

A Brief Analysis of Culture and Translation

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Abstract—Language and culture are closely related to each other. Language is part of the culture of people and the chief way by which the members of a society communicate. This paper will focus on the influence of culture on translation and provide us the semantic and pragmatic equivalence approaches in translation with large amounts of representative examples. Thus we can know the relation between culture and translation better.

Index Terms—culture, translation, semantic and pragmatic equivalence

I. INTRODUCTION

Different nations have different cultures. Then, what is culture? To put it simply, “culture refers to the entire ways of people.” This simple definition implies that culture is the patterns of customs, traditions, social habits, values beliefs and language of society. Language and culture are closely related to each other. As cultures are diverse, so language are diverse. Understanding these foreign words or expressions is not a easy task. And these words may contain some cultural connotations and obviously mirror cultural characteristics, therefore, it is very difficult to translate them correctly.

So by exploring the relation between culture and translation, we should know the translation approaches of semantic equivalence and pragmatic equivalence when translating these words. Also we know that between different languages and different cultures, there exists in translation semantic correspondence and semantic zero. So we should try to make up semantic zero caused by culture when translating.

II. RELATIONS BETWEEN CULTURE AND TRANSLATION

A. What is a Good Translation?

Translation is, in fact, a converting process. Theoretically, a good translation should give its reader the same conception as what a native reader gets from the original. Nida remarked that how to determine a good translation is the response of the receptor to the translated message, and this message must then be compared with the way in which the original receptors presumably reacted to the message when it was given in its original setting. Jakobson held the view that translation does not just mean the change of symbols into another language, but it is a process of information substitution. The task of a translator is to translate the information he receives into symbols which he will send out. Catford explained that in translation there is no meaning equivalence, but just the signifier equivalence. Because of the differences between the original language and the target language, there exists the translation equivalence limitedness. This limitedness is not only manifested in the meaning of words, grammatical features, but also manifested in cultural differences more seriously.

B. Relations between Culture and Translation

The purpose and characteristics of translation are to promote understanding among different countries and nations. Eugene Nida, a famous American translation theorist, defined translation as: translation consists in reproducing the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source language, first in terms of meaning and secondly 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 of the differences in histories, geographic locations, local customs and religious beliefs, etc., there are some translation obstacles which hinder people from understanding each other properly. So, translation not only involves translator’s or interpreter’s linguistic competence, but also calls for the acquaintance with the respective cultures. In this sense, translation means more than merely translating the words, sentences or articles from the source language into the target language. It means also to transfer between cultures.

III. INFLUENCE OF CULTURE ON TRANSLATION

Actually, the aims of translation are how to achieve cultural equivalence between the source language and the target language and how to make up semantic zero caused by culture. Cultural equivalence mainly refers to semantic equivalence and pragmatic equivalence.

A. Semantic Equivalence

In translation, the meaning of a word usually can be divided into designative meaning and associative meaning. The

designative meaning of a word serves to define the range of referents which the word in question can represent, while “the associative meanings of a word are derived primarily from the context (both cultural and linguistic) in which such words habitually occur”. The associative meanings of words are often subtle and elusive because these words contain more cultural connotations.

Semantic equivalence aims to achieve both the designative and associative meanings, and this kind of examples is few. But, we still can list some equivalent words, for example:

(1) first hand information: 第一手材料---both two versions express that the information is quite reliable because we get it from our practical experience.

(2) strike the iron while hot:趁热打铁---also, both two versions indicate that we should seize the chance and do something quickly.

(3) one stone kills two birds:一石二鸟, 一箭双雕--- these two idioms share the same meaning that we can achieve two aims by doing one thing.

(4) constant dripping wears through the stone:水滴石穿---both two versions vividly describe the same phenomenon, and make us believe that we can overcome any difficulty if we have a persistent heart.

(5) turn on green light:开绿灯---both two versions mean to make somebody do something smoothly.

(6) castle in the air:空中楼阁---both two versions refer that some body's thought or plan is actually not practical.

Idiom is considered as the special cultural image. Its translation requires not only to convey the meaning of the original as much as possible but also to keep the national features.

In English and Chinese, there are some idioms which are of the same grammatical forms and of the more or less same meaning. In this case, these idioms in the target language can be borrowed. For example:

Two heads are better than one.-----三个丑皮匠，胜过诸葛亮。

One swallow does not make a summer.-----花独放不是春。

Among the blind the one two eyed man is king.-----山中无老虎，猴子成霸王。

Also, 97% Chinese idioms are in the form of 4-character phrases because of their beautifulness in sound, parallel in form, concise and comprehensive in meaning. It's tendency that more and more 4-character phrases are used in writing and translation of Chinese.

Sometimes there are set-phrases that have equivalent meaning in English. For example:

A drop in the ocean-----沧海一粟

Burn one's boats-----破釜沉舟

Smell of the baby-----乳臭未干

Not to have a bean-----囊空如洗

Sometimes there are no equivalent set-phrases in English, so a right expression should be chosen by translator. For example:

Misery loves company.-----同病相怜

The truth comes out.-----真相大白

The storm clouds gathered darkly.-----乌云密布

There are cultural differences between Chinese and English because of different beliefs, religions, custom and so on. So we should pay much attention to this factor in translating culture-loaded components into 4-character phrases.

As strong as a horse-----健壮如牛

As clear as daylight-----洞若观火

As clear as the sun at midday-----昭然若揭

Bleed like a pig-----血流如注

As dumb as an oyster-----守口如瓶

So in this case, we should understand the culture they are involved in, and reconstruct the true meanings they carry faithfully. 4-character phrases are very popular, but they can not be used too much. Otherwise it will make negative effect in translation. In short, the adequate use of 4-character phrased in translation can make the translation graceful and concise, but there are still some factors which we should pay attention to. This means that we can achieve the semantic equivalence to some extent. But we have to use pragmatic equivalence when there are no equivalents in target language.

B. Pragmatic Equivalence

Pragmatic equivalence studies meaning not in isolation but in context. Context is considered as constituted by the knowledge shared by the speaker and the hearer and consists of linguistic context, paralinguistic context, social cultural context and stylistic context. This paper focuses on the social cultural context which includes historical culture, local culture, customary culture and religious culture, etc. Actually, pragmatic equivalence doesn't pay much attention to the meaning of a word or a sentence itself, but stresses the availability of the words that the receptors can understand properly in certain context.

a. Historical cultural differences

It refers to the culture that comes into being in the process of historical developments. As specific historical developments are diverse, so cultures are diverse. It is natural then that with differences in historical cultural contexts, difficulties often arise in communication between nations or countries.

Many English allusions involve events or characters from the treasure house of English literature, especially from Shakespeare. Native speakers of English quote the allusions every day, often without realizing they are doing so. Once there was a sentence in an American magazine TIME: “many took to gambling and got in over their heads, borrowing from Shylock to pay their debts.” Actually, Shylock is a character of Shakespeare’s famous play The Merchant of Venice. Usually, it is often used to symbolize a cruel, greedy and money-grabbing person. Between different contexts, pragmatic equivalence stresses the same use value, and here we can neglect the language form as long as translated version can be properly understood by receptors. In this way, the sentence can be translated into Chinese like: 那些债台高筑的赌徒不得不借高利贷还债。If we have no idea of the allusion in specific context, we simply cannot go any further in understanding.

Also, there is another example: 凭你有李、杜文章，颜、曾的品行，却是也没有一个来问你。---- You might have the genius of LiBai or DuFu and the moral worth of YanHui or Zeng Shen (both of them were disciples of Confucius), no one would ask your advice.

Chinese people are very familiar with the four men- LiBai, DuFu, YanHui and Zeng Shen. In the source language only their first name are given, the source reader can understand. But it is unfamiliar for a target reader. Therefore, it should be amplified when translating, or it can’t be understood by the reader.

With the extra annotation, the source message’s semantic, the linguistic and social meaning are all conveyed. Thus, the reader can understand the Chinese unique culture.

b. Local cultural differences

Geographical locations, natural environment and social customs, etc., contribute a lot to the forming of local culture. In this paper, local cultural differences mainly concern that some equivalent words in two languages actually have no same cultural connotations.

There is an English sentence which has a completely different cultural connotation with that of Chinese. “You are a lucky dog”. Maybe people who have little knowledge of the western culture will directly translate it into “你是条幸运的狗”. However, we should translate like this “你是幸运儿”. Similarly, being aware of the local cultural contexts, we’d better handle the rendering under the principle of pragmatic equivalence. In western culture, the connotation is totally different, “dog” has a derogatory meaning, and it is often used to curse somebody, for example: “狗腿子”, “狗胆包天”, “狗急跳墙”, etc.

A poem can very often show the culture of language. It may involve allusions, history, geography and its religion, etc. The good translation of poems cannot be isolated from culture.

Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?

Thou art more lovely and more temperate;
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer’s lease hath all to short a date.

我怎么能够把你来比作夏天?

你不独比他可爱也比他温婉;
狂风把五月宠爱的嫩蕊作贱,
夏天出货的期限又未免太短。

Here comes an improper translation caused by different geographical culture, because the summer in Britain is mild and lovely, the comparison of “you” to “summer” is very proper. If the summer in the target language country is not as lovely and in Britain, then “春天” is more proper than “夏天” in translating the word “summer”.

Also, let us read the following stanza by Robert Burns:

John, Anderson, my Jo, John,
When we were first acquaint,
Your locks were like the raven,
Your bonnie brow was brent,

The Chinese Version by Liang Yuchun(梁遇春):

John, Anderson, 我的爱人, John
我们当初认得的时候
你的头发黑的象乌鸦
你的额头也是丰润无痕

The poet compared his lover’s locks with that of the raven and which has no derogatory connotation. But to a Chinese, the raven is unwelcome, unpleasant. And is usually associated with derogatory sense, such as in the expression.” 乌鸦嘴” and “天下乌鸦一般黑”. The Chinese version retains the metaphor, but runs counter to the aesthetic standards of Chinese readers; therefore, the original meaning of the poem may not be perfectly represented, the following translation would be better.

约翰安德生，我的爱人
记得我们初相遇
你的头发如墨
你的脸儿似玉

c. Customary cultural differences

All of us may have a glimpse of the customary culture, for it comes into being in everyday life. Customary culture covers greetings, compliments, apologies, addresses, euphemisms and taboos, etc.. And customary cultural differences are unavoidable in translation.

Take English and Chinese for example: in Britain, the weather changes a lot, and so people have a special feeling for weather, "Lovely day, isn't it ?". It becomes the most convenient and safe greeting. In China, the problem of daily bread has been the subject people have been concerned with.

Also the widely used color words and the connotations they carry in one culture are generally different from another culture. In Chinese, we often use the seven kinds of color "赤橙黄绿青蓝紫", while in English the basic color words are black, red, yellow, green, blue, brown, purple, pink, orange, and grey. Red is related to happiness, anger, danger, fire, blood and crime. For example:

red-letter-----喜庆的
red with anger-----气的满脸通红
red alert-----战祸
red alert-----紧急通报
red-handed-----血淋淋的
get into the red-----负债

To Chinese people, blue can produce fine imagination, and it stands for purification and magnanimousness. To English people, blue expresses failure, depression, horror and grief. For example:

"She looks blue today." means "She is depressed."
"in the blues" means "in low spirits."
"blue Monday" means "the dejected Monday after the rest of weekends."
"blue murder" means "horrid scream."

Green not only symbolizes life and youth, but also carries the meaning of ignorance and inexperience in English. For example:

"green hands" means "new hands".
"green eyed" means "jealously".
"green power" means "the power of money".

English color words are colorful. Both Chinese and English color words have their different cultural connotations. Color words, though very small in number, reflect to certain extent the cultural, moral and aesthetic values of different races and people of different times.

d. Religious cultural differences

Religion is an integral part of human culture. Religious culture can be reflected in many ways, such as religious beliefs, values, worships, taboo, etc. Religions 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 respected creature, it's a symbol of sacredness, prestige and solemnity. In ancient China, emperors of different dynasties regarded 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 spurt 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'd better translate "dragon" like "Long", and add some explanation about the word "Long". By this, foreigners can get correct information.

Because of the cultural differences between the source language and target language, semantic and pragmatic equivalence cannot be achieved at the same time. In most of the cases, semantic equivalence is hardly to be achieved, for there are few equivalent words which are of the same designative and associative meanings, but pragmatic equivalence can overcome the obstacle of cultural differences and functions in the process of translation.

IV. CONCLUSION

From the above, we know that translation is more closely related to culture factors in language. Without the culture knowledge, it is difficult to translate the original into target language accurately. So after those examples, on the one hand, we may now get a clear idea of the relation between culture and translation; on the other hand, we also may master the approaches of semantic and pragmatic equivalence in translation. It is true that these two aspects can open our eyes to a new perspective of understanding culture and translation.

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