

On the Translation of English and Chinese Idioms from the Perspective of Cultural Differences

Wei Jin Jiang

Fuzhou Technology and Business University, Fuzhou 350000, Fujian, China

Abstract: As the elite of language and the crystallization of a nation's culture and wisdom, idioms are a kind of peculiar and fixed expressions formed in language use. The translation of English and Chinese idioms has been occupying a significant place in translation area. This paper aims to probe into the cultural differences influencing the translation of these two different language idioms from the perspective of living environment, traditional custom and material culture. Besides, some translation skills of English and Chinese idioms are covered in this paper.

Keywords: Idioms; Differences; English; Chinese; Translation skills

1. Introduction

As the quintessence of language and the crystallization of a nation's culture and wisdom, idioms are a kind of peculiar and fixed expressions formed in language use, including proverbs, colloquialisms, and slang expressions and so on. Possessing a vivid image and carrying local color or national features, most of the idioms are explicit; some are implicit which can trigger varieties of imagination or associations; some need judging from the context for they contain more than one meaning. If language is said to be the minor of culture, idioms, as the quintessence of language, can be respected as the elite of culture. Hence, the translation of idioms largely determines the quality of translation. Translation, in fact, is a rendering from one language into another. With the development of translation field, translation is no longer merely perceived as a conversion of language symbols, but as a cross-culture exchange. In other words, the switching of language symbols is just the surface level of translation while cultural diffusion is the essence of translation. Idiom translation has been considered the most typical in translation field. Eugene. A. Nida has ever grouped the character of language culture into five categories: Material Culture, Religious Culture, Ecological Culture, Linguistic Culture and Social Culture. In this sense, we can generalize the cultural differences of English and Chinese idioms into five facets: living environment, traditional customs, material cultures, religious beliefs and historical allusions. Accordingly, the author endeavors to take living environment, traditional customs and material cultures as three cases to illustrate cultural differences affecting the translation of English and Chinese idioms.^[1]

2. Cultural differences of English and Chinese idioms

2.1 Difference in living environment

The elements of geographical environment play an indispensable role in forming a country's culture. Human beings are incapable of changing the geography. Different geographical environment would directly give rise to differences in people's concept of life. In consequence, the idioms formed in different geographical features appear different.

It is known to all that Britain is an inland country surrounded by the sea and shares no land border with any other countries except the Republic of Ireland. The past glorious history of Britain witnessed that its navigation industry kept ranking first in the world for a long time. Therefore, British people have a strong love for water. In contrast, Chinese people cannot live without earth since most part of China belongs to inland place. As a result, Chinese people have a keen passion for earth. It is such different geographical condition that results in different idioms in these two languages. For example, there is a Chinese idiom called "hui jin ru tu" which represents the behavior of extravagance while in Britain people use the idiom "spend money like water" to designate such behavior. Take another example, the weather in southern China is pretty mild and moisture, so bamboo is a familiar plant for people living there. Consequently, they use the idiom "yu hou chun sun" to delineate the new things springing up in great numbers. Comparatively speaking, in order to convey such meaning, Britain people use the idiom "spring up like mushrooms" since in Britain when spring comes, mushrooms can be seen here and there. We still have a typical instance to illuminate the difference in idioms influenced by different geographical environment. In China, the west wind is the cold air from Siberia. Thereby, the west wind has been signifying a sense or a feeling of bleakness and dismal in Chinese culture. As a result, numerous prominent expressions have been produced, such as "xi feng jin, bei yan nan fei, xiao lai shui ran shuang lin zui, zong shi li ren lei", "lian juan xi feng, ren bi huang hua shou", "ren sheng ruo zhi ru chu jian, he shi xi feng bei hua shan",^[2] However, England boasts a maritime climate and the west wind is the symbol of spring for people there. Then there is a famous sentence produced by Shelley in his , Ode to West Wind, that "it's a warm

wind, the west wind, full of birds' cries”.

2.2 Difference in traditional customs

Traditional custom is a kind of manifestation of cultural awareness formed in long-term practical experience of life of a nation. As a vital component of national culture, language inevitably manifests the nation's traditional custom.

In China, most of the idioms concerning dog denote an emotion of derogation. We have many derogatory idioms about dogs, such as “lang xin gou fei”, “gou gai bu liao chi shi”, “gou za zhong”, “gou tui zi”, “gou zhang ren shi”, “gou ji tiao qiang” and so on. Nevertheless, in western countries people have been viewing dogs as their doorkeepers, friends, pets or companions. As a result, in English language, most idioms regarding dogs contain a dual sense, such as “you are a lucky dog—ni shi yi ge xing yun er”, “to be a top dog—ju yu yao wei”, “every dog has his day—ren ren dou you de yi shi” etc. “Dog tired” means “overwhelmingly tired”. Its literal meaning is “tired like a dog”. It is said that English people often observe their dogs coming back, then, out of exhaustion, lying on the ground as if they were dead. Consequently, this idiom has been used to embody human's weariness.^[3]

Chinese people have long been highlighting the concept that food is the first necessity of people and their diet structure is rich and colorful, which is vividly reflected by some Chinese idioms, such as “chao you yu”, “jiang hai shi lao de la”, “xiao cong ban dou fu—yi qing er bai”, “lao you tiao” and so on. For westerners, their diets are more inclined to bread, cake, cheese, butter and so on. Accordingly, some idioms are produced, such as “earn one's bread—yang jia hu kou”, “a piece of cake—xiao cai yi die”, “have one's finger in the pie—duo guan xian shi”.

2.3 Difference in material cultures

With the ever-increasing expansion of economic globalization and international exchange, western cultures have increasingly exerted great impact on every aspect of Chinese traditional culture. For instance, “coffee, chocolate, sofa” have been translated into “ka fei, qiao ke li, sha fa”, which are commonly used in our daily life. In the meantime, Chinese culture has the similar effect on English language. For example, “gong fu, ma jiang, dou fu” have been translated into “kongfu, mahjong and toufu”. Thus, with the development of translation field, translation is no longer merely perceived as a switching of language symbols, but as a cross-culture exchange.

There is a popular saying in China: “qiao fu nan wei wu mi zhi chui”. It has once been translated by some one that “even a clever housewife fails to cook a meal with no rice.” The translated version and the original one are equivalent in form, catering to Chinese readers who know much about Chinese diet habit. But for English readers, they may feel perplexed since they have little knowledge about Chinese diet habit. As rice is not the main diet for westerners, they would probably make this response: why not cook a meal with flour? As we all know, flour is more popular than rice for their diet habit.

3. Strategies in idiom translation

Translation, as a kind of language activity, aims to reproduce or reappear the original information with the closest and the most natural equivalence. As the famous translator Eugene A. Nida has ever noted, “the relationship between the target text receiver and the target information should be basically the same with the relationship between the original text receiver and the original information. The target text and the original one should be dynamically equivalent to each other.” However, cultural background and rhetorical characteristics existing in idioms have brought in difficulties for translation. When doing translation, we need to ensure the efficiency of cultural transmission of idioms and meanwhile try to retain their national color and regional features, which has long been crucial in translation field.^[4]

3.1 Literal translation

Literary translation has been viewed as a complete representation of the original. It serves as a faithful conveyor of the meaning of the original and in the meantime retains the full flavor of idioms. This is an ideal solution. We may as well have a look at the example below:

She refused several offers of marriage, and then, at the age of forty, found herself left on the shelf.

Ta ju jue le duo ci qiu hun, dao si shi sui, fa xian zi ji mei you jie hun de xi wang le.

Ta ju jue le duo ci qiu hun, dao si shi sui, fa xian zi ji shu zhi gao ge le.

Here we can see that the phrase “on the shelf” was literally translated into “shu zhi gao ge”, which not only faithfully and smoothly expresses the content of the meaning but also keeps the flavor of figure of speech. If it was liberally translated into “mei you jie hun de xi wang”, though smoothly, yet losing the original form and figure of speech, such translation appears to be inferior.

3.2 Liberal translation

Liberal translation, also called free translation, is another translation tactic which does not pursue the form or word order of the original. If there are dissimilarities or great difference between English and Chinese in the sequence of vocabulary, in grammatical structure and art device, free translation should be employed. For example:

The teenagers do not invite Bob to their parties because he is a wet blanket.

A. Qing nian men bu yao qing Bao Bo can jia ta men de ju hui, yin wei ta shi ge sao xing de ren.

B. Qing nian men bu yao qing Bao Bo can jia ta men de ju hui, yin wei ta ge shi tan zi.

Comparing the two versions, we can find that A used liberal translation while B employed literal translation. From the perspective of sentence structure and grammar, both are all right, but according to the meaning of the original, a wet blanket is a reason why the teenagers do not invite Bob to their parties. The version of “shi tan zi” bears no relation with the reason. Although “sao xing de ren” conveys no meaning of “a wet blanket”, it might reveal the logical reason and enable readers to apprehend why Bob was not invited to their party. Comparatively speaking, version B would trigger readers' confusion. Thus, here it is more advisable to employ the liberal strategy.

3.3 Liberal plus literal translation

Literal translation will sometimes reduce the readability of the version, making readers confused and bored. Liberal translation will break the faithfulness of the original. In order to tackle this problem, we ought to employ a tactical combination of liberal translation and literal translation. Such translation strategy can not only keep the figurative flavor of the idioms, but at the same time can express the meaning clearly. Let's take a look at several examples below:

Make hay while the sun shines- Chen zhe tian qing shai gan cao, mo shi liang ji.

Here we can see that "chen zhe tian qing shai gan cao" belongs to literal translation. Although it successfully conveys the original content and the flavor of the proverb, the reader would probably fail to fathom its implication. Therefore, the liberal version "mo shi liang ji" is added. The fine combination of these two strategies enhances the readability and meanwhile keeps the spirit of the original.

Until all is over, ambition never dies- Bu dao huang he xin bu si.

Here it can be seen that "xin bu si" belongs to literal translation while "bu dao huang he" is liberal. The integration of these two tactical methods successfully retains the flavor of the original, facilitating the comprehension of the reader.

Every family is said to have at least one skeleton in the cupboard-Su hua shuo, yi gui li cang ku lou, jian bu de ren de shi jia jia dou you.

It is not difficult to find that "ku lou" is literal version whereas "jian bu de ren de shi" belongs to liberal translation. This skillful combination can not only increase the efficiency, but also guarantee the reader's apprehension of its implication and its original feature.

4. Conclusion

From all that has been discussed above, we can come to a conclusion that idioms are an indispensable part of language and the quintessence of a nation's culture. Being concise and vivid, they are widely used in our daily life. However, different cultural background directly leads to different connotation of idioms, posing great difficulties to translation field. We need to acquire a better understanding of Chinese and English idioms based on their different culture. Only in this way can we fathom the profound connotation or implication of idioms in a better way. Poor translation would ultimately deter successful communication. In order to enable readers to have a good command of the flavor of different cultures, decrease readers' confusion and enrich their vision in the course of appreciating translated works, the author suggests three tactical methods above to handle the rendering of idioms, but they are, as he is convinced, far beyond enough. To be a capable translator, one needs to work hard at different languages and cultures and do adequate practices so as to generate faithful, expressive and elegant versions.

References:

- [1] Eugene A. Nida. *On Translation* [M] Beijing Chinese Foreign Translation Press, 1984.
- [2] Yu Fumin. *A Comparative Study of English and Chinese Idiom* [M]. Shanghai, Shanghai Transportation Press, 1996.
- [3] Jiang Songjian. *A Comparative Study of Chinese and English Translation* [M], Hunan Renmin Press, 2002.
- [4] Zing, H.M. *On the Different Way of Translating Idioms from the Perspective of Cultural Differences* [J]. Jilin University Press, 2008(4)32-33.