Strategies for Coping with Cultural Differences in Translation Between Chinese and English

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Abstract. Translation facilitates communication between different languages, and translators have endeavored to ascertain the nature of language in order to establish translation methods that will ensure barrier-free communication across languages. As a matter of fact, language is the medium of culture, whereas translation is a facilitator of communication across cultures. Hence, translation not only interprets the meaning of a different language, but also communicates cultural messages. Translation bridges linguistic gaps which have largely arisen from cultural differences. With this understanding, this paper explores the causes of the cultural differences in the context of translation between Chinese and English, examines their impact on translation, and proposes effective strategies for translators to cope with such differences.

Introduction

Language and culture are intimately related. American anthropologist-linguist Edward Sapir states in his book Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech: “Language has a setting. The people that speak it belong to a race (or a number of races), that is, to a group which is set off by physical characteristics from other groups. Again, language does not exist apart from culture, that is, from the socially inherited assemblage of practices and beliefs that determines the texture of our lives.”[1] Due to the intricate relations between language and culture, it’s particularly important for translators to gain a proper understanding of the source language in the process of translation. To do so, the translator must establish a link with the cultural context where the source language has been produced and must be familiar with the culture of the source language. From the cultural perspective, translation is in essence the exchange and communication between two cultures. Specifically, translation between the Chinese and English languages is the exchange and communication of the Chinese and English cultures. Thus, it is crucial for translators to identify cultural differences, examine the pros and cons of common translation methods, and adopt the most relevant strategy to cope with cultural differences.

Causes of Differences between Chinese and English Cultures

Differences in Geographies

Britain is an island country in Europe, whereas China lies on the Asian continent. Therefore, many English idioms involve water and ships, while the Chinese language talks a lot about soil. For example, in English, a person who is careless about money is said to “spend money like water”, while in Chinese, the same person is said to “use gold like soil”. For another example, as the weather in Britain is capricious, people often strike up a conversation by saying “Lovely day, isn’t it?” In China, where the availability of food has traditionally been a major concern, people greet each other by asking “Have you eaten?”

Differences in Religious Beliefs

Westerns believe in God, while the majority of Chinese worship the Buddha and believe in Heaven, which is considered the “ruler of nature”; thus, the Chinese say “the Buddha bless you”, while Westerners say “God bless you”; the Chinese say “Heaven knows”, while Westerners say “God
knows”. The Chinese are very particular about feng shui when building houses and tombs, whereas Westerns move constantly in their lifetime and, after death, are often buried in the church, where there is no feng shui at all. In many regions in China, people avoid holding wedding ceremonies on odd-numbered days, whereas Westerners consider “13” to be an unlucky number.

**Differences in Aesthetics**

In the West, it’s not uncommon to address an elderly woman in her seventies or eighties or aged above 100 as “miss”, a practice that may cause offense in China. Likewise, the simple English verb “grin” should be translated into “抿嘴一笑” when it is used on a woman and “咧嘴一笑” when it is used on a man. In the Arabian culture, the camel is considered a symbol of endurance and strength. In the ancient Egyptian culture, the cow was a holy symbol. In the Christian culture, the sheep symbolizes meekness; in the Chinese culture, the cow is a symbol of assiduity. Spitting is viewed as a rude behavior in the Western culture and is used as a way to express contempt in China; yet, in some Indian cultures, it conveys a willingness to repent and turn over a new leaf.

**Differences in Historic Tales**

In both Chinese and English cultures, there are a large number of historical tales which have simple structures but profound morals. Most of them cannot be taken literally, such as “Lord Ye’s Love of Dragons”, “The Oath of the Peach Garden”, and “Farewell My Concubine” in the Chinese language, and “The Sword of Democracy” and the “Pyrrhic Victory” in the English language.

**Differences in Connotations and Implications**

Some English words, such as “filibuster”, “overkill”, “hippy” and “trophy wife”, have not exact equivalents in Chinese, and vice versa, such as “缘分”, “热闹”, “天干” and “地支”. In his poem, *Lodging on the Hibiscus Mountain on the Snowy Night*, Liu Changqing wrote: “日暮苍山远, 天寒白屋贫” (“When the mountains lurk dim in the pale dark; the cottage of shabby looks stands alone.”) If “白屋” was rendered literally as “white house”, it would be confused with the White House in the United States. In his poem, *A Confession*, Du Mu wrote: “十年一觉扬州梦, 赢得青楼薄幸名.” (“Now my ten-year Yangzhou dreamy gay life has been over, but I've got from the brothel a name of fickle lover.”) If “青楼” was translated literally as “green house”, the original meaning would be completely distorted.

**Coping Strategies**

For the reasons listed above, both Chinese and English cultures are naturally manifested in different forms, exhibiting differences of varying degrees. Such differences contain similarities and are overlapped in some cases; in other words, different cultures, despite their seeming differences, share some common elements; they have both commonality and individuality. Such commonality is the foundation of communication across cultures, while the individuality encompasses heterogeneous elements and reflects cultural pluralism and diversity. Language reflects culture and conveys rich cultural messages. Under the influence of their respective cultures, the Chinese and English languages are “different yet similar” [2]. Translation, a process of transplanting a language in a certain cultural context into another one, is a cross-cultural activity. No translation can be done without the transmission of culture. Then, in the translation between Chinese and English, how can we handle the cultural differences between the two languages? The following is a description of a strategy that the author recognizes. This particular strategy combines the domesticating strategy with the foreignizing strategy in translation.

**Domesticating Strategy**

The “domesticating” strategy steers clear of the words and syntax of the source language but grasps its pragmatic meaning, and uses expressions from the target language which have the same pragmatic meaning as the source language. By using the method that focuses on the culture of the target
language, the translator can bring the world reflected in the source text close to the world of the readers in the culture of the target language. “Domesticating” is a translation strategy under which the linguistic forms or the cultural messages conveyed by the linguist forms are inclined towards the target language. In essence, it refrains from introducing new expressions but localizes the source language. For example, if “煞风景” was translated as “killing the scenery”, it would make no sense; its closest English expression should be “be a wet blanket”. For another example, if “拍马屁” would better be rendered as “lick somebody’s boots” than “pat the horse’s buttock”. These two examples demonstrate that “domesticating” gives a greater consideration the reader and has a stronger emphasis on the source language, and its main strength is its ability to make the translation sound native and fluent, giving the reader a sense of affinity. [3]

**Free Translation Method.** When the culture-specific terms in the source language have no exact equivalents in the target language and all the methods in the domesticating strategy do not work, the translator may break away from the linguistic forms and literal meanings in the source language, and use cross-cultural “equivalents” to convey the cultural messages of the source language [4]. For example, the following color-rich paragraph that “Mr. Brown is a very white man. He was looking rather green the other day. He has been feeling blue lately. When I saw him he was in a brown study, I hope he will soon be in the pink again.” can be rendered into Chinese as “布朗先生是个非常忠实可靠的人。那天,他脸上颇有病容。近来他闷闷不乐,我看到他时他在沉思之中。希望他早日恢复健康。”

**Substitution Method.** The substitution method is to substitute culture-specific terms in the source language into equally culture-specific terms in the target language. This particular method is often used to translate idioms and figurative phrases. For example, “as strong as a horse” is rendered as “力大如牛”. In this translation, “horse” and “ox” are equivalent to each other in terms of cultural meaning in the two cultures. This is due to the fact that in ancient Britain, horses were widely used for plowing purposes, and therefore are treated by the British with fondness and viewed as a symbol of assiduity and tenacity in British and American cultures. In contrast, in the Chinese cultural psyche, the ox symbolizes assiduity and tenacity and is particularly humanistic animal. Since ancient times, the ox has been plowing fields in China and has earned the praise and love of the Chinese for its hard work and perseverance.

National differences and the characteristics of national cultures determine the differences in the linguistic symbols used by the nations. Over the course of evolution, people from different cultural backgrounds would choose a distinctive linguistic form to convey their thoughts. Thus, if the “domesticating” translation method is still used in inter-lingual communication across cultures to transplant linguist signs recognized by a culture into a different cultural context, the resulting translation will make no sense and the communication will break down [5]. Hence, translators should maintain a focus on the target language and use the “domesticating” method to transmit messages from the source language. Only in this way can the translation has the same effect on the reader as the original text would have on its reader.

**Foreignizing Strategy**

Venuti suggests that “foreignizing” means departing form the indigenous mainstream values and retaining the linguistic and cultural differences of the original culture. Venuti proposes “resistant” translation, that is, the “foreignizing” translation strategy, which is aimed at enabling the reader and the translator to break away from the cultural constraints for a dominant culture in reading and writing. The Dictionary of Translation Studies defines “foreignizing” as the type of translation in which a target text “deliberately breaks target conventions by retaining something of the foreignness of the original”.

“Foreignizing” is generally regarded as the adoption of expressions in the source text to give the translation a sense of exoticness. The “foreignizing” method reproduces the expressions in the source text; it not only enriches and enhances the expressiveness of the translation, but also allows the reader...
to gain an understanding of the foreign culture through the translation and to obtain a close feel of the foreign country, thereby fulfilling the purpose of translation [6]. Specifically, “foreignizing” brings the reader closer to the author and makes the reader source-oriented without changing the cultural, linguistic and stylistic characteristics of the source text.

**Literal Translation Method.** Literal translation uses the “equivalents” in the target language to convey the cultural messages of the source text. The semantic and social pragmatic value of the “equivalents” must be consistent with those in the source language in order to ensure equivalency between the target and source languages in terms of linguistic and cultural meanings and to retain the cultural characteristics of the source language to the greatest extent possible [7]. For example:

原文: 只因薛蟠是天性得陇望蜀的, 如今娶了金桂, 见金桂的丫头宝蟾有三分姿色, 举止轻浮可爱, 便时常要茶要水的, 故意撩逗她。

English translation: Now Hsueh Pan was a living example of the saying “to covet the land of Shu after getting the region of Lung.” After marrying Chin-kuei, he was stuck by her maid Pao-chan’s charms. As she seemed approachable as well as alluring, he often flirted with her when asking to fetch him tea or water.

The Chinese idiom “to covet the land of Shu after getting the region of Lung” alludes to excessive greed and insatiable desire. In the translation, the translator uses the foreignizing method to render a literal translation without giving a footnote. There are good reasons for the translator to do so. First, the second half of the paragraph is exactly an interpretation of the Chinese idiom, allowing readers unfamiliar with the idiom to figure out its meaning from the subsequent words. Second, the literal translation method retains the ethnic style of the source text, exposing readers in English-speaking countries to the Oriental culture without causing ambiguity.

**Transplanting Method.** There is still another scenario: the cultural messages conveyed by the source language do not have any relevancy in the target language. In this case, we can use the foreignizing method to transplant the messages in the source language into the target language with its original appearance remaining largely unchanged. This method not only incorporates brand-new linguistic elements and fresh expressions into the target language, but also facilitates the communication and mutual infiltration of the two heterogeneous cultures and languages and enhances their integration. Thus, the exoticness of the culture of the source language is retained, loan words are also absorbed, the target language and its culture are enriched as well, making it possible for two different languages and cultures to complement each other. Examples in this regard include “卡拉OK” (karaoke), “嬉皮士” (hippie), “丁克家庭” (dinks), etc.

**Transliteration Method.** The transliteration method is often applied in translating the names of people and places in Chinese and English; some culture-specific words are also treated in this manner. Examples include “litchi” (荔枝), “kowtow” (磕头), “tofu” (豆腐), “Kongfu”, etc. Words such as “逻辑” (logic), “引擎” (engine), “巧克力” (chocolate), “高尔夫” (golf), “黑色幽默” (black humor), “肥皂剧” (soap opera) and “香槟” (champagne) have also become part of the Chinese vocabulary.

**Translation Annotation Method.** Some historical events, figures and tales in source texts are usually culturally specific. For them, the translator may first provide a free translation and then explain or illustrate the cultural background by amplifying or giving notes. Such a practice will not only help to retain the cultural features of the source text and facilitate the reader’s understanding. For example:

Chapter 34 of *The Dream of the Red Chamber* contains the following paragraph: “难道这也是个痴丫头, 又像颦儿来葬花不成?”因又笑道: “若真也葬花, 可谓东施效颦了;不但不为新奇, 而是更是可厌。”

Translation: “Can this be some silly maid come here to bury flowers like Frowner!” He wondered. This reminded him of Zhuangzi’s story of the beautiful Xi-shi’s ugly neighbor, whose endeavors to imitate the little frown that made Xi-shi captivating produced an aspect to hideous that people ran from her in terror. The recollection of it made him smile. “This is imitating the frowner with a
vengeance”, he thought, “—if that is really what she is doing. Not merely unoriginal, but downright disgusting!”

“东施效颦” is an idiom from Zhuangzi. The translator, David Hawkes, adopted a typical amplification method in translating this idiom. He not only explained its origin, but also interpreted its meaning, allowing Western readers who are unfamiliar with 东施 and 西施 to appreciate the charms of classical Chinese culture and the profound cultural messages of the text.

**Conclusion**

In summary, the “domesticating” strategy, which focuses on the culture of the source language, contributes the central messages of a culture and language to another culture and language without changing their original looks. This enriches the cultural connotations of the source and target languages and enhances the mutual understanding and exchange of different countries and peoples.

Clearly, both “foreignizing” and “domesticating” play an important role in linguistic and cultural exchanges. As the contemporary world moves toward multi-polarity, interaction among different nations is rising rapidly. Thus, we should adhere to the guideline of cultural equality in translation, and accelerate cultural exchanges through translation and enable translation to play a full role in maintaining and promoting diversified cultural development. The choice between “domesticating” and “foreignizing” as a translation strategy should be based on whether it can better promote cultural exchange in actual translation. They are not mutually exclusive, but mutually complementary. The point is that the translator should keep them under proper control and use them in a flexible manner according to actual circumstances. Their semantic equivalency and social pragmatic value, the cultural psyche of the people of the target language, and the cultural interaction of the two languages should be taken into full consideration.

**References**


