On Chinese Vogue Word Translation from Cultural Perspective

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Abstract. This paper discusses the source, and the features of vogue words, applies Susan Bassnett’ cultural translation theory and Eugene Nida’s translation theories to assess the Chinese vogue word translation, and eventually puts forward some translations strategies and techniques of Chinese Vogue words.

Introduction

Chinese vogue words assumes an important position in the system of Chinese Culture for it serves as a window for foreigners to glimpse into Chinese modern culture and an effective means to familiarize foreigners with Chinese culture. Consequently, it is asserted that the translation of Chinese vogue words into English is significant in publicizing Chinese culture and that it is worthy of deep research and careful study. Since vogue words have its own specific features, their translation calls for some different translation methods and strategies. In order to maintain the original flavor in the translated Chinese vogue words, the know-how has become the chief concern. This paper discusses the source, and the features of vogue words, applies Susan Bassnett’ cultural translation theory and Eugene Nida’s translation theories to assess the Chinese vogue word translation, and eventually puts forward some translations strategies and techniques of Chinese Vogue words.

Vogue words

Vogue words are popular with more and more people throughout the whole world. Vogue words have faddish, trendy, ubiquitous features and there is something fresh and novel about them. They may be newly-coined words or they may be old words with the newly-adopted usages and newly-obtained meanings. Often they quickly become clichés or standard idioms, and sometimes they pass into obscurity after a period of feverish popularity (Bryan A. Garner, 2000).[1] The application of vogue words in the conversation serves to show off instead of express certain specific meanings.

Vogue words can be formed by several means. The usage of jargons in the daily life is one of its sources. A vogue word may first be adopted by some professionals to promote their conversation, then it happens to catch the attention of the media, and after that it is widely used by the public who in fact have no idea of what the vogue word means and use it just as a way to parade their professionalism and trendiness. Moreover, newly-coined words, or the neologism contributes to the largest of vogue words. In response to the changes and innovations of the society, more and more vogue words have come into being accordingly. The attachment of novel meanings to the existing words also boosts the formation of vogue words, which not only enrich the cultural connotation of the language, but also increase the attraction and the charm of the language. For example, “Tekunsheng” merely refers to the economically disadvantaged students, but now it has an amusing and interesting interpretation, which means the sleepy students in class. The new meanings are attached to the word “Tekunsheng” for “Kun” in Chinese has two meanings, namely poor and sleepy. The ingenious application of puns achieves the humorous effects, which enables it to become a vogue word. Lastly, with the more and more frequent mutual interactions between nations, loan words constitute vogue words, as well.

Vogue words can reflect the underlying culture behind them. In China, vogue words tend to reflect the negative social aspects such as the unreasonableness and unfairness of the society with
sarcasm. Yet the use of this kind of vogue words does not transform its users to cynics. Instead, vogue words accuse the society of its guilty and ugliness in an indirect, humorous and thought-provoking way. For example, “My father is Li Gang”. Li Gang is the police chief whose son shouted the remark to the public when he drove his car and hit others. Then when it was reported by the media, it became a vogue word in an instant. In China, vogue words are usually driven and publicized by media. In addition, internet plays the role of catalyst in the popularity of vogue words. Actually the internet has established a big stage for the vogue words and led to numerous diverse vogue words ranging from verbal expressions to non-verbal ones. For example, a blue thin mushroom with a sad face, which means sadness and the desire to burst into tears for blue and sadness are similar in pronunciation. When it first appeared on the internet, more and more netizens reprinted it in their communications with others on the internet. A new vogue came into being.

Vogue words, as weather wane of the value orientation, reflect the value orientation of the society. In China, the value orientation reflected by vogue words demonstrated four characteristics: fortune-oriented, open to the previous embarrassing topics, entertainment-centered, simple and creative. For example, “fry”, which means purchasing something at a low price but selling it at a high price; “Small Three”, which means the women who have a steady sexual relationships with married man for money; “bar”, which means the entertaining place; “extremely packed”, which means there are lots of people.

**Theoretical Framework**

**Susan Bassnett’s Cultural Translation Theory.** Suan Bassnett has proposed cultural translation theory, which has influenced the translation field and assumed an irreplaceable position in Cultural Turn in translation history. She points out the translation unit should be culture rather than the linguistic units such as words, sentences, paragraphs, or the texts, which the traditional linguistic approach has insisted. Therefore, she thinks that translation should be the exchange of culture instead of the unitary exchange of linguistic matters. And according to her, the translation can be divided into the inter-cultural translation and intra-cultural one so the translation should achieve the functional equivalence in culture instead of the semantic equivalence. “Translation is not supposed to be confined to the description of source text and discourse. On the contrary, translation should dig out the functional equivalence in the culture of target language---The final end of translation is the realization of cultural shift.”[2] When it comes to translation strategy, Suan Bassnett proposes “foreignization dominates, domestication subordinates” for some expressions in the original text is deeply rooted in the unique culture, which have no counterparts in the target language. Domestication is “A term used to describe the translation strategy in which a transparent, fluent style is adopted in order to minimize the strangeness of the foreign text for TL readers...it is identified with a policy common in dominant cultures which are ‘aggressively monolingual, un receptive to the foreign’, and which he describes as being ‘accustomed to fluent translations that invisibly inscribe foreign text with[target language] values and provide readers with narcissistic experience of recognizing their own culture in a cultural other’. Foreignizing translation in which a TT is produced which deliberately breaks target conventions by retaining something of the foreignness of the original.”[3] Venuti regarded foreignizing translation as a challenge towards domestication and the function is to “register the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text, sending the reader abroad.”[4] Bassnett’s emphasis on foreignization has propelled the exchange of different culture, which is beneficial to breaking through the dominance of western culture. The tendency can be perceived in the emergence of expressions such as “Kongfu, Dangma, Guanxi” in English.

**Eugene Nida's Theory as References.** Eugene Nida is the aggressive advocator of Functional Equivalence Theory, which is previously named as dynamic equivalence theory. But later on, Eugene substitutes functional equivalence for dynamic equivalence. Dynamic equivalence is defined as “the degree to which the receptors of the message in the receptor language respond to it
in substantially the same manner as the receptors of the source language. The relationship between receptors and the message in receptor language should be generally the same as that of the original message in source language. The responses the original message and target message provoke respectively should be close, which is more often than not the situation, if not, identical.” [5] To apply functional equivalence theory into translation, the translator should first understand the response of the receptors of the source text, then predict the response of the receptors of the target language, and eventually produce a translation approximating functional equivalence. The functional equivalence here is not measured by prescribed specifications, but by proximity, which numerous efforts are made to achieve.

Eugene Nida also proposes the reader's response theory, which is closely related to the above-mentioned functional equivalence theory. The responses from the readers of the rendering and the target language receptors are the subjects of the translation because the quality of a translation depends on the proximity between the response from the target text receiver and that from the target language readers. The more similar they are, the better the translation is. The translation should conform to the conventions and traditions of the target language. In accordance with this theory, the translation strategy preferred is domestication in order to achieve the naturalness and fluency of the translations and smoothen the understanding of the translation.

The translation strategy preferred by Susan Bassnett and Nida is contradictory, but Nida’s theory, as a reference in this paper, can be a good complement to the Susan’s cultural translation theory and provides an complementary insight into the vogue word translation.

Chinese Vogue Word Translation

Assessment of Current Chinese Vogue Word Translation. Although the current Chinese vogue word translation has improved much due to the development of translation theory and the improvement of translators’ language abilities, yet there exist three obvious problems. Awkwardness is perceptible almost everywhere in the Chinese vogue word translation. Owing to the vacant correspondence between Chinese and English, mechanical translation inevitably leads to awkward translation. For example, “Yue Guang Zu”, which means the people using up all their money in a month in Chinese, is translated as “Moonlight People”, which confuses the target readers. Redundancy is another problem caused by the underlying meaning of the English word, which is lacking in Chinese word. For instance, “Bao Hu San” in Chinese is translated as “Protective Umbrella” instead of “Umbrella”, which already entails the meaning of protection. Distortion of original expression is the worst problem, which is caused by the translator’s misunderstanding of the original. For example, “Dan Qin Mom” is mistranslated as “Mother in a Single Parent Family” instead of “Single Parent”.

Translation Methods of Chinese Vogue Words. Under the guidance of the dominant foreignization with reference to domestication, literal translation is the most preferable choice for it not only renders the denotations but also retains the original images of Chinese vogue words, which is beneficial to the transmission of Chinese culture. For example, empty nest elderly, grass-roots. Sometimes, in order to avoid the confusion and misunderstanding to literal translation, the literal translation plus annotations is adopted in order that the original images are preserved and meanwhile the connotations are transferred. For example, the literal translation of one Chinese vogue words are that “Don’t call me female house potato, do call me Madame Curie.” “Female house potato” has derogatory meanings in Chinese, while Madame Curie is appreciative with the same denotations of “female house potato”. If translated in such a way, the humorous connections perceived by the contrast are lost. Therefore, an annotation can be added as “Madame Curie, an appreciative term, has the same meaning of ‘female house potato’, and both refer to a female who spends considerable time at home. Free translation attempts to transfer the connotations with the inevitable loss of the original images, which is widely adopted for the cultural difference defies the maintaining of cultural images. For example, Fang Nu in Chinese is not translated as the slave of the house, which is confusing to foreigners. Instead, it is translated as mortgage slave. Sometimes, if there is a correspondent in English, substitution can be adopted in the translation of Chinese vogue
words. For example, “false female” in Chinese can be translated as “cross-dresser”. Sometimes, when the Chinese vogue words are so unique that it is impossible to transfer them directly, interpretation, the interpretative translation method to explain their connotations, is adopted. For instance, “Five sons passed the imperial exam” is translated as “Money, a house, a car, a wife and a child are the essentials of happiness”.

**Conclusion**

Chinese Vogue Word, as a reflection of Chinese unique culture, should be paid more attention to. Its translation is demanding and challenging for its proper transference calls for the good command of the two cultures and the two languages as well as the creative conveying of the original. The research only attempts to provide specific insight into the issue, so more study is called for in the field of Chinese vogue word translation.

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**References**


