

On the Translation of Words with Chinese Characteristics

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Abstract: Chinese characteristic words are very important parts of the study on English. Chinese characteristic words stand for the words or phrases that are belonging to the Chinese culture or have no equivalents in English or other languages. In the process of diplomatic exchange, the influence of Chinese on English continuously expands, and Chinese characteristic words show their unique expression advantages, and at the same time, they also put forward higher requirements for translation. So when words with Chinese characteristics are translated into English, the complexity of how to remain the unique Chinese culture and arts, and make the Western people understand and accept them as well is self-evident. All in all, with the help of examples in the corpus, this thesis aims to study problems and methods on the translation of words with Chinese characteristics, in order to find out the tendency in this area.

Introduction

The so-called Chinese characteristic word, as a very important part of the English study, is relative to the common English and foreign vocabulary. It is the unique part of speech in Chinese culture and it is highlighted in the foreign exchange. Meanwhile, in the cultural exchange process, the Chinese influences English continuously, the Chinese characteristic word emphasizes advantages of its unique expression and puts forward higher requirements for translation as well. However, in the past two or three decades, words with Chinese characteristic translation are an area that is far from being explored. Few monographs at home and abroad could not meet the need of mutual communication. Therefore, the main purpose of this thesis is to find out the basic strategies of Chinese characteristic words translation by the analysis of the problems and methods in this area.

Problems on the Translation of Chinese Characteristic Words

Chinese characteristic words literally indicate different or particular words, which should represent two qualifications: the Chinese characteristic words in one culture should be new to other cultures; and they should show the positive effects of a culture. Chinese characteristic vocabularies are those lexical terms which could reflect Chinese cultures, spread Chinese flavor and exhibit Chinese connotations. Chinese characteristic words are not only unique to the Chinese, but also to the whole world, nowhere in the world could find equivalents for such words completely.

At the same time, translation means that a culture with a set of specific symbols transfers into a set of specific symbols in another culture and translation is a kind of cross-cultural behavior. While words with Chinese characteristics are enriched with the essence of China's long history culture, so in order to keep the Chinese characteristics and achieve cultural exchange, translators need to know the factors that influence the translation of words with Chinese characteristics. Linguistic and culture factors play significant roles.

Linguistic Factor

It is known that Chinese and English belong to different language systems, Chinese belonging to Sino-Tibetan family and English belonging to Indo-European family, and they differ from each other in the aspect of language structure, sound, grammar, etc. As it is obviously noticed that, the Chinese words are featured with conciseness and abstractness, so it is very hard to find corresponding equivalents in English. Those words always contain rich connotations, so the translators have to add words or explain in a specific way when dealing with them.

One of the marked differences between Chinese and English is that more prepositions, conjunctions are in English than Chinese. For example in English, “and” is often used to link two phrases, or grammar mistakes may occur; but in Chinese it is not like that. Many prepositions, conjunctions and adverbs are playing the role of oiling. So when words with Chinese characteristics are interpreted or translated, these linking words should be employed, for instance one word used to express Chinese attitude on differences and divergences is “求同存异”, and the whole translation of this Chinese term is “seeking common ground while putting aside differences”. The use of “while” makes the four-character Chinese term with a clear structure.

As far as linguistic factors are concerned, sometimes the translating would cause Chinglish. it refers to the Chinese-way of using English and it is not according with English grammar or customs. The US scholar Joan Pinkham, who has worked in China for a long time, has a detailed description in her book *The Translators Guide to Chinglish*, she calls it as English with Chinese Characteristics. 1 This description indicates that translators are easy to say and write Chinglish in translation.

The appearance of such kind of phenomenon is due to the Chinese thoughts and customs of translators and easily makes the foreigners feel at dizzy. The reform and opening up is so great pioneering work that politics, economics, culture, science and technology and other aspects of the society advance, many words with Chinese characteristics are appearing at a surprising speed and increasingly in number. For example in the annually published government work report which draws much light every year, people witness the bringing forth of new words, phrases, descriptions which are summarizing the previous achievement and future aims. These descriptions are unique in China and are hard to find corresponding counterparts in English.

For example the translation of “三个代表” is “three represents” and it might sound unconventional because in English, the numeral could not be put in front of verbs, so foreign guests might feel confused when they hear this word. With the consideration of linguistic factor, it should be corrected as “three representatives”. In another case, “stage” means the different phases in the same market, but when interpreting “现代化建设三步走”, the translated version is “three stages in modernization drive”. These cases mentioned are all unique in China and could not avoid being translated in Chinese featured traces.

In summary, the difference in linguistic factor affects the translation on the words with Chinese characteristics. In the process of translation, it should be paid a lot of attention on the language structure, grammar, and sound and so on.

Cultural Factor

It is known that the concept “culture” covers big scope almost including every aspect of society. It has material meaning and ideological meaning. The famous US translation theorist Nida categorizes culture into five kinds:

1. Ecology
2. Material culture
3. Social Culture
4. Religious Culture
5. Linguistic Culture²

These five kinds obviously include the material scope and ideological scope. But some scholars think the culture only indicates the spiritual civilization and this is the common view of many people inside and outside. The New Encyclopedia gives a definition of culture: it is the totality of the spiritual, intellectual, and artistic attitudes shared by a group, including its tradition, habits, social

customs, morals, laws, and social relations. Sociologically, every society, on every level, has its culture; the term has no implications of high development. This definition obviously excludes the development level of material civilization but includes the accumulation of human spiritual civilization such as arts, tradition, customs, and social customs.

So it could be seen that the translation could be considered as a transfer of one culture into the other, and any translation could not be separated with culture and so does the translation of words with Chinese characteristics in translating. It could be concluded from famous translators, such as Wang Zuoliang, the translator must be a culture intellectual. It is always said that translators have to be a master of two languages and indeed it is true; however, if translators fail to understand the culture they would be far away from controlling the languages.

Languages are the integral part of cultures and produced by the culture. In the process of translation, the right or wrong in understanding the source text depend greatly on translators' understanding of culture and for the translators, if they do not make comparison of the two cultures, there is no space for them to clearly and exactly express understanding on the culture-loaded words.

In translating words and phrases containing Chinese culture connotation, translators make some adjustments to the translating text in order to let foreigners understand. For example, “四书五经” is translated as “four books and the five classics”, but if it permits the translators should name them one by one and foreign guests could raise their interests on those books and in this way the Chinese culture could be spread.

More specifically, different histories, local customs and traditions lead to culture gap to a great extent. For example, in traditional mind of Chinese people, “牛” represents good quality, hardworking, unselfish, strong, etc. A number of words could be found in Chinese --- “牛劲”, “壮如牛”. While in western world, people are accustomed to employ “horse” to express this kind of meaning, such as “strong as a horse”, “work like a horse”, “eat like a horse”, etc. Similarly, “狗” sometimes is not a commendatory term in Chinese culture, which could be found examples in “走狗”, “狐朋狗友”, “狗腿子”. While in English, “dog” equals to loyal friend to humankind, which could find evidence in “lucky dog”, “love me, love my dog”, “jolly dog”, and “teach an old dog new tricks”. So the translation of words with Chinese characteristics into English could not be word-to-word, the culture factor must be concerned in the exchange process.

In conclusion, during the process of translation with Chinese characteristic words, culture factors could not be neglected. Because the culture default presents in regional, conventional and religious cultures, translators should pay attention to the difference so as to avoid the misunderstanding by culture problem.

Without doubt, in the process of translating and interpreting words with Chinese characteristic words, the translation problems are mainly caused by two factors, linguistic factor and cultural factor. The former one rooted in the language difference, such as grammar, structure, and sound, etc. So translators need to add or subtract words to solve this problem. The latter one stems from different cultures. Therefore, translation must be accustomed to the culture custom

Translation Methods of Chinese Characteristic Words

Chinese characteristics should be incarnated, exhibited and highlighted in translation of Chinese specific words. Besides, thorough and intensive comprehension of Chinese characteristic words is prerequisite and core of Chinese-English translation. Basic techniques in translating Chinese culture loaded words could mainly categorized as transliteration, literal translation and liberal translation.

Transliteration

Transliteration means the words and ways of expressions from the source language are translated according to their pronunciation. Transliteration refers to the verbatim spoken or written representation of one language by another. Translating Chinese characteristic words into English by transliteration refers to reserving their Chinese pronunciation in target texts so that the features of the source language that stand out in translated texts.

To begin with, transliterating English words into Chinese could provide experiences for translating Chinese characteristic words. Transliterating foreign words into Chinese has many successful stories. The most famous case is Coca-Cola. When Coca-Cola first entered the Chinese market in 1928, they had no official representation of their name in Mandarin. They needed to find four Chinese characteristics whose pronunciations approximately the sounds “ko-ka-ko-la”. Therefore, “可口可乐” allows the mouth to be able to rejoice indicating something palatable from which one receives pleasure.

There are two approaches to transliterating: one is to transcribing Chinese-specific words directly in pinyin, such as this unit of measure 元 (yuan), 角(jiao), 分 (fen); The other is to borrowing Chinese characteristic words, imitating and approximating their pronunciations by spelling them in quasi-English words. For example, many Chinese borrowings in English come from Chinese dialects. Given that few English equivalents could describe or translate unique things and phenomena in Chinese culture, borrowings from Chinese are standing out in English ways of expression. At the same time, there are also many successful examples of transliterating from Chinese into English lexical words. For example, “高考”(gaokao), “不折腾”(buzheteng), “福娃”(Fuwa), “山寨”(shanzhai), “加油”(jiayou).

In addition, transliteration plus annotation are another translation technique of preserving the original pronunciation and revealing the true meaning of the original. Chinese-specific words which constitute a lexical gap in western culture and hard to imagine should be transliterated and annotated. “Differences of a culture might also be a reason for having marginal notes in a translated text”.³ Transliteration plus annotation is mainly used in translating local snacks and scenic spots so that foreigners learn how to pronounce those culture-specific words and understand them. For example, “炕”kang (a heatable brick bed), “乱炖”luan dun(boiled dinner), “老婆饼”laopo (a kind of cake), etc. By the means of transliteration plus annotation, the translation not only keeps the feature and original style of Chinese words, but also makes it easy to accept by westerners.

To conclude, transliteration could help to keep the origin style and feature of Chinese. It is known that words are the symbol of the language. If some nouns, place names, personal names, company names and some unique Chinese terms in Chinese happen to find no equivalence in English, transliteration is a better way to deal with such words so as to avoid unnecessary misunderstanding caused by other translation techniques.

Literal Translation

Literal translation in fact is “a notion which has for many centuries been at the heart of most translation controversies, here it has been either staunchly defended against or vigorously attacked in favor of its rival, free translation. However, here is a certain amount of variation in the way this term is applied, as literal translation. Literal translation can be defined in linguistic terms as a translation made on a level lower than is sufficient to convey the content unchanged while observing TL norms”.⁴

Literal translation refers to the translation that a translator tries to keep the original form and meaning, including meaning, structure, style, figure of speech, etc. but it is not the word-for-word translation. For example, the brand “王老吉” is translated by “the king is always lucky” on the internet. Obviously, it is nothing but a mistake. Here are some successful examples of literal translation:

- “再就业” re-employment
- “纸老虎” paper tiger
- “大观园” grand view garden
- “以德治国” rule by virtue
- “经济特区” special economic zone
- “下岗工人” laid-off workers
- “改革开放” reform and opening-up

These phrases are very vivid and figurative. Literal translation method is also widely used in publicity of media. Here are some cases:

(1). Under a government plan released at the end of last year, China is to abolish the May Day “Golden Week” but keep the other two week-long holidays – the National Holiday and the Spring Festival. (Beijing Review, Feb 22, 2008) (黄金周)

(2). Civil servants will have to perform better if they are to remain in their jobs. It breaks the iron rice bowl mentality. The tests provide motivation for the civil servants to do better. (China Daily, Jan 3, 2008) (铁饭碗)

(3). Under the correct leadership of the CPC, the people of all China’s ethnic groups followed the guidance of Deng Xiaoping Theory and the important thought of Three Representatives, thoroughly applied the Scientific Outlook on Development, and comprehensively implemented the principles and policies of the central authorities and the decisions and resolutions of the Fifth Sessions of the Tenth NPC in 2007. (China Daily, Mar 21, 2008) (三个代表)

Now in the modern world, with the tide of globalization, mutual communication has penetrated into the culture, politics and economy areas. It is understandable and reasonable that certain similarities in some aspect are shared all around the world. So literal translation could be accepted by westerners although in the different culture backgrounds

However, sometimes literal translation could not completely express the meaning, at this time, it is used together with explanation to supplement the cultural factors and lost information, which is also an important method in the translation of Chinese specific terms.

In brief, literal translation could provide the necessary cultural background and characteristics of source language in order to help the target language readers understand and accept the source cultural information and expressions.

Liberal Translation

Liberal translation refers to the rendering of text from one language to another according to conveying the sense of the original rather than word-for-word meanings. It is adopted when the sentence patterns or speech figures of source language could not be preserved in translation. Compared with literal translation, liberal translation is easier to be understood and accepted by target language readers. All in all, by using this method, the translation could roughly express the original meaning and keep the target language smoothly. But it is not the random translation, here are some examples:

The Chinese term “安居工程” could be translated as “safe living project”, if it is translated in the way of word-for-word. However, this version of translation could not express the Chinese meaning perfectly, because that “安居工程” is aimed to guarantee that average and even poor citizens own their house to live in. So at last, this term is translated liberally as “Housing project for low-income urban residents”

The second case is “拳头产品”, maybe some translators translate it as “fist product” to keep the speech figure and pattern of Chinese. If it is translated like that, foreign readers must be totally confused. Because in their mind, “fist” just equals to a hand gesture and they do not understand that this Chinese term contains a metaphor. Therefore, in this situation, the figure of speech needs to be transferred clearly. The translation version of “Competitive products” is more suitable.

The third example is “表扬信”. It is translated as “the bread and butter letter”, instead of “the compliment letter”. Likewise, “绝交信” is translated as “the dear John letter” instead of “the break-up letter”. In this case, sometimes the Chinese characteristic words could not be translated without losing expressing effect, while some words existing in English just have similar meaning could be found. At this time, there is no need to preserve the Chinese specific feature in pattern or structure, to choose liberal translation is the best way.

Though the translation would be somewhat wordy, it could demonstrate the original natural colors. The following are some typical examples in the external publicity:

(1). I think it is really a big shot in the arm for gene therapy and for medicine in general. (China Daily, April 29, 2008) (大腕)

(2). Examples of bad contract performance, counterfeit commodities, rights infringements and chain debts have occurred one after another. (China Daily, August 20, 2004) (三角债)

It is worthy noting that, when using liberal translation, one should make clear of the context. In Chinese language, one word or phrase often has two or more meanings, which should be focused by translators. The author is believed that liberal translation can be used in the translation of Chinese specific terms by explaining difficult points, but translators should take the context into consideration.

In summary, liberal translation is helpful for readers to understand the connotation of the original texts, at the sacrifice of losing Chinese specific features to some degree. Therefore, in the process of translating words with Chinese characteristics liberally, how to keep a balance between the Chinese feature and expression effect is the key.

From all the above, it could be noticed that when dealing with Chinese characteristic words, translators adopt various translation methods, such as transliteration, literal translation, liberal translation, etc. whatever method is used, they are trying to overcome the obstacles of cultural disparity so as to accomplish the inter-communication between the source language and the target language. And at the same time, translation is to pursue formal correspondence with the original and strive to reach correspondence in essential content. In short, the fundamental task of translation method is how to make the translation have the original implication mood fully expressed and keep the translation readable, faithful to the original both in essence and in form.

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