On the Analysis of Untranslatability of Culture

Sheng-Ai LI¹,a, Ning SUN¹,b,*

¹Jilin Agricultural University, Changchun, China

a359469156@qq.com, b342640245@qq.com

*Corresponding author

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Abstract. Translation is not merely a cross-language communication, but more of a cross-cultural communication. When translation confront with both language and cultural barriers, linguistic untranslatability and cultural untranslatability appear. This paper elaborates the relationship between language, culture and translation, and explores the causes of cultural untranslatability and its classification, thus provides some constructive advice to transform untranslatability to translatability.

Introduction

Translation, an activity of both cross-language and cross-culture, has played an important role in the evolution of history and society. With the fast-paced development in all the areas in human life, translation, as an inevitable medium for communication, has become more and more prominent in various demands in today’s world. Culture translation is of great significance in the increasing international communication.

Nevertheless, it is by no means an easy thing. When translation confront with both language and cultural barriers, linguistic untranslatability and cultural untranslatability appear. The issue of untranslatability has long been the center of attention from philosophers, linguists and scholars from other related areas, among which the most well-known are W. V. O. Quine and T. S. Kuhn.

Quine’s indeterminacy [1] of translation and Kuhn’s theory of incommensurability [2] are the beginning discussion about untranslatability. Quine revealed to us the indeterminacy of translation based on the indeterminacy of meaning and the inscrutability of reference, making us realize that the external behavior cannot solely determine meaning and reference. Quine thus provided us with a whole new perspective to contemplate the issue concerned translation. Kuhn then further developed this theory into the incommensurability theory which can also be applied to the discussion of linguistic and cultural topics [3]. First, the author wants to elaborate the relationship between language, culture and translation, and then explore the causes of cultural untranslatability and its classification, thus provides some constructive advice to transform untranslatability to translatability.

Language, Culture and Translation

Language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires by a system of voluntarily produced symbols. Culture means the total way of life of a person, including the pattern of belief, customs, objects, institutions, techniques and language that characterizes the life of human community. Language is part of culture, the
carrier and container of culture; it is influenced and shaped by culture. Every people have its distinct language and culture. Different cultures make their different ideas, values and beliefs reflected in different language. Thus nobody can deny that language and culture cannot exist without each other, and they are closely related to each other. As cultures are diverse, so languages are diverse. Understanding the words and expressions of a different language is not an easy task. Translation is, in fact, a converting process. Theoretically, a good translation should deliver its reader the exact conception from the target language. Eugene A. Nida pointed out that the standard of judging and determining a good translation relies on the feedback of the receptor and the message given in the original setting [4].

Language is a cultural phenomenon. It is the product as well as the carrier of culture. The close relationship between language and culture determines that language translation is inseparable with culture. On the one hand, translation is a kind of intercultural communication. Translation, from the perspective of communication, is a way of transmitting messages and exchanging information. Specifically, it is an intercultural communication between author and translator and between translator and the readers of the target language. On the other hand, translation is a medium of cultural exchange. The purpose and characteristics of translation lie in cultural and ideological exchanges. It is the urge of people in different communities, nations, regions and countries to get to understand each other that makes translation a necessity.

The purpose of translation is to promote understanding among different countries and nations. Translation consists of reproducing the receptor language and the closest natural equivalent of the target language, one in terms of meaning and the other in terms of style. However, to reproduce the closest natural equivalent in the target language is more or less influenced by the cultural differences. Because there exist lots of differences in history, geographic features, traditional customs and religious beliefs etc., so there are some obstacles which hinder people from understanding translation properly and accurately.

**Translatability vs. Untranslatability**

Is translation possible or impossible has been a heated discussion among philosophers, linguists as well as translation theorists through the history of translation. Some scholars and artists believe that virtually everything is translatable. While others insist that translation is ultimately impossible [1].

Catford put forward two kinds of untranslatability: they are linguistic untranslatability and cultural untranslatability [5]. Cultural untranslatability is due to the absence in the target language culture of a relevant situational feature for the source text.

The problem of translatability or untranslatability is closely related to man’s understanding of the nature of language, meaning and translation. On the understanding that the object of translation is the message instead of the carrier of the message, language-specific norms considered untranslatable by some linguists should be excluded from the realm of untranslatable. Socio-semiotic meaning carried by a source expression does not coincide with those of a comparable expression in the target language. The controversy over the problem of translatability or untranslatability stemmed from the vagueness of the notion of meaning and a lack of consensus over the understanding of the nature of language and translation.
Factors leading to Untranslatability [6]

(1) Religions cultural difference

Religion is an integral part of human culture. Religious culture can be reflected in many ways, such as religious beliefs, values, worships, taboo, etc. religious have a profound impact in people’s lives. As a result, we should notice the cultural differences in translation.

In Chinese religious culture, “dragon” is a highly respectful creature; it is a symbol of sacredness, prestige and solemnity. In ancient China, emperors of different dynasties regard themselves as the symbol of “real dragon”. The Chinese expression means “wishing one’s son becoming somebody later.” However, in western culture, “dragon is a kind of fierce and cruel and horrible monster who can spur fume and fire. This, of course, is quite counter to Chinese custom. When foreigners hear “dragon”, they would connect it with the animal exists in their mind. So, in our translation, we would better translate “dragon” like “Long”, and add some explanation afterwards. Otherwise, westerners cannot get the meaning.

(2) Personal Values

Translation is the external representation of people’s mind-set. Different natural and social conditions will exert different influence on people’s thinking pattern. Therefore, people from different countries or districts vary in wording, phrasing, sentence and text structuring, and semantic association.

The western people tend to think in an analytic and linear way, from general to detail. In textual construction, they would present the conclusion first while Chinese like to narrate from beginning to the end chronologically. Affected by the hieroglyph, Chinese are good at expressing abstract concept in terms of imagery, while on the contrary, English are accustomed to expressing specific ideas in abstract concept.

What’s more, English grammar is dominant in sentence expressing while Chinese usually make use of the logical relation to connect the sentence. Conjunctions and subjects are often omitted in Chinese and the sentences are rather shorter compared with English.

(3) Idioms and conventions

Idioms as a special form of language exit in both of them and carry a large amount of cultural information such as history, geography, and religion, custom, nationality psychology, thought pattern and etc. and therefore are closely related to culture.

Idioms basically come from the conventions, and to a great extent, reflect a nationality’s cultural characteristics, and the different nationality’s experience of life and the national languages. Britain Island is surrounded by sea. That’s the reason that words or terms about sea and boat are rich, such as smooth sailing, all at sea.

(4) Aesthetic Preference

Learning a foreign language is in separable from learning its culture. We need to learn enough about the language’s culture so that we can communicate in the target language properly to achieve not only the linguistic competence but also the pragmatic or communicative competence as well.

Anyone studying a foreign language has to be bicultural as well as bilingual to speak the new language in a way that it is not disparaging to the culture and its origin. Language does not end at the meaning or the use of words associated to a culture’s words representing beliefs, history, and the culture of their origin and they must be used accordingly.
Conclusion

In a word, language is the carrier of culture, the main expressional form of culture, which develops along with nation, country and society’s development. Language is a part of a nation’s culture. Language and culture are closely related to and depend on each other through their history. The native language is acquired along with the ways, attitudes and patterns of behaving of the social group, and these ways, attitudes and patterns of behaving patterns find their expression through language. In the view of this, we can know that language is an inseparable or integral part of culture, and the medium through which culture is acquired.

References


