Application of Compensatory Translation Approach to English Idioms

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Abstract—**Idioms, the gems of a language, best reflect the national characteristics embodied in a language and always have rich national flavor and cultural connotation. It is not easy to translate idioms since not all English idioms have equivalents in Chinese idioms mainly due to cultural differences. There are six translation approaches in translating English idioms into Chinese: compensatory translation, literal translation, free translation, borrowing, integrated approach, explanational translation. This paper aims to propose the compensatory translation approach, one of the important and indispensable tactics to Chinese translation of English idioms based on Eugene A. Nida's equivalence view. It is worth discussing on compensatory translation approach to English idioms from cultural perspective so as to better understand the application of this tactic, hoping to cast some enlightenment on further research in this area.**

Index Terms—**idioms, culture, compensatory translation, application, translation approach**

I. INTRODUCTION

Eugene A. Nida once said "Differences of culture may also be a reason for having marginal notes in a translated text." (Nida, 2001, p.82) It is known that cultural awareness is quite important while translating since there are many factors influencing the process of translating.

Sometimes, although the literal translation of some idioms may not cause cultural conflict, the practice is likely to lead to the ineffective cultural transfer. If idioms cannot possibly be understood without cultural context, they are usually translated literally, together with paraphrasing or footnotes, making the comprehension complete. The approach is called compensatory translation approach, which is an important and indispensable tactic to better convey the connotative meanings of English idioms when translating them into Chinese.

II. USING COMPENSATORY TRANSLATION APPROACH TO CONVEY CONNOTATIONS

To make the comprehension of idioms with special origins complete, they are usually translated literally, together with compensatory notes, paraphrasing or footnotes. In this case, a translator can first render the idiom literally, so as to retain the vividness and the original flavor of the idiom; then bring out the connotative meaning by paraphrasing or explanation, that is, to add a note as a compensation, so as to fulfill the function of communication.

For instance: "A Procrustean bed" has the meaning of "an arrangement, plan, scheme, ordinance, that produces uniformity by violent and arbitrary measures". To understand it better, a note is added: "Procrustes was a legendary robber of ancient Greece who forced his victims to fit the bed be offered them by stretching their limbs if too short, or shortening them if too long." (Yu & Guo, 1999, p.115). With the help of the compensatory note, the connotation of the idiom is brought out and the vividness and the original flavor are kept.

To better know the effective use of compensatory translation approach, let us take "A Pyrrhic victory" as an example:

> "A Pyrrhic victory" refers to "a victory gained at such cost that it is almost equivalent to a defeat, or a victory that was not worth winning because the winner has lost so much in winning it". The reference is to the defeat of the Romans by Pyrrhus, King of Epirus, at Asculum, 280 B.C. To those who came to congratulate him he said: "Another such victory and we are done for" (Collins, 1960, p.184).

It can be translated into "*pí luò shì de shèng lì, dé bù cháng shī*" with a note in Chinese:

> *Gōng yuán qián 279 nián, gǔ xī là yī bì lǔ sī guó* (Epirus) *de p íluò sh ìwáng* (King Pyrrhus) *zài zhàn shèng luó mǎ jūn duì de zhàn yì zhōng fù chū le jí dà de dài jià, tā de dà bù fēn jīng ruì bù duì hé zhǐ huī guān zài nà cì zhàn dòu zhōng zhèn wáng. Dāng yǒu rén xiàng tā biǎo shì zhù hè shí, tā shuō: "zài yǒu yī cì zhèi yàng de shèng lì, wǒ men jiù yào chè dǐ kuǎ le." Yǐ hòu rén men biàn yòng "pí luò shì de shèng lì* (Pyrrhic victory)" *lái biǎo shì yīn dài jià chén zhòng ér dé bù cháng shī de shèng lì.*

It is the literal translation that helps to retain the vividness and the original flavor of this idiom and it is the compensatory note that helps the target language (TL) readers figure out why "a Pyrrhic victory" proves to be almost equivalent to a defeat.

Take "Hobson's Choice" as another example:

> "Hobson's Choice" means "the acceptance of what is offered when there is no alternative, or situation in which a person must accept what is offered because there is no alternative other than taking nothing at all." which can be translated into "*huò bù sēn de xuǎn zé, háo wú xuǎn zé*", meaning "*wú kě xuǎn zé de xuǎn zé, méi yǒu xuǎn zé yú dì de jú miàn*" in Chinese.

In order to make readers understand it better, a Chinese note is added:

> "*Huò bù sēn de xuǎn zé* (Hobson's choice) *qǐ yuán yú shí liù shì jì de yīng guó. Dāng shí yǒu wèi míng jiào tuō bài è sī huò bù sēn* (Tobias Hobson) *de shāng rén, tā de gōng zuò jiù shì jià zhe zài rén sì lún dà mǎ chē, zài lún dūn* (London) *hé jiàn qiáo* (Cambridge) *zhī jiān pǎo yùn shū, bìng bǎ xián zhì de mǎ pǐ chū zū gěi jiàn qiáo dà xué* (University of Cambridge) *de xué shēng. Huò bù sēn zǒng shì duì tā de gù kè shuō: nǐ men kě yǐ xuǎn zé rèn hé zì jǐ kàn zhòng de mǎ, zhǐ yào tā shì lí mǎ jiù mén zuì jìn de nà yī pǐ. Huò bù sēn de bù jìn rén qíng shǐ gù kè méi yǒu rèn hé xuǎn zé de yú dì, yīn cǐ zhāo zhì le bù shǎo zū jiè mǎ pǐ de rén de wēi cí. Hòu lái，huò bù sēn de xuǎn zé* (Hobson's choice) *de shuō fǎ jiù zhú jiàn chuán kāi le*."

By adding the note, readers would know that Hobson was Tobias Hobson, a legendary figure, who kept an inn at Cambridge and hired out horses. Though he had a large number of horses, he always insisted that a prospective hirer should take the one nearest the stable door: whence, 'it became the proverb, when what ought to be your selection was forced on you, to say "Hobson's choice"' (Collins, 1960, p.143). It has been pointed out that Hobson's practice was sensible, because the horse nearest to the door was the one that had been longest in the stable since it was previously used. and so the most rested (Collins, 1960, p.143-144).

Although the succinctness of the idiom is somewhat lost by adding the note, it can still help to explain clearly why Hobson's choice is no choice at all. Obviously, the vividness and the original flavor of the idiom are retained and the connotative meaning is brought out by the explanation of its source.

It is obvious that the above idioms, either derived from ancient fables, myths, legends or historical events, are usually translated literally to retain the vividness and the original flavor, and by adding explanation or notes, their connotative meanings are more comprehensible to target readers.

III. THE IMPORTANCE OF COMPENSATORY APPROACH

Good literal translation can help Chinese readers acquire the direct cultural information of English idioms, but sometimes the direct literal translation without any compensatory notes will puzzle readers so that cultural gaps will be naturally produced. So the compensatory approach may supply notes to backgrounds, English allusions, rhetoric meaning, sources and context, etc., strengthen the acceptability of English idioms and keep their original flavor (Chen, 2007). For example:

> "Round-table conference" refers to "political or other conference attended by representatives of various interests to discuss matters and reach agreement".

Today the table at which the representatives sit may not be round, but the idea originally was that a round table prevented there being a head-seat, and that all present should be on equal terms, without any jealousy on the score of precedence. An article by Brewer has some interesting information about round tables. Details of the legendary Round Table of King Arthur come from Malory's *Morte d' Arthur*, but such tables, he points out, were common in the age of chivalry. He refers to the one shown at Winchester, used to accommodate twelve favourite knights of Henry III,which Henry VIII showed to Francis I; to a table established at Kenilworth in the reign of Edward I by Roger Mortimer; and one erected by Edward III at Windsor (Collins, 1960, p.190-191).

Take "carry coals to Newcastle" as another example:

> "You're really carrying coals to Newcastle. She has many a diamond rings." can be translated into "*nǐ zhēn shì yùn méi dào niǔ kǎ suǒ, duō cǐ yī jǔ, tā yǒu de shì zuàn shí jiè zhi.*"

"Carry coals to Newcastle", an idiom with strong national characteristics, means to "take something to a place where it is so plentiful that it is not wanted; figuratively, do something that is absurdly superfluous". The first use of the phrase is by Fuller in 1650, though 'as common as coals from Newcastle' appears in 1606. The French have *porter de l'eau à la rivière* ('to carry water to the river') (Collins, 1960, p.57).

As to this version, the note "*duō cǐ yī jǔ*" still could not explain well about its meaning, Chinese readers might be confused about "*yùn méi dào niǔ kǎ suǒ* (Newcastle), *duō cǐ yī jǔ*", so another note in Chinese must be added like this: "*niǔ kǎ suǒ* (Newcastle), *yīng guó dōng běi bù yī gè gǎng shì, shì zhù míng de chǎn méi zhōng xīn.*" The meaning is "Newcastle, a seaport city in Northeast England, which is a famous coal production center". Thus the readers may understand the relationship between Newcastle and "*duō cǐ yī jǔ*" and they could acquire new information about this idiom (Luo, 2006, p.79).

IV. ALLUSION OF ENGLISH IDIOMS

English allusion is a part of idiom, which has many splendid stories. Literal translation with notes to allusion can make Chinese readers recognize the origin and wider their knowledge when reading the translation.

For instance, "The Middle East Oilfield seems to be an apple of discord between the two superpowers." can be literally translated into "*zhōng dōng yóu tián fǎng fú chéng le liǎng gèchāo jí dà guó zhēng duó de 'jīn píng guǒ'*" in Chinese. In order to make readers understand it better, a note is added: "*yuán zì xī là luó mǎ shén huà, zhǐ bù hé nǚ shén* (Eris, the goddess Discord) *tóu dào hūn yàn shàng bìng yǐn qǐ zhēng zhí de jīn píng guǒ.*" (Luo, 2006, p.42).

By adding the note, readers know that in classical mythology, an apple of gold was thrown into a banquet of the gods and goddesses by the goddess Discord, who had not been invited. The apple had "For the Fairest" written on it. When three goddesses claimed it, the choice among them was referred to the handsome Paris, prince of Troy. So "the apple of discord" means "cause of contention, trouble, hatred, etc." or "any subject of disagreement and contention; the root of the trouble or dispute", which is literally translated into "*jiū fēn de píng guǒ*", meaning "*dù jì zhī yuán, zhēng dòu zhī yīn*" in Chinese. The allusion is to the apple that the goddess Eris (Discord) threw among the gods and goddesses at the marriage of Thetis and Peleus, to which she had not been invited, and that Paris gave to Venus as the most beautiful of the three goddesses, from which action resulted indirectly the Trojan War (Collins, 1960, p.33).

It is translated literally to keep the image of the sentence, since many Chinese readers may not know what "the apple of discord" is, through the note Chinese readers not only get to know the origin of the idiom "an apple of discord", but also acquire new information and get a deeper understanding of the Middle East Oilfield situation.

V. METAPHORICAL IMAGES IN ENGLISH IDIOMS

Some English idioms have metaphorical images which have been accepted by Chinese readers. Due to the communication between cultures for a long time, such kind of English idioms not only have been accepted by the Chinese people, but also have become the phrases and expressions for everyday use in Chinese. They can be first translated by literal translation, so as to retain the vividness, the original style of the idioms and their figures of speech; then by adding notes as compensations to bring out the connotative meanings in fulfilling the function of communication. For example:

> "The favors of Government are like the box of Pandora, with this important difference, that they rarely leave hope at the bottom" is translated into "*zhèng fǔ de ēn huì rú tóng pān duō lā de hé zi, hòu huàn wú qióng, zhǔ yào bù tóng zhī chù shì: hé dǐ hěn shǎo liú yǒu xī wàng*" (Jiang, 2000, p.144).

Chinese people might understand the literal meaning, but the implicated meaning is hard to figure out.

> "In Greek mythology, Pandora was the first woman, sent to the earth by the gods as a form of punishment. Zeus (or Jupiter, in Roman mythology) gave her a box which she was to give to the man who married her. When this box was finally opened, all the evils in it flew out, and since then have caused trouble to mankind." (Deng & Liu, 1989, p.69)

So "Pandora's box" or "the box of Pandora", means "a present or something which may seem valuable, but which brings trouble and misfortune" or "a box containing all the ills that could plague mankind". In translating it into Chinese, something more about who Pandora is should be added to convey its implicated meaning. Through the employment of compensatory translation, "the box of Pandora" is rendered into "*pān duō lā de hé zi, hòu huàn wú qióng; zāi nàn de gēn yuán*" with a note: "*yuán zì xī là luó mǎ shén huà, pān duō lā* (Pandora) *shì bǎ zāi nàn dài dào rén jiān de měi nǚ.*" Thus the Chinese people might not be confused. Because the implicated meaning in the original text is revealed in the TL, this idiom will be clearly understood by the reader of the TL culture.

VI. TRANSLATION OF IDIOMS FROM CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

Translating means communicating. Culture is the source of translation and translation is the tool of culture communication. Without culture, translation would be a well without water, and without translation, culture might not be so colorful. The cultural development of the world mainly depends on translation. What is important in judging the validity of a translation is the extent to which receptors correctly understand and appreciate the translated text. A correct understanding of the language unit rests upon a due understanding of the relevant facts or features of the culture. Language is an intrinsic part of culture. It carries culture and plays a very important role in it. It is considered as the keystone of culture. Without language, culture would not be possible (Deng & Liu, 1989, p.3). In other words, language should and can only be understood in the cultural context.

As it is known to all, the influence of the culture on the meanings of words and idioms are so pervasive that, without careful consideration of its cultural background, scarcely any text can be adequately understood. Idioms, as the essence or the crystallization of language, are closely related with culture. Necessary sensitivity to the cultural characteristics of both English and Chinese languages is indispensable to adequate understanding of idioms and successful rendering of idioms from English to Chinese (Chen, 2007).

"Translating is a complex and fascinating task" (Nida, 2001, p.3). Probably, it is the most complex type of event in the history of the cosmos. "Bilingual competence has almost always been regarded as an essential requirement for translators" (Nida, 2001, p.81), but "for truly successful translating, biculturalism is even more important than bilingualism, since words only have meanings in terms of the cultures in which they function" (Nida, 2001, p.82). That is to say, "knowing two languages is not enough, it is also essential to be acquainted with the respective cultures" (ibid, p.6). It is the same case when take the translation of idioms into consideration.

As an important part of the language, idioms, influenced and shaped by culture, also reflect culture. As idioms and culture interact with each other, understanding of one requires understanding of the other. It is thus worthwhile to probe into the translation of idioms from English to Chinese in a cultural perspective so as to have a good grasp of the meanings and use of the idioms and to achieve the aim of adequate rendering of the idioms (Chen, 2007).

There are some good examples illustrating the important role that culture played in translating idioms, "There is a black sheep in every flock" can be translated into "*hài qún zhī mǎ, wú chù bú yǒu*"; "All is fish that comes to one's net" can be translated into "*jiǎn dào lán zǐ lǐ biàn shì cài*" and "kick sb. when he is down" in Chinese is "*qiáng dǎo zhòng rén tuī*" (Jiang, 2000, p.192). Although different words are used in English and Chinese due to different cultural background, these idioms express the same idea or meaning. So, in some veins, idioms are influenced and shaped by culture (Chen, 2007).

For better understanding and translating of idioms, one should know not only the two languages, but also the respective cultures. That is, in determining the meaning of words or idioms, the translator must not only look at the syntagmatic contexts but also the cultural contexts, for "the cultural contexts of words are the keys to understanding the meanings of texts" (JFL Correspondent, 1998, p.4)

VII. CONCLUSION

Eugene A. Nida suggests that translation should be based on the establishment of cultural equivalence between the receptor language and the source language and points out that translators should avoid overlooking the cultural differences and applying their own personal set of values formed in their own culture in the translation. Since literal translation has the merits of promoting culture communication and enriching the target language, when there can be several different versions of translation, literal translation is preferable if no misunderstanding will be triggered. Translation is a process of transferring information from one language into another and a bilingual art of cross-cultural communication, which cannot be absolutely separated from certain society and culture.

Translators often rely on paraphrasing, footnotes or provide adequate background information for the understanding of the terms in question so as to ensure acceptance of cultural otherness. The application of compensatory translation approach makes the gap between different languages and cultures narrow and makes cultural exchange among countries more convenient and easier as well. Only by using the method of literal translation with compensatory notes or paraphrasing, can idioms with allusions or strong national characteristics be understood fully in their cultural context. Although the conciseness and explicitness of the idioms are somewhat lost, it is exactly a quite useful and important approach to convey the meaning of English idioms in such a way that it will impose the same effect on the target reader as the original does upon the original reader. This paper is only a preliminary research on compensatory translation approach of English idioms in the perspective of culture. It is believed that further research and more explorations in this field will be worthy and necessary.

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