

The Analysis of the Phenomenon of Language Right Weakening of Cantonese Translated into English

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Abstract—A global society has made the communication and cooperation in politics, economy, culture and many different fields between countries booming. As a link in international communication and exchanges, translation has been playing an increasingly significant role. Translation is the communication of conveying the meaning of a source-language with target-language. However, in the process of translation, due to different language systems and cultures, when source language is translated into the target language, the meanings and culture elements cannot be fully kept, thus causing the loss of meaning. Language right is a part of human right. It refers that every human being or human group enjoys the right to freely use the language. It also refers that the used language enjoys the right to survive, develop and be fully transmitted. The loss of meaning in one language is the result that the language right of it is not guaranteed or weakened. This paper, researches on the characteristics of Cantonese, through the analysis of the English lines of the Cantonese movie *The Infernal Affairs*, presents the language right weakening of Cantonese translated into English. Some tentative strategies are hopefully to be discovered.

Index Terms—Cantonese, language right weakening, translation

I. INTRODUCTION

A global society has made the communication and cooperation in politics, economy, culture and many different fields between countries booming. As a link in international communication and exchanges, translation has been playing an increasingly significant role. Translation is the communication of conveying the meaning of a source-language with target-language. From Nida's point of view, translation is about achieving lexical equivalence, or in other words, the equivalence of words' meaning as well as the semantic and styles of the original context. (Susan Bassenett, 2003)

However, in the process of translation, due to different language systems and cultures, when source language is translated into the target language, the meanings and culture elements cannot be fully kept, thus the right of the source language to be fully expressed cannot be guaranteed. That is to say, the language right of the source language is weakened.

Actually, the phenomenon of language right weakening in translation is not uncommon, especially when the source language is the minority language while the target language the majority, and when the two languages belong to totally different language systems. However, the phenomenon of language right weakening in the study of translation hasn't become one of the key issues. This paper researches on the phenomenon of language right weakening of Cantonese translated into English, through presenting the characteristics of Cantonese, and with the analysis of English lines the Cantonese movie *Infernal Affairs*. It aims to find the possible solutions or strategies to compensate the weakening of language right of Cantonese.

II. LANGUAGE RIGHT WEAKENING IN TRANSLATION

An Introduction of Language Right Weakening (LRW)

1. Definition of Language Right

The concept of "language right" was firstly introduced in the west as a part of human right. The English expressions of it can be: linguistic human rights, language rights, human language rights. According to Wikipedia, language right refers to:

Linguistic rights (or language rights or linguistic human rights) are the human and civil rights concerning the individual and collective right to choose the language or languages for communication in a private or public atmosphere. Other parameters for analyzing linguistic rights include the degree of territoriality, amount of positivity, orientation in terms of assimilation or maintenance, and overtness. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Linguistic_rights (accessed 9/11/2014)

2. Language Right Weakening

Language right can be divided into individual language right and collective language right. In terms of individual language right, human have the right and freedom of expression and to use their own language with other members of their group. In terms of collective language right, it means that the right of a linguistic group to ensure the survival of its

language and to transmit the language to future generations. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Linguistic_rights (accessed 9/11/2014) That is to say, if the survival of a certain language as well as the transmission of it cannot be ensured or in a full manner, the collective language right is weakened or not guaranteed. This paper is set up on the theoretical foundation of collective language right weakening.

3. Language Right Weakening in Translation

Although Nida once said "Anything that can be expressed with one language can be expressed with another language", translation is not simply a process of transferring individual words from one language to another, but "an extremely complicated process". And even Nida himself admits that language is a series of verbal habits that represent aspects of a culture. (Eugene A. Nida, 2006) Actually, in the process of translation, due to different language systems, and cultures, the tone, style, culture elements, and unique characteristics of the original language cannot be completely represented in the target language. In translation, this is called semantic loss. Semantic loss is not a kind of translation mistake, but unavoidable in translation. The occurring of semantic loss in translation weakens the right of the language to be fully expressed.

In such cases, translators always risk inappropriate spill-over of source-language into the target-language translation, thus 100% equal interpretation from one language to another in every situation cannot be achieved. Usually, such cases happen most frequently when the source language belongs to a very different language system and cultural system with the target language. Therefore, this paper, through analyzing the characteristics of Cantonese, a southern dialect in China, which is totally different from English, researches on the phenomenon of language right weakening of the minority language Cantonese with a Cantonese movie as an example, and possible solutions to the problem of language right weakening are concluded.

III. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF CANTONESE

A. Introduction of Cantonese

Cantonese is a language that originated in the vicinity of Canton (i.e., Guangzhou) in southern China, and is often regarded as the prestige dialect of Yue. It is an official language in Hong Kong (along with English) and in Macau (along with Portuguese). Sometime also known as Guangfuhua, a broader definition which also include the Guangzhou dialect, Hong Kong dialect, Xiguan dialect, Wuzhou dialect, and Tanka dialect. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cantonese> (accessed 9/11/2014)

Cantonese is the prestige language of the Cantonese people. Inside mainland China, it is a lingua franca in Guangdong Province and some neighbouring areas, such as the eastern part of Guangxi Province. Outside mainland China, it is spoken by the majority population of Hong Kong and Macau in everyday life. It is also spoken by overseas Chinese communities in Southeast Asia (like Malaysia, Christmas Island), Canada, Brazil, Peru, Cuba, Panama, Australia, New Zealand, Europe, and the United States. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cantonese> (accessed 9/11/2014)

The Cantonese language is also viewed as part of the cultural identity for the native speakers across large swathes of southern China, Hong Kong and Macau. Although Cantonese shares much vocabulary with Mandarin Chinese, the two languages are not mutually intelligible because of pronunciation, grammatical, and also lexical differences. Sentence structure, in particular the placement of verbs, sometimes differs between the two languages. The use of vocabulary in Cantonese also tends to have more historic roots. To be specific, the characteristics of Cantonese, which differ from Mandarin, can be presented as following. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cantonese> (accessed 9/11/2014)

B. The Characteristics of Cantonese

Cantonese is an analytic language in which the arrangement of words in a sentence is important to its meaning. A basic sentence is in the form of SVO, i.e. a subject is followed by a verb then by an object, though this order is often violated because Cantonese is a Top-prominent language. Unlike synthetic languages, seldom do words indicate time, gender and plural by inflection. Instead, these concepts are expressed through adverbs, aspect markers, and particles, or are deduced from the context. Different particles are added to a sentence to further specify its status or intonation. Among them, the most typical characteristics are as follows. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cantonese> (accessed 9/11/2014)

1. Grammar

(1) Morphology

"The suffix used for the plural of pronouns, 哋, cannot associate with human nouns, unlike its similar Mandarin counterpart 們 -men. Mandarin 學生們 xu shengmen "the students" would be rendered in Cantonese as (啲)學生." (Qianwei, 2010 p.2)

"There are words in Mandarin which require the suffixes 子 or 頭, but they are normally optional in Cantonese, e.g. 鞋子 "shoe" and 石頭 "rock" can simply be 鞋 and 石 in Cantonese." (Qianwei, 2010 p.2)

(2) Comparison

Cantonese usually use the marker 過 after an adjective to expressive adjective comparison. For example, 佢瘦過我 "He is thinner than me."

In Standard Mandarin Chinese, comparison is marked by the word “比”. The sentence above can be translated as “他比我瘦”.

(3) Passives

Cantonese passive sentence usually contains a word “畀”, similarly to “被” in Mandarin. For example, 苹果畀人食咗 "the apple have been eaten by someone"

(4) Final Particles

There are many final particles in Cantonese which can change the moods or sometimes even the meaning of an utterance. Sometimes these final particles can be combined together to enhance the effect. For example:

你食饭未呀? have you had lunch?

你去邊度呀? Where are you going? 我返屋企呀 I'm going home.

There are more final particles than those shown above, such as 嘞, 囉, 咯, 吓, 呵, 吖, 喎, 啱, 噃, 嘸, 啲 and 咩.

Final particles may sometimes combine to convey multiple moods. There are unwritten rules about which particles can be combined and in what order they occur which are probably too complicated to explain here. However, one good rule of thumb is that 嘅 always comes before the other particles. In addition, the particles used in questions (呀 aa3, 咩 me1, 呢 ne1, 嗎 maa3, etc.) always come last. (Zhong Ping, 2012)

(5) Reiteratives and Rhyming words

Reiteratives are typical in Cantonese and a characteristics of it, like “佢快脸红扑扑”(她的脸红扑扑)、“饭菜香喷喷”、“尼朵花好好睇啊”(这朵花好好看啊)

Both Cantonese and Mandarin are featured with many such rhyming words such as: “出尔反尔”、“以事论事”、“人云亦云”、“听之任之”

2. Culture

(1) Massive Ancient Chinese

“One of most significant features of Cantonese is that it remains massive of the ancient Chinese pronunciation characteristics. Cantonese contains lots of ancient Chinese words which are already not used in Mandarin Chinese. These words are often used in oral expression. For example, the uses of “髀”、“翼”、“狼”、“戾”、“多谢”, etc. These words are not used in normal Mandarin Chinese. “鸡髀”(鸡腿), “鸡翼”(翅膀) These Cantonese words are oriented from ancient Chinese. Besides, there are also words like 佢(他), 匙羹(勺子)、锁匙(钥匙), 银包(钱包)、癲(疯)、“针眼”(线人)、“鸳鸯袜”(穿错袜子)、“擦鞋”(拍马屁), and so on.” (ZhuYueming, 2004, p.80)

(2) Unique Expressions

Moreover, many Cantonese words carry deep local characteristics. Such as “叹茶”、“饮茶”、“早茶”、“大排档”、“蛋挞”、“虾饺”、“叉烧包”、“糖水”、“老火靚汤”、“凉茶”、“骑楼”、“白车”(救护车)、“家产”(武器)、“靚仔”(小子), etc. These words are all closely related to local cooking and life culture. They are something unique in areas where Cantonese is spoken.

IV. CASE STUDY: THE PHENOMENON OF LANGUAGE RIGHT WEAKENING IN THE ENGLISH LINES OF INFERNAL AFFAIRS

A. Language Right Weakening of Cantonese—Metaphors



(1) 我条针眼话倪永孝拧左成百万粉出来

我的线人说倪永孝拿了一百万毒品出来。

My secret man informed me that Hau took out a million's worth of coke.

针眼: 针孔, 比喻秘密监视, 线人—secret man

“针眼” means needle eye in Chinese and a special expression in Cantonese meaning the person who secretly spying

someone else. It is a metaphor. It is translated as “secret man” and the vivid expression of this metaphor is gone. Thus the original in Cantonese is not fully expressed.

Actually, there are many such vivid expressions and been used in their metaphorical meanings now, which cannot be fully presented their original colors in English. For example:

- (2) 见一见头先着鸳鸯袜果个人—
先见一见刚才穿错袜子的那个人。
...go see “Mr. wrong socks” first;
- (3) 尼几日风声紧，你翻屯门住一排先—
这几天风声紧，回屯门一段时间吧—
Hide in Tuen Mun till things quiet down.

B. Language Right Weakening of Cantonese—Unique Expressions



到了现场，见几十人挥舞刀棍在械斗

- (1) 见到几廿人刺晒家产，系度做紧大戏。
见几十人挥舞刀棍在那里械斗。
A gang fight was taking place.
家产：工具，武器；财富
刺晒家产：拿着武器，挥舞刀棍—a gang fight

Analysis: “家产” in Cantonese means tools or weapons. It is the unique expression indicating fighting, because weapons are usually needed in a fight. In this example, both Cantonese and Mandarin emphasize the weapon (家产-刀棍), while the English translation omits it, thus weakening the language right of Cantonese here.

More examples:

- (2) 不过两年前，比我见翻个靓仔
两年前，我再遇到了他。
But when I saw him again two years ago.
靓仔：帅哥，小混混—him
- (3) 阿 Sir，不如叫白车啦！
警官，叫救护车吧。
How about calling an ambulance, Sir?
白车：救护车（救护车是白色的）
白车-ambulance

C. Language Weakening of Cantonese—Reiteratives



我见你最近没精打采，还以为你不想去

- (1) 我见你尼排盞砗砗咁，仲以为你唔想去添
我见你最近没精打采，还以为你不想去呢。

I thought you'd been dreading it.

盗砗砗 (reiterative 叠音词): 傻瓜, 没精打采

盗砗砗—dread (a feeling of great fear or terror)

Analysis: Reiterative is the act of repeating a process with the aim of approaching a desired goal, target or result, which are for reinforcing the effect. Reiteratives are typical in Cantonese and a characteristics of it, like “佢快脸红扑扑”、“饭菜香喷喷”“尼朵花好好睇啊” Unfortunately, Reiteratives of Cantonese cannot be represented in English.

D. Language Right Weakening of Cantonese—Rhyming Words



- (1) 点样？未见啲打啲咯。
怎么样？当然是见一次打一次。

I'll kick your ass every time I see you.

见啲打啲: Rhyming Words, -- kick your ass every time I see you

A rhyme is a repetition of similar sounds in two or more words. Rhyme partly seems to be enjoyed simply as a repeating pattern that is pleasant to hear. Both Cantonese and Mandarin are featured with many such rhyming words such as: “出尔反尔”、“以事论事”、“人云亦云”、“听之任之”, etc. However, these rhyming words as well as their effected and not be represented in English.

E. Language Right Weakening of Cantonese—Final Particles



- (1) 我见你尼排盞車車咁，仲以为你唔想去添。
我见你最近没精打采，还以为你不想去呢。

I thought you'd been dreading it.

There are many final particles in Cantonese which can change the moods or sometimes even the meaning of an utterance. Sometimes these final particles can be combined together to enhance the effect. While in English, the moods or sometimes the meaning of an utterance can only be realized by the change of tones. There are many unique final particles in Cantonese, and when they are translated into English, all of them cannot be rendered in English. More examples:

- (2) 我都话你今晚会杀我嘅啦。

我说过你今晚杀我的。

You'll whack me tonight. I told you so.

我係今日返屋企嘅 I'm going home today. (the "today" is emphasized)

(3) 你係幾時返來嘍? When are you coming back? (the "when" is emphasized)

佢返一日啫 He's only coming back for one day.

V. TENTATIVE STRATEGIES FOR LANGUAGE RIGHT WEAKENING IN TRANSLATION

From the introduction from Chapter two, we have already known the definition of Collective language rights. Since the above analysis shows that Cantonese cannot be fully re-expressed into English, the survival of it as well as the transmission of it cannot be guaranteed, the language right of it is not ensured or weakened to some extent. It is not convincible to the development of the language as well as the protection of the diversity of language types. Actually, the main reason for this phenomenon is the differences between language systems and cultures.

As a matter of fact, Eugene Nida thinks that anything that can be expressed by language can be expressed by another language. Corresponding expression can be sought by different means such as information recombination and semantic reconstruction between language and culture. Usually, the strategies for compensating the lost information or cultural elements of the source language to realize full equivalence between two languages in translation are:

(1) Free translation. Free translation is a way when translators cannot save the literal meanings and have no way but to give up the metaphor and forms, finally just express the meanings of the original language. This way suit for dealing with semantic absence phenomenon with heavy cultural color like idioms, proverbs, common sayings, etc. Interpreting should be closely related to the original contents and pragmatic functions when interpreters use free translation. For example, “家产”—weapons, “风声紧”—the situation is urgent,

(2) Paraphrasing. There are some expressions which have special meanings. The connotation and cultural characteristics will be neglected if we just use transliteration or free translation. In this case, adding notes may come in handy. Adding notes, as the name suggests, is to paraphrase like attributes or connotations about the original thing or words. Paraphrasing is usually used in the translation of special mechanisms, allusions or catchwords, and can reach the complementation of meanings and pronunciation. For example, 老子曾说过, 治大国如烹小鲜。To run a big country is like cooking a small fish. Do not overdo it. “鸳鸯袜”—Yuanyang Socks, which means wrong socks. 针眼—needle eye, which means a man secretly spying others.

(3) Zero translation. However, in some cases, the unique features of the source language like the examples listed above are impossible to be fully rendered. Otherwise, the translation would be very unnatural. For example, the reiterative and rhyming words in Cantonese listed above cannot be translated at all. 嘞, 囉, 咯, 吓, 呵, 吖, 喎, 啱, 啱, 啱 and 咩.

VI. CONCLUSION

In the process of translation, due to different language systems, and cultures, the tone, style, culture elements, and unique characteristics of the original language cannot be completely represented in the target language. Translators always risk inappropriate spill-over of source-language usage into the target-language translation. It is a kind of semantic loss. Semantic loss is not a kind of translation mistake, but unavoidable in translation. The occurring of semantic loss in translation weakens the right of the language to be fully expressed. Thus the phenomenon language right weakening occurs. Therefore, this paper, through analyzing the characteristics of Cantonese, a southern dialect in China, which is totally different from English, researches on the phenomenon of language right weakening of the minority language Cantonese with a Cantonese movie as an example, and possible solutions to the problem of language right weakening are concluded.

Although there are many similar vocabularies between Cantonese and Mandarin Chinese, the two languages differs from each other because of pronunciation, grammatical, lexical differences and Sentence structure. Cantonese vocabulary tends to have more historic roots. The language right weakening of Cantonese, through the examples of the English lines of the Cantonese movie *The Infernal Affairs*, are analyzed from four aspects: Metaphors, unique expressions, reiteratives, and rhyming words.

The strategies for compensating the lost information or cultural elements of the source language to realize full equivalence between two languages in translation are free translation, paraphrasing. However, in some cases, the unique features of the source language like the examples listed above are impossible to be fully rendered. Zero translation is a have-to strategy. Therefore, problem language right weakening cannot be solved all the time, although we should try our best to protect the linguistic right of languages.

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