certain extent, seriously affecting cultural exchanges between languages and nations that speak those languages. Nida puts forward his translation equivalence theory in translation, describing it as "dynamic equivalence" and "functional equivalence." His core concept is "functional equivalence" [7]. Functional equivalence is the basic principle of using information theory and different languages to transform the same information and effectively express its meaning. Although this principle faces other readers, it will still give target languages the same feeling as readers of source languages.

2.3. Idioms and Their Translation

Nida Eugene points out that translation is the equivalent reproduction of the meaning in the source language in the target language using natural language. Translation enables smooth communication between the author of a source-language text and the readers of a target language text. Also, it can arouse the same experience and association among target language readers and source language readers. The information conveyed by translated idioms includes the literal information of vocabulary and many implicit meanings [8]. Idioms are the carrier of culture. Their forms of expression pay attention to the perfect coordination of syllables and rhythm. Generally, idioms express meaning thoughtfully, concisely, vividly, or rich in philosophy [9], and they are full of cultural characteristics. Translating idioms reasonably and equally is complicated.

Researchers take idioms as research symbols in isolation and move towards social factors other than idioms, explaining the role of idioms in social communication [10]. This crystallizes a national language and culture and the essence of sentences. Therefore, the translation of idioms can offer a deeper understanding of culture and contributes to cross-cultural exchanges between countries [10]. However, idiom translation is an arduous task due to idioms' stable structure and rich cultural factors. For example, an idiom may not have an equivalent expression when being translated into a target language.

2.3.1. Translating Chinese Idioms into English

Combining the local characteristics of Chinese and Chinese culture, Chinese researchers have constantly tried and explored a series of foreign theories at the level of translation practices and gradually formed a set of translation practice theories suitable for translation tasks. From the perspective of social semiotics, much research on translation applies functional equivalence theory.

Kwong (2018) discusses potential blind spots in the translation of Chinese idioms [11]. He believes that the components of idioms cannot be added, deleted, or replaced at will. Although some words meet the requirements of vocabulary and grammar, translated versions cannot be used as English idioms. Any arbitrary change to the composition is regarded as undermining the usage of the whole idiom. For example, "a hundred steps through a poplar" cannot be changed to "a hundred steps through a willow." In addition, the semantic unity of idioms means that idioms are inseparable from semantics. Idioms must be understood as a complete meaning, regardless of each independent component's definition. The importance of an idiom is not the sum of the implication of each word forming an idiom but a new connotation. The Chinese idiom, "having a well thought out plan beforehand," has nothing to do with the plant "bamboo."

A study focuses on meaning transmission in the Chinese language [12]. Intralingual meaning is the relationship between language symbols, including phonological, grammatical, and lexical meanings. Intralingual meaning is closely related to language resources. As English and Chinese belong to different language families and have distinctive characteristics, it is challenging to convey an intralingual meaning when translating Chinese idioms with prominent language characteristics into English. Taking the phonetic characteristics of Chinese idioms as an example, the Han nationality attaches great importance to the rhythm, emphasizing the collocation of flat tones and harmonious phonology. They are good at using various rhetorical means such as tautology, double tone, and rhyme to enhance the phonological beauty and rhythm of the language, which is fully reflected in their idioms [13]. Many idioms in Chinese feature neat, symmetrical, and complex syllable distribution [13].

A comparative equivalence method is based on translation practices [14]. According to Nida's functional equivalence theory, the so-called comparative equivalence method searches for an expression with the same meaning from Chinese idioms or classic idioms when translating English idioms into Chinese. Translators take functional equivalence as the representative information of the source language to be translated and do translation according to the general meaning in the original text [3]. It is to translate the whole sentence without the need for each correction. Each word is translated in turn. This translation method makes readers sense the original authors' real emotions more intensely. Comparative equivalence can fully solve cultural differences caused by rich local culture, regional and national characteristics in English idioms, and the obstacles to readers' reading. However, even if idiom forms are different, their functions are entirely consistent. The inner feelings about an article of readers of a target language are usually similar to readers of a source language [3].

3. DIFFICULTIES IN TRANSLATING CHINESE IDIOMS INTO ENGLISH

In translation, due to significant differences in language systems and cultural backgrounds between Chinese and English, the equivalent transformation of the three meanings is almost difficult to achieve simultaneously [8]. Therefore, dealing with the transmissions of intralingual, referential, and pragmatic meaning in translation is a severe challenge to translators, especially in the English translation of Chinese idioms with significant language characteristics and rich cultural connotations. Qi's research (2019) summarizes the following aspects when investigating the difficulties and causes of the English translation of Chinese idioms[15].

The first is a religious belief. In the old times, due to human's ignorance of nature, human beings had awe and worship of the supernatural mysterious forces or entities outside, which developed into a particular social ideology. China is mainly influenced by Buddhist culture in its development, while Christianity primarily affects western countries. Secondly, there are many historical allusions in both English and Chinese, which also significantly impact idioms. The third is about geographical regions and customs. Since most parts of China are inland areas, idioms were primarily closely related to mountains, rivers, fields, and farming life. By contrast, idioms in many western countries were deeply affected by the influence of the maritime era.

Moreover, ideology and values play an important role. Traditional cultures also influence different social ideologies, but they can be expressed through languages. For China, influenced by ideology, its traditional culture mainly takes social groups as the main body of value, emphasizing social values and moral standards. In

contrast, western cultures emphasize an independent life, namely individualism.

The differences in idiom expression caused by cultures lead to the inequality of form and meaning in English and Chinese idioms. Therefore, translators need to adopt translation strategies that can maximize Nida's functional equivalence.

4. STRATEGIES OF TRANSLATING CHINESE IDIOMS INTO ENGLISH FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF SOCIAL SEMIOTICS

Nida puts forward the theory of functional equivalence from the perspective of language function to solve the problems encountered in translation [9]. Although various languages have the same or similar meaning behind different expression forms, the translation process seeks the functional equivalence of different languages. Nida takes the equivalence of the responses of source language readers and target language readers as the highest standard to measure translation. This has an important guiding significance for language translation, especially idiom translation [9].

4.1. Literal translation

The literal translation is the most commonly used method when translating Chinese idioms into English. Literal translation can correctly express the surface meaning while maintaining the original form, deep meaning, and hidden cultural connotation. According to Nida's functional equivalence theory, if the forms, meanings, and rhetoric of English idioms and Chinese idioms are the same, the translation of source language readers and target language readers can be equivalent. For example, black often represents death, darkness, or evil in Chinese and Western cultures. In Chinese and English, black means "illegal and evil". In this sense, literal translation makes readers understand the true meaning of these idioms on the premise of maintaining the source language's values, culture, and expression. In addition, literal translation can be used to translate the following idioms into Chinese: "as cunning as a fox" in Chinese and "as cunning as a fox" in English, and "Donkey" in Chinese reminds people of "stupid". There is as stupid as an ass in English, whereas In Chinese, people often say "stupid as a donkey".

Therefore, literal translation can accurately and effectively express the cultural connotation of an original text, achieve the equivalence of form, semantics, and rhetoric, and narrow the gap between English and Chinese. Literal translation can achieve the equivalent effect, and the responses of the source language and target language readers are entirely consistent.

4.2. Free translation method

Influenced by different factors such as religious beliefs, historical allusions, myths and stories, geographical regions and customs, ideology and values, idioms in various countries have unique personalities and characteristics. For example, the Chinese say "as strong as a cow", while the English say "as strong as a horse". The free translation should be adopted for idioms whose meanings and forms cannot be found in Chinese. In other words, when translators translate idioms of a source language and cannot find idioms in a target language, they need to use the free translation method to express the meaning of idioms of the source language by considering the idioms' contexts. Nida proposes that if one of the following five conditions is met, free translation should be adopted in idiom translation. Firstly, literal translation will lead to translation errors. Secondly, there is no meaning expressed by the source language in the target language.

Moreover, although formal equivalence is achieved, it will cause the obscurity of the source language. In addition, formal equivalence will lead to the ambiguity of the meaning expressed by the authors of source languages. Finally, formal equivalence does not conform to the grammar of a target language.

5. CONCLUSION

Idioms are the essence of language culture and play a very important role in learning a language. Understanding idioms and translating them into a target language can improve students' ability to learn languages and enhance their understanding of the cultures behind languages. However, the translation of idioms should integrate various factors and adopt literal translation or free translation. When it comes to literal and free translations, translators should consider the forms and meanings of idioms, understand the cultural connotation of idioms in their source language. Then they should adopt corresponding translation strategies to achieve the "minimum functional equivalence" making expressions consistent in their respective contexts.

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