The Translation of English Animal Idioms from the Perspective of Intercultural Communication

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Abstract. Idioms, the essence of language, embody rich cultural connotation. Animal idioms occupy an important position among idioms. This thesis studies the translation of English animal idioms from the perspective of intercultural communication. First, this thesis makes a comparison of cultural connotations between Chinese and English animal idioms, which can be concluded into the following four aspects: the same animal sharing similar cultural connotations, different animals sharing similar cultural connotations, the same animal baring different cultural connotations, and vacancy of cultural connotations in different cultures. Based on the comparisons and under the guidance of Newmark’s communicative translation theory, three translation methods including literal translation, substitution, and free translation, are concluded in order to promote the intercultural communication between Chinese and English cultures.

Introduction

A language is a reflection of a culture. Idioms containing rich cultural connotations are the essence and treasure of language. This thesis focuses on the translation of English animal idioms from the perspective of international communication.

Background of the Study

With the rapid development of economic globalization and technology, the whole world turns into a global village, and intercultural communication is becoming more and more important. People from different parts of the world are eager to learn other’s cultures. As a member of the global village, China also holds an increasing interest and curiosity about western cultures. Under such circumstances, translation becomes indispensable and vital for Chinese people to know foreign cultures.

This thesis chooses the translation of English animal idioms as a specific field to discuss the translation solutions for better intercultural communication. As we all know, there are a large number of animal idioms in both English and Chinese due to the rich history of the two languages, and the origins of animal idioms have close relationship with the nation’s culture, such as geographical environment, customs, religion, history, social background, etc. Thus, owing to the cultural differences, even the same animals may have different cultural connotations in English and Chinese, which will lead to the misunderstanding during the translation. The proper translation of English animal idioms will not only contribute to a better understanding of western culture, but also stimulate the cross-cultural communication between our two nations.

Methods of the Study

The study will be done through the following steps.


(2) Data analysis. Those English animal idioms will be classified into four categories according to their different cultural connotations. The purpose is trying to find out the similarities and differences in cultural connotations between Chinese and English animal idioms.
Suggestions for translation. Based on the similarities and differences of cultural connotations of Chinese and English animal idioms, communicative translation theory will be applied to the practice of the E-C translation of English animal idioms. Consequently, three translation methods will be concluded to guide the translation of English animal idioms.

Necessity of the Study

Being so significant in the language of a culture, idioms have long been the focus of the academic studies. However, previous studies on idioms are mainly centered on their origins and expressive functions. With the increasing frequency of international communication, more and more attention has been paid to the studies of metaphoric associations and cultural comparison between Chinese and English idioms, such as A Study of English Idioms from New Perspectives: Culture and Pragmatics (Zhang Zhenhua, 2007). Animal idioms are an integral part of English idioms and the animal images bare different cultural connotations in Chinese and English cultures. The study of translation of English animal idioms from the perspective of international communication is a relative new angle to study English idioms. Under the guidance of the communicative translation theory, three translation methods including literal translation, substitution and free translation are introduced to deal with the English animal idiom translation aiming to improve the quality of the translation.

A Comparison of Cultural Connotations between Chinese and English Animal Idioms

In both English and Chinese, there are a lot of animal idioms which are brief, vivid and interesting. The reason is that human beings have a close relationship with animals. Some animals are food sources, such as chicken, duck and pig. Some are used to work for men, such as horse, donkey, cow, etc. Some are men’s good friends, like dog and cat. The animal idioms reflect a nation’s living environment, customs and culture. For example, there exist a large number of idioms about cattle in Chinese, while in English, the idioms about fish take a large proportion, such as “neither fish nor fowl”, “a fish out of water”, and “an odd fish”, etc. This is because that China is a traditional agricultural country where people depend on cattle to help them with their farm work, while the UK is an island country surrounded by the sea where fish is the most common creature. Therefore, animal idioms are rich in cultural connotations. This chapter will focus on the comparison of the cultural connotations of animal idioms between Chinese and English.

The Same Animal Sharing Similar Cultural Connotations

Despite the differences in culture and beliefs between China and Western countries, different nations share some similarities in understanding the objective material world. Consequently, there are some animal idioms with the same animal images sharing similar cultural connotations between Chinese and English. Take “bee” as an example. In both Chinese and English cultures, the cultural connotations of “bee” are almost the same, referring to the virtue of diligence or the state of being busy. In Chinese, “bee” is used to describe a diligent person. In English, the idioms with similar cultural connotations can also be found, such as “as busy as a bee” or “a busy bee”. Another example is “swan”. It is a symbol of holiness and purity, representing people’s good wishes in both Chinese and English cultures. In English, there are lots of idioms about “swan” with commendatory meanings, such as “as graceful as a swan”, “black swan (a rare and precious treasure)”, etc. The great writer William Shakespeare has been honored as “The Swan of Avon” to show people’s respect. The Chinese idiom “as pure as a swan” shares almost the same meaning.

More examples about the same animal images sharing similar cultural connotations are listed as follows.

1) a wolf in sheep’s clothing  
2) as stupid as an ass  
3) as obstinate as a donkey  
4) the dove of peace  
5) at a snail’s pace  
6) fight like a tiger
Different Animals Sharing Similar Cultural Connotations

Since both Chinese and English are complicated language systems, many animals with different conceptual meanings may share similar cultural connotations. For example, sheep and horse are different animals, but the Chinese equivalent of the English idiom “lock the stable door after the horse is stolen” is “亡羊补牢”, and “害群之马” has the same connotation with an English idiom “black sheep of the family”. This situation reflects the differences in the cognition of the objective world between Chinese and English.

More short examples are given as follows.

1) goose flesh 鸡皮疙瘩
2) Kill the goose that lays the golden egg. 杀鸡取卵
3) like a cat on hot bricks 热锅上的蚂蚁
4) like a drowned rat 落汤鸡
5) birds of a feather 一丘之貉
6) as timid as a rabbit 胆小如鼠

The Same Animal Baring Different Cultural Connotations

In English and Chinese, people may have different recognition and feelings towards the same animals. Therefore, it is quite natural that the same animal image may bare different cultural connotations. This has presented the major difficulty for the translation of animal idioms. Two typical examples of this category are discussed in the following part.

Dragon.

The most classic example of discrepant cultural connotation between Chinese animal idioms and English ones is “dragon”.

Since ancient times, there have been many legends about “dragon” going on among Chinese people, in which “dragon” is regarded as a mysterious and holy creature with great magic power. Chinese people regarded themselves as “the offspring of dragons”. On the one hand, “dragon” is considered as the symbol of dignity and strength. There are some related Chinese idioms like “hoping his son to become an outstanding person”, etc. On the other hand, “dragon” was the symbol of imperiality in feudal dynasties of ancient China. The emperors called themselves “the son of dragon” and the palace they lived in was decorated with dragons, too. It can be said that everything related to the emperor was added by “dragon”.

However, according to the definition in the Oxford Advanced Learner’s English-Chinese Dictionary (7th Edition, 2009: 605), “dragon” is a kind of giant and aggressive animal with wings and a long tail, that can breath out fire. It is usually used to describe a woman who behaves in an aggressive and frightening way. In English legend, someone who kills a dragon is honored as a hero. In the Anglo-Saxon epic Beowulf, the image of “dragon” is a monster. Thus, in English, “dragon” is a symbol of evil and most English idioms with “dragon” are derogatory, such as “a dragon” and “chase the dragon”.

Dog.

There are a large amount of dog idioms in English. Actually, both English and Chinese people like to raise dogs, while the image associated with dogs are totally different.

In ancient China, the purpose of raising dog is to keep the door. In fact, most Chinese idioms about “dog” are derogatory and used to refer to bad people or evil deeds. On the contrary, western people treat dogs as their faithful friends and English idioms about “dog” are mostly commendatory, for example, “a lucky dog”, “a dog’s chance”, “Love me, love my dog.”, “Every dog has its day.”, etc.

Vacancy of Cultural Connotations of Animals in Different Cultures

This category means that some animals have rich cultural connotations in English, but have no cultural meanings in Chinese, and vice versa. This kind of animal idioms is culture-loaded and cannot find equivalent in target language, so it asks for translator’s bicultural ability when dealing with them.

Example in English: White Elephant. To Chinese people, “white elephant” is a special type of elephant with white skin, two curved outer teeth and a long nose. There are no other associations and cultural connotations about this animal. In fact, in English, “a white elephant” refers to an embarrassing gift, a very costly possession that is worthless to its owner and only a cause of trouble. (Hou Haining, 2001:245) This idiom comes from a story in Thailand. Thailand is famous for its elephant, but the white elephant is so rare and precious that it is only reserved for the king. Once there
was a king who gave the white elephant to the minister that he was not satisfied with as a gift as well as a punishment. Because white elephant was regarded as holy creature which cannot be transferred or used to do farm work, the minister had to feed it without other choices. At last, the white elephant became a heavy burden for the minister. Thus, the rhetorical meaning of white elephant came into being.

**Examples in Chinese.** China boasts of a long history and brilliant civilization, so the number of Chinese animal idioms with unique cultural connotations is numerous. Take “Crane” as an example. It is a symbol of longevity in Chinese culture and used to represent outstanding person. But in westerners’ eyes, it is nothing but a kind of bird with long legs and long neck. Other examples include “silkworm”, “tortoise”, “mandarin duck”, “carp”, “Kylin”, etc.

**Methods on Translation of English Animal Idioms**

**Communicative Translation Theory**

Communicative translation theory was proposed by Newmark in his *Approaches to Translation* (1981). “Communicative translation attempts to produce on is readers an effect as close as possible to that obtained on the readers of the original.” (Newmark, 1981:39) That is, the aim of communicative translation is that the receptors in the target language would have the same or similar response as the receptors in the source language. To be more specific, the translation of English animal idioms should take the Chinese readers’ understandability as the priority.

**Translation Methods of English Animal Idioms**

Based on the comparisons of cultural connotations discussed in chapter two, three different translation methods are put forward in terms of the treatment of animal images in the target language (Chinese) to deal with the translation of English animal idioms in different categories.

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**Literal translation: use the same animal images in the target language.** Using the same animal images in Chinese to deal with English animal idioms is only practical when the same animal shares similar cultural connotations as those analyzed in 2.1. For example:

1) as sly as a fox: 像狐狸一样狡猾
2) as busy as bees: 像蜜蜂一样忙碌
3) as stupid as all ass: 蠢如驴
4) as ugly as a toad: 像癞蛤蟆一样丑
5) to kill two birds with one stone: 一石二鸟
6) make a monkey out of somebody: 拿某人当猴耍
7) play cat and mouse with somebody: 和某人玩起猫捉老鼠的游戏
8) when the cat is away the mice will play: 猫儿不在,鼠儿自在
9) a rat crossing the street is chased by all: 老鼠过街,人人喊打
10) as brave as a lion: 勇猛如狮

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**Substitution: Replace the Images in English Animal Idioms with Different Chinese Animal Images.** This method can be used to handle the English animal idioms discussed in 2.2, when different animal images share similar cultural connotations. For example:

1) as mute as a fish: 噤若寒蝉
2) as stubborn as a mule: 僵的像头牛
3) as timid as a hare: 胆小如鼠
4) neither fish nor fowl: 非驴非马
5) like a duck to water: 如鱼得水
6) drink like a fish: 牛饮
7) eat like a horse: 狼吞虎咽
8) a rat in a hole: 瓮中之鳖
9) to sell a pig in a poke: 挂羊头卖狗肉
10) all evil crow, an evil egg: 龙生龙凤生凤

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**Free translation: omit the images during the translation.** For the cases like 2.3 and 2.4, where the cultural connotations of English animal images are diverse or vacant in Chinese, the animal images can be omitted during the translation and guarantee the comprehension of Chinese readers. For example:

1) be like a dog with two tails: 非常高兴
2) every dog has his day: 人人皆有得意日
Conclusion

This thesis examines the cultural differences between Chinese and English animal idioms and puts forward three translation methods to deal with the translation of English animal idioms.

It must be pointed out that there are some limitations in this thesis because of the author’s limited language competence.

First, since the number of English animal idioms is enormous, those quoted examples only account for “the tip of the iceberg”. They may be not sufficient.

Second, there are some other translation methods which can be used in translating English animal idioms. But owing to the restricted capability, the author just concludes three methods in this thesis.

References


