

Translation of Chinese Four-character Idioms on Basis of Equivalence Theory

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Abstract: Chinese idioms, as a national culture of concentrated essence, have the nation's unique cultural connotation. With the growing number of western and eastern cultural connections, the idiom translation has become more and more important between communications. Thanks to the different expressions between Chinese and English, especially in terms of history, geography, religious beliefs, and customs and so on, there are many significant differences in several aspects, therefore, how to make the English national readers appreciate Chinese idioms and feel the same way with native readers is the key to translate Chinese idioms. This thesis attempts to explore the English translation of four-character idioms under the guidance of Nida's equivalent translation theory, and make an analysis of idioms translation through the different methods.

Key Words: equivalence translation, theory four-character idioms' structure, translation methods

1 Introduction

To some extent, translation has existed since people began to use different languages to communicate with each other. As Theodore Savory said, Translation is almost as old as original authorship and has a history as honorable and as complex as that of any other branch of literature.

In eastern countries, Strictly speaking, a translation theory in its true sense in China originated from Yan Fu (严复). Yan fu was a famous translator in the late Qing dynasty, he learnt French, western science and technology, including philosophy, natural science and social science, he even went to the field investigation, it laid a solid foundation to his later western sociology of the translation.

He proposed the famous triple principles for translation: faithfulness (信), expressiveness (达), and elegance (雅). The so-called "faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance", with simple words to explain: faithful to the original (faithfulness), meaning accurately and smoothly (expressiveness), having beautiful style and skillful (elegance).

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The translation principle of “fidelity” has been regarded as the first principle among the Chinese and a western translator, Yan Fu’s “faithfulness” is the meaning of the faithful, “faithfulness” emphasizes the original content of transmission, advocates in the process of translation to sense of sense. The expression should be of fluency and of acceptance. Yan Fu uses “expressiveness and elegance” to show his point of view, “elegance” especially embodies that Yan Fu pays attention to readers’ thought, which has caused wide attention in the Chinese translation circle and produced far-reaching effect.

In the west, at the end of eighteenth century, the British literary theorist Tytler proposed: In good translation, the original advantages have been completely into another language, so that another language belongs to the people can get a clear understanding of and strong feelings, and used the original equality. American translation theorist Eugene Nida Tatsuya pointed out: “the so-called translation is from semantics to style in the target language the closest natural equivalent of the reproduction of the original information.” (Nida, 1964). The translation of Chinese set phrases, namely from semantics to form of semantic equivalence process, so that the target language readers can be achieved the same feeling with the source language readers.

2 Equivalence Translation Theory

Equivalent translation theory, which is the earliest theory proposed by AF Taylor in eighteenth century, and then has further development by A, Eugene Nida. The theory has great impact among the Global translation researchers. Because the theory pays more attention to the recipient response but not the information in the form, to some extent, it quelled long struggle of literal translation and free translation.

Equivalent translation in the western translation studies is a recommended translation principle. **It emphasizes** the original works on receptor influence and implications for receptor equivalent translation. Equivalent translation is the focus of the two languages history behind the culture, language habits, thinking emotional tendency, and not dwell on the difference in thousands of ways personality.

In Nida’s “The Theory and Practice of Translation” (1969), Nida’s “dynamic equivalence” was further elaborated: “in a dynamic equivalence translation, we ask the readers of the response and the original readers’ reaction should basically the same”. It is not difficult to find, Nida’s translation theory emphasizes the “equivalent”, however, “Dynamic equivalence” was put forward first. Later on, it was modified into “functional equivalence”.

In explaining the new concept of translation. Nida first studies the nature of meaning and language. According to Nida, language is used by human beings to map the cultural experience of different people, and the nature of language as free symbols enables it to express those new experience and concepts that come from other languages and cultures.

With this view of language, Nida argues that everything said in one language can be said in another, and the form of the original message should be adapted to the target language and culture in order to communicate the meaning of the message effectively. This means that the main focus of translation should be the intelligibility of it, that is, a translation is intended to be understood by the receptors. So the translator should always take into account of the reader's conditions when translating message.

In 1990s, Nida has improved his theory, taking into account the differences between the original text and the translation text. He divided translation level into two levels: "the highest level and the lowest level." Although in the actual translation, it is difficult for us to get the highest level of equivalence, but the lowest level is the minimum criterion of translation equivalence." To this point, we can define by Nida: "the lowest level of equivalence refers to readers to understand and appreciate the reader of the source text is how to understand and appreciate the text information". If the translation is not up to the standard, it cannot be called a good translation. In his book, Nida has repeatedly stressed, in his definition, equivalence is not absolute but relative.

Nida's new concept of translation is expressed in the following statement: Translating consists in reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source message, first in terms of meaning and second in terms of style. This definition of translation clarifies the relationship between meaning and form, that is, meaning has priority over form, and in order to preserve the meaning, the form must be changed. In the concept of "closest natural equivalent", Nida proposes a new principle of translation-dynamic equivalence. He thinks that the traditional principles of translation are mainly oriented toward formal equivalence, which focuses upon producing the formal and stylistic features of the original language and culture. In the new principle, the old focus is shifted from the form to the receptor's response. Hence, when a translator translates or evaluates, the first element he should keep in mind is: Who will be the reader of the translation and can he understand the translation correctly? Then, the goal of translation is to elicit from the TL (target language) reader the same response as that of the source language reader to the original message.

Translation is treated as a dynamic communication process in which the relationship between the message and the receptor becomes the central point of translation. This view is different from the traditional ones in which translation is mainly message-oriented. In order to achieve the dynamic equivalence, Nida sets up a three-stage translational procedure characterized by the famous deep-structure transfer.

In summary, Nida's theory is a systematic analysis of the problems of translation, which consists of its theoretical foundation, the definition of translation, the principles of translation and the procedure of translation.

3 The Background of Four-character Idioms

Generally speaking, four-character idioms are mostly derived from ancient literature. The meaning of a four-character idioms usually surpasses the sum of the meanings carried by the four characters, as four-character idioms are often intimately linked with the myth, story or historical fact from which they were derived. As such, four-character idioms do not follow the usual grammatical structure and syntax of the modern Chinese spoken language, and are instead highly compact and synthetic.

Four-character idioms in isolation are often unintelligible to modern Chinese, and when students in China learn Four-character Idioms in school as part of the classical curriculum, they also need to study the context from which the Four-character idioms were born. Often the four characters reflect the moral behind the story rather than the story itself. As is known to all, Chinese is heavily idiomatic, Chinese four-character idiom is widely used both in writing and speaking, it takes on various characteristics.

3.1 The Features of Four-Character Idioms

Firstly, the four-character idioms are readily available and conventional. To be specific, the idioms “刻苦耐劳”, “说东道西” and so on, are all modern generation, formation of idioms. As for a handful of four characters, such as “百花齐放”, “百家争鸣”, are possibly a long-term use.

Secondly, the four-character idioms should have strong rhetoric function. The idiom has strong expressive and special rhetorical effect, for the idiom judgment, people can not consider the difference with the general language characteristics. As people usually say, if idioms can be used well, it can be worth a few adjectives. This argument simply reflects idiom's economic effect and rhetorical effect. The rhetorical function of the same idiom ideographic characteristics related to the overall meaning of the idiom, literal meaning is often inconsistent, which makes the person produce associative, concise and comprehensive effect.

Thirdly, the four-character idioms should be stereotyped. For instance, the idiom in china has the meaning of “has become”. The “type”, mainly refers to the number and order of syllables. In the popular mind, an external form of idioms is four syllables. “Stereotypes”, emphasized the idiom parts and format, can not change. Here, we say “stereotypes”, is mainly about idioms' formation – definitely four words. It is more convenient and efficient to judge from the external idioms' form.

3.2 Applications in Translation of Idioms

Peter Newmark defines culture as: the way of life and its manifestations that are peculiar to a community that uses a particular language as its means of expression. Culture manifests itself

in patterns of language; the amazing development of human history is mirrored to a large extent in the development of the vocabulary. Calver Walvin has once remarked, though by no means a perfect mirror, the lexicon of a language remains the single most effective way of approaching and understanding the culture of speakers, therefore, idiom as a specialized form of language, will naturally reflect its culture like all other kind of words.

As the most sensitive part of vocabulary, English idiom may provide clues to people's history, geographical features, environment, customs, religion and literary works, etc. The emergence of idiom is closely related with people's lives and their work. England is located on a large island; its navigation was once most advanced in the history, people created a lot of idioms that have something with water, sea or navigation. While Chinese people live on the mainland so far, therefore, the "land" of "something with land" appears in the Chinese idioms very much.

Besides, it is well acknowledged that idioms have rich national features; its figurative image reflects the ethnic characteristics. Some of the images aren't familiar with foreign culture, if you, not for the target language reader to accept, according to the principle of equivalent translation, we need to make some adjustments to the original image, which can be converted into the target language for translation readers who accept the image. Such as: Chinese Idiom "雨后春笋" to describe things in general and the rapid development of large numbers. Because it is not English native plants, the word "bamboo" is introduced from abroad. If people use literal translation, it would cause the barrier to understanding. Therefore, this idiom in English should be spring like "Mushroom" to reflect the same effect. The idiom "谋事在人, 成事在天", contains a "day" of Buddhist terms. In Christianity as the religion of the British and American people, "God" is people's worship idol. Therefore, this idiom of Buddhism should be converted to Christianity in the "God" to make the readers do not produce misunderstanding, so as to achieve the equivalence principle.

4 Methods of Chinese Idioms Translation

In our native language, the Chinese four-character idioms play a very important role in our life. Chinese idioms are mostly four-character idioms, they are concise, vivid, powerful and endowed with the imagination, and most of the idioms have a relation with ancient Chinese story that makes the idiom of the translation particularly difficult. The translator should not only strive to linguistic precision, but also has great knowledge. So the Chinese idiom translation is complex and out of the ordinary.

4.1 Literal Translation

It does not violate the language specification and error association rather than maintain the original style of direct translation, in other words, **the** translation tries to keep the original form of the language, including vocabulary, sentence structure, imagery, and verbal fluency. Literal

translation in Chinese idioms translation is performed for a literal meaning of the idiom translation. Besides, it has the advantages of vivid image, easy to understand and original. Such as “对牛弹琴” (play the lute to a cow), “矫枉过正” (exceed the proper limits in righting a wrong), “半途而废” (give up half way), “一文不名” (without a penny to one’s name), “治病救人” (cure the sickness to save the patient), “削足适履” (cut the feet to fit the shoes). The translation of four-character idioms is all corresponded with their Chinese four-character idioms in terms of vocabulary, sentence structure, imagery, and verbal fluency.

4.2 Free Translation

Thanks to the influence of cultural factors on translation, some idioms do not retain the original statement of literal meaning and significance of the image, they cannot find **synonymous** idioms borrowed as well, in this case, the original image can be replaced by another translation image which readers are familiar with so as to convey the original language meaning. For example, “落花流水” usually refers to the big break, translated into English is “to be shattered to pieces”; “乌烟瘴气” “to describe the situation of confusion”, with “chaos” a word to express; “望子成龙” in the English translation cannot be translated its image, then translated into English we should use short words to describe the meaning of the word: “to expect one’s son to become an outstanding personage”.

4.3 Combination of Literal and Liberal Translation

This method is one of the most important translation means for adaptation in the translation; it can have literal meaning, significance and implications of the image. The idiom can be translated into other language according to literal meaning, but the translation will lose its original meanings (metaphor and rich colors) thanks to the different cultural, social, historical connotation, and make people feel confused, then we should adopt “combination of literal and liberal translation”. For example, “盲人骑马” can be translated into “A blind man on a blind horse rushing headlong to disaster.” Its advantage **can avoid** those who don’t understand Chinese and retain the original image.

4.4 **Borrowing** Translation

It is one of the most commonly used methods of idiom translation, namely they use words from target language, which can make the translation easy to understand. But if the translator lacks a correct and comprehensive understanding of the idioms’ cultural connotation, it could easily lead to improper use.

As a result of human different feelings about things and different social experiences, there exist a lot of differences between English and Chinese idioms, For some idioms, if the literal meaning and significance of the image convey the same cultural information, this idiom can be

used “borrowing” in translation. As the English idiom “Practice makes perfect” can be translated into Chinese “熟能生巧”; “Strike while the iron is hot” into “趁热打铁”; “隔墙有耳” into “Walls have ears”. These translations between English and Chinese idioms are in some corresponding. Because of similar sources, these have same understanding. Besides, Chinese idiom “破釜沉舟” and the English “burn one’s boats” are both derived from the bilateral military strategy, so the usage and the meaning is the same.

4.5 Rhetorical Translation

It is faithful to the original, the appropriate use of synonymous idioms, both original and beautiful. To be specific, In Chinese idioms, there are often juxtaposed and dual structures, which use two different metaphorical expressions of the same meaning, the meaning is repeated before and after. When encountering this kind of situation, translators can use abridged method to save juxtaposition, repetition, and retaining the basic means while avoid superfluous. For example, “铜墙铁壁” can be translated into “wall of bronze”, instead of “wall of copper and iron”; “愁眉苦脸” can be directly translated as “gloomy faces”; “长吁短叹” can be translated into “sighing deeply”.

4.6 Literal Translation with Annotation Method

Some literal translation of idioms may be ambiguous and fuzzy, so filling the original historical background and source can be a better expression of the meaning of original text.

Annotation is to retain the original national characteristics and local color, for some contains allusions to idioms, translation must fill its own cultural background in order to clear the intent. In Chinese English translation, some Chinese cultural backgrounds should be added to assist the specific notes. For example, “朝秦暮楚” can be translated into “To serve (the state of) Qin in the morning and (the state of) Chu in the evening”, which make readers difficult to understand, so need to add “be quick to switch sides” with annotation. Thus translators should interpret this context well.

5 Conclusion

Language is the expressional form of culture, and meanwhile, idioms are the same as poems and other literary works which is the essence of language. Chinese four-character idioms are large and complex, for their meanings are very colorful and distinctive. On the basis of the equivalence translation theory, it is of great help to make the four-character idiom translation easier and more precise. Of course, every idiom has a deep meaning and association, the difficulty of translation is the differences between cultures, so when translating, it is very necessary to consider the different cultural background and get to know the differences of Chinese and English vocabulary.

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