

Untranslatability and the Method of Compensation

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Abstract—This paper discusses the problem of untranslatability between Chinese and English, including linguistic and cultural untranslatability. English belongs to the Indo-European language family, and Chinese belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language family. The phonemic system, character structure and figure of speech are all completely different, and most of these in one language do not have equivalent in the other language. This causes linguistic untranslatability. But untranslatability is not absolute, we should understand the co-existence of translatability and untranslatability. Based on this, we can use some methods to compensate in order to reduce the barrier in translation and promote language and culture communication.

Index Terms—untranslatability, linguistic untranslatability, cultural untranslatability, method of compensation

I. INTRODUCTION

Untranslatability is a property of a text, or of any utterance in one language, for which no equivalent text or utterance can be found in another language. J.C. Catford, a celebrated translation scholar of linguistics school, raised the issue of untranslatability in 1965. He argues that the linguistic untranslatability is due to the differences in the source language and the target language, whereas culture untranslatability is due to the absence in the target language of relevant situational features. Nida presents a rich source of information about the problem of loss in translation, in particular about the difficulties encountered by the translator when facing with terms or concepts in the source language that do not exist in the target language. Peter Newmark once has briefly talked about the deviation in translation. In China today, many translation experts and scholars have also discussed the problem in their papers. The problem of untranslatability is always a disputed issue. Nowadays, it is well accepted that translation is a possible and feasible task. However, there are still some language points that are difficult to translate, which is called the phenomenon of untranslatability. Linguistic and cultural differences, the two categories of untranslatability phenomenon are caused by different factors. These resulting from the linguistic differences will hardly change while those resulting from cultural differences may become translatable in the future by using the methods of compensation and the skill of translators.

II. LINGUISTIC UNTRANSLATABILITY

Professor Liu Biqing wrote in his *Modern Translation Theories* that “The structure of language commonly shows the characteristics of the language, these characteristics only can be found in relative language, the similar transfer is difficult to find in non-relative language, for it need to change the code completely.” View from the etymology, English belongs to the Indo-European language, while Chinese belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language, so there exist the linguistic untranslatability, which includes the following aspects: phonology, character, figure of speech, and so on.

A. Untranslatability in Phonology

Any language has its own special phonemic system, which cannot be replaced by other language. There are large differences between Chinese and English, and most of the pronunciations in one language do not have equivalent in the other language. Therefore, they cannot be translated into the target language. For example:

(1) “石诗士施氏，嗜狮，誓食十狮……”

The author wrote the whole passage in homophone words. This is a typical example of untranslatability caused by phonemic system. See another example:

B. Untranslatability in Character Structure

Chinese words consist of characters carrying their meaning, but English words consist of alphabets that are meaningless. They are completely different in writing. Chinese has a writing skill of describing characters, for example: (3) “人曾为僧，人弗可以成佛，女卑为婢，女又何妨成奴”，“鸿是江边鸟，蚕是天下虫”，“琴瑟琵琶八大王，王王在上，魑魅魍魉四小鬼，鬼鬼靠边”。 They all use the special feature of Chinese characters to describe the character structure in poetry with their meaning. But English has no such structures in alphabetical system, so they are absolutely untranslatable. Some riddles that are relative to the structure of characters or English words are also untranslatable, for

example: (4)“田头长草”（苗），“What makes a road broad?”(The letter B). If the latter riddle is translated into:“什么使道路变宽？”（字母B）Everybody will feel ridiculous, and no one can understand that.

C. Untranslatability in Figures of Speech

Most of the languages have their own figures of speech. Just because of the existence of figure of speech, the languages become vivid and interesting. In translation practice, if the target language cannot show the figure of speech in source language correctly, it is not faithful to the content, thought and style of the source language. Although their meaning are similar, it will lessen the language influence of the source text. The people who speak Chinese and the people who speak English have large differences in the way of thinking and aesthetics, so when they express the same concept, they often use different figures of speech. These caused the untranslatability in Chinese- English translation. The following are the main aspects:

1. Puns

Pun means humorous use of a word that has two meanings or of different words that sound the same. Puns pack several meanings into one word, and it is extremely unlikely that any other language will pack into the same set of meanings, so it is difficult to translate into the target language. Example one:

(5)“杨柳青青江水平，闻郎江上唱歌声，东边日出西边雨，道是无晴却有晴”

Here“晴”is a pun, and it also means “情”，it is translated into “The willows are green, green, the river is serene. Thence is his song rafted to me. In the east the sun is rising, in the west the rain is falling. Can you see if it's fair or foul?” In this translation, the translator did very well, especially in “green, serene, fair or foul”, but he can not translate the pun completely. Example two:

(6)“She is too low for a high praise, too brown to a fair praise, and too little for a great praise.” The “low” and “fair” are all puns in this sentence. “Low” means short in height and low social status. “Fair” means pale skin, light in color and justice. There is no word or phrase in Chinese having the two meanings together, so the translator can not translate the two correctly into Chinese, only adopt one meaning, and lose the other meaning.

2. Alliteration

Alliteration is using the same letter or sound at the beginning of the two or more words in succession. It is a common figure of speech in English, especially in proverb, advertisement, novel and so on., and most of the alliteration are untranslatable. For example:

(7)To many parents, the three Gs, gays, guys, and gangs have replaced the three Rs as benchmark of school life. 对于许多父母来说，同性恋，枪支，帮派这三个词已经代替了读，写，算作为学校的基本尺度。

In this translation, the three Gs, gays, guys, gangs are alliteration, which emphasize the serious problems of the gays, guys and gangs, but after translating them into Chinese, we can not see this effect.

3. Malapropism

“Malapropism comes from Richard Sheridan's comedy *The Rivals*, a honored lady name Malaprop, who often speaks wrong words or pronunciation. Malapropism is a figure of speech using wrong words with similar pronunciation tension or intension to reach the humors effect.” Malapropism brings difficulties in translation. For example:

(8)“我推开澳门，看到地上铺的是巴基斯坦，桌上摆的是刚果……”

This is a sentence from cross talk, Chinese people know the humors naturally, but if it is translated it into: “Pushing open the ‘Macau’, I saw ‘Pakistan’ paved on the floor and ‘Congo’ on the table. English readers can not accept that, for ‘Macau’ is not a door, ‘Pakistan’ is not a blanket, and ‘Congo’ is not fruit either. Most of the younger generation in China have heard this humorous sentence:“我手持郑伊健，脚踏温兆轮，翻过赵本山，穿过关芝林，跨过潘长江，来到周星池……”It is untranslatable too.

III. CULTURAL UNTRANSLATABILITY

“According to J.C. Catford, instance of untranslatability can arise from two sources: one is linguistic, and the other is culture.” Nida also mentions that words have meaning only in terms of the total cultural setting. And what is culture, Edward Taylor gave the definition the earliest in his *The Primitive Culture*: “Culture or civilization taken in its wide anthropographic sense is that complete whole which include knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, custom and other capabilities and habits acquired by a men as a member of society.” Peter Newmark wrote in his *A Textbook of Translation*: “I define the culture as the way of life and his manifestation that are peculiar to a community that uses a peculiar language as its means of expression.” Translation is a very important medium for cultural exchange between people using different languages. It is one of the most important tasks from translators and translation researchers viewing problems of translation from the angle of cultural exchange in order to increase the degree of cultural exchange achieved by translation as much as possible.

It is known to all that language is an important aspect of culture. Culture includes and affects language, it is this ground from which language grows and develops. All languages are the product of the culture as well as of the nation. They all have long historical background and various cultural connotations. The history, social system, natural environment, religion and customs are all shown vividly in their culturally-loaded words, proverbs, idioms, and so on.. In traditional practice, there are often no such words in target language, and the translators have to find the similar

codes or make some new codes to replace, so when these culturally loaded words are translated into another language, the cultural connotations are lost. Nida once pointed out that: "For the success translation, being familiar with two cultures is even more important than mastering two languages, because the language has its meaning only in the cultural background." Chinese culture belongs to eastern culture, while English culture belongs to the western culture. There are essential differences between eastern culture and western culture, so the untranslatability is understandable.

A. *Untranslatability Resulted from Culture Gap*

1. Material culture

Different nations live in different places, and will have different images for the same thing. We often hear some Chinese say: "走, 喝酒去!" The word "酒" is difficult to translate. It includes liquor, spirit, alcohol, drink, beer, wine, and so on. These words are all "酒", but the liquor and spirit means low quality, and the drinks include hard drinks and soft drinks, while the wine is often referred to the grape or fruit wine.

In English, the daffodil is the symbol of spring and happiness, but in Chinese, it is only a kind of flower called "黄水仙". In Chinese people's mind, the plum, orchid, chrysanthemum and bamboo are all the symbol of high spirit. But English people do not think so.

2. Traditional culture

People live together in one country or region, and will form their own traditions, these traditions will pass from generation to generation. And other countries or regions people may not have these traditions, even they have, but in different meaning, thus making these traditions untranslatable. For example:

(9) According to English tradition, the family will throw old shoes to the unmarried couples when they go out of the house, which means wish them luck, but if this tradition is translated into "扔旧鞋", the Chinese people will misunderstand it. For in China, throwing old shoes to a woman means abuse her. For the traditional reason, a lot of appellations are untranslatable. The meaning of English uncle include such Chinese words as 叔父(father's younger brother), 伯父(father's elder brother), 舅舅(mother's brother), 姑父(father's sister's husband), 姨父(mother's sister's husband), 叔叔(father's younger brother or a friend or acquaintance about the same age as a young person's parent). It would be considered a terrible mistake in Chinese culture to refer to the father's brother as 舅舅, so if the relation is not clear in English, it can not be translated into Chinese.

3. Religious Culture

In religion, translation becomes the mission. Chinese have translated in this field for a long time, but Chinese people do not have Christianity background. Thus many of the culture will make Chinese people misunderstand. For example: "End of the world" will make Chinese people think of the coming of great disaster, in which all the human being will die, and they will feel fear. But to the English people, it has nothing to do with disaster. It is the coming of the justice moment.

4. Historical culture

The history of a nation is the record of the social development. Idioms and legends provide ready support in this respect. "The main problems that idioms and fixed expression pose in translation relate to the two main areas: the ability to recognize and interpret an idiom correctly; and the difficulties involved in rendering the various aspects of meaning that an idiom or a fixed expression conveys into the target language."^[10] An idiom or fixed expression may have no equivalent in the target language. One language may express a given meaning by a single word, another may express it by a fixed expression, and a third may express it by an idiom, and so on. So it is unrealistic to expect to find equivalent idioms and expression in the target language in all cases. The idioms and expressions may be culture-specific which makes it difficult to translate or is untranslatable. The expression such as Kangaroo Court, related to specific cultural background provides a good example. And the historical stories or legends also have their culture element, for example: "八仙过海, 各显神通", "三个臭皮匠, 顶个诸葛亮", "情人眼里出西施".

B. *Untranslatability Resulted from Culture Conflict*

In translation, some words in one language are traditionally considered equivalent to other words in another language, but their connotations and even their referents are in effect quite different, they are so-called false friends. For example: (10) Chinese people view "龙" as a symbol of power or good fortune. Such as "望子成龙", but the English people see the dragon as fierce and associate it with evil, cruelty and violence. so "望子成龙" can not be translated into "to expect one's son to be a dragon" for this cultural reason. Since the forms of the related items are the same, they are often misleading. For example, the brand name of a well-known Chinese battery "白象" is literally translated into "White Elephant". "白象" means fortune and good luck in Chinese. However, the translation elicit unfavorable reaction from English consumers, who use white elephant as an idiom to mean something costly but useless. Some words of color have conflict meaning as well. Take red for example, (11) it has the meaning of happy and festival as "红" in Chinese, such as "red-letter days". But the Chinese "红茶" is "black tea" in English, and the Chinese "红糖" is "brown sugar" in English. The English "in the red" is "亏损赤字". Culture is one of the great obstacles in the process of translation, along with the linguistic barrier that is responsible for untranslatability in translation.

IV. THE METHOD OF COMPENSATION

Compensation is a special method that is used to reach the equivalence when there is no equivalent concept and suitable expression in the target language. It is widely accepted that the language phenomenon of untranslatability is not absolutely untranslatable, especially in the cultural aspect. In translation practice, when dealing with this kind of phenomenon, the translator always makes great effort to get a relatively satisfactory version, following are the methods often used by translators to compensate.

A. *Adaptation*

An “adaptation”, also known as “free translation”, is a translation procedure whereby the translator replaces a social, or cultural reality in the source language with a corresponding reality in the target language, this new reality would be more usual to the audience in the target language. This method aims at maintaining the elegance and intelligibility in the target language at the sacrifice of the form of the source language, but without changing the main cultural message of the original. For example:

(12) “很好，不用瞎担心了，我还有委员的福分呢！”

“么事的桂圆？”

“是委员！从前行的是大人老爷，现在行委员！你还不明白？”

“He give me very good news, we need not look for trouble. I have the possibility of being a member of committee!”

“What’s a common tea?” Asked the wife who vaguely caught the sound.

“A committee! Lords and esquires are out of date, and the prevailing nomination is to a committee. Don’t you still understand?”

Here, the Chinese word “委员”(member of a committee) sounds quite like “桂圆”(longan, a kind of tropical fruit). In the conversation, the wife does not quite catch the word and mistake the “桂圆” for “委员”. If the two words are translated literally, the reader will find the wife’s mistake incomprehensible since there is no phonological similarity in English between the two items. The translator uses the method of adaptation, turning logon (桂圆) into common tea. Now the form is changed, but the function or effect is preserved. Common tea is phonologically related to committee. By using adaptation, this homophone untranslatability is turned into translatability.

B. *Borrowing*

Borrowing is a translation procedure that the translator uses a word or expression from the source language in the target language *holus-bolus*. Differences between cultures may mean that one language has expressions and concepts that may not exist in another. For example, we have no ready-made equivalent for the English “model”, “Coca-cola”, “coffee”, “logic”, “sofa”, “motor”, “Brandy”, “chocolate”, “Benz”, and so on. Faced with such words and expressions, the translators are hard-pressed to convey the original meaning and are often left with no choice but to borrow the original lexical items. So these words come into Chinese: “模特儿”, “可口可乐”, “咖啡”, “逻辑”, “沙发”, “摩托”, “白兰地”, “巧克力”, “奔驰”, and so on. And likewise, there are no English equivalents for some Chinese words, such as kang (heated brick bed), Guandi Miao (temple enshrining Guan Yu, a well worshipped ancient Chinese hero), Zongzi (a pyramid-shaped dumpling made of glutinous rice wrapped in reed leaves that is eaten during the Dragon Boat festival), Qigong (a system of deep breathing exercise popular in China), Taiji Quan (a kind of traditional Chinese boxing), and so on. Some of these had been accepted by English people, and some will be accepted, and these words will come to English.

C. *Translator’s Note*

A translator’s note is a note (usually a footnote or an endnote) added by the translator to the target language to provide additional information pertaining to the limit of translation, the cultural background and any other explanation. “Nida also points out that the footnote can explain contradictory customs, identify unknown geographical or physical objects, give equivalent of weights and measures, provides information on plays on words, include supplementary data on proper names and add information which may be generally useful in understanding the historical and cultural background of the document in question.” In a word, using this method can turn some untranslatability into a certain degree of translatability.

For example:

(13) 道可道，非常道 —— 《道德经》 Laozi

The Tao^① that can be expressed in words is not the constant Tao.

Note: ① The Tao is absolute, in which all other things are relative, it is almighty and omnipresent. Its vastness or minuteness can not be compared with things of our understanding. The universe is embracing it. “Here the Chinese character “道” is a word with very profound meaning, which finds itself no equivalent in the English language. It is almost untranslatable. Through the footnote, some of the culture messages have been transferred into the target language text.”

D. *Calque*

Calque is a translation procedure that a translator translates an expression (or occasionally a word) literally into the target language, translating the element of the expression word for word. Peter Newmark refers it to as semantic translation. It is a method of translation that aims at preserving the most cultural message of the source text at the sacrifice of the formal element of the target language, and sometimes even the intelligibility of the target text. Such as translate “armed to teeth” into “武装到牙齿”, translate “knowledge is strengths” into “知识就是力量”, translate “hot dog” into “热狗”, and translate “纸老虎” into “paper tiger”. Maybe they seem ridiculer at the beginning, but they will be accepted by the target language speaking people and become a common word in their daily life.

E. Paraphrase

“Paraphrase is as extended synonym and inevitably an expansion and a diffusion of the original text. It is only justified when an item of terminology technical institutional cultural, ecological, scientific cannot be explained in any other way. E.g. by TL equivalent, transcription, neologism by reproducing the encyclopedic tenor for the linguistic vehicle.” Sometimes, some words in their source language do not have equivalent in the target language, so it is difficult to use calques or other method to compensate. And what we can use is paraphrase, for example:

The Chinese idiom “一龙一猪”, means one is very clever and capable, but the other is stupid and hopeless. If it is translated into “one is a dragon, another is a pig”, English readers can not understand the meaning. And there are no similar idioms to substitute, so we only can use the method of paraphrase, and translate it into: “One is very capable, while the other is extremely incompetent.”

V. CONCLUSION

For the differences in linguistic and culture, we should accept that there does exist untranslatability between English and Chinese. But we never neglect the fact that there are numerous language universality and cultural similarities. Such as integration, cultural diversity, network technology revolutionary, the world is getting smaller and smaller. We are sure to believe that the language and cultural communication will be more and more, and the barrier between languages will be less and less.

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