

Linguistic and Cultural Barriers in Translation

ZHAO Bin

Beijing Information Science and Technology University, Beijing, China

This paper deals with the linguistic and cultural barrier between Chinese and English in translation. Aiming at making translation accurate, fluent, and appropriate, the paper argues that great attention should be paid on the differences of language and culture between Chinese and English. These differences restrict the understanding and expressing in translation. As Chinese and English are two different languages and the people live in different cultural societies, the people have different habits and customs, different religious belief, different senses of aesthetic, and different view of history, so in order to make Chinese and English understand each other, when we are doing translating, we should observe the translation criterion so that translation can be accurate, fluent and appropriate, and make it easy for people to understand each other. It accentuates in conclusion that only by breaking down the linguistic and cultural barrier between Chinese and English can translation be accurate, fluent, and appropriate.

Keywords: language barrier, cultural barrier, translation

The Relationship among Language, Culture and Translation

Since culture is defined as “the totality of beliefs and practices of a society”, nothing is greater strategic importance than the language through which its beliefs are expressed and transmitted, and by which most interaction of its members takes place. Different societies have different cultures. Different cultures cause the differences in language understanding and expressing. Nida (1980) once said: “We think the way we think because we talk the way we talk” (p. 10). It is true that the particular structures of a language (sounds, lexemes, syntax, and discourse patterns) reflect to a certain degree the way people think. The way of people’s thinking is determined by their culture. Language and culture influence each other. While for translation, as we all know the meaning of translation is that translating consists in the receptor language the closest natural equivalence of the source language message. It means that when we do translating, we should use the receptor language to express the message of the source language in order to make people who speak different languages understand each other. Translation is influenced by language and culture. As we do translating between Chinese and English, we should consider every difference between these two languages, and we should also take the differences between Chinese and English culture into serious consideration. The differences of language and culture between Chinese and English restrict the quality of translating.

Translation Criteria

According to the explanation of many translators, we can sum up the translation criterion as “accurate, fluent,

and appropriate”.

As Chinese and English are two different languages and the people live in different cultural societies, the people have different habits and customs, different religious belief, different senses of aesthetic, and different view of history, so in order to make Chinese and English understand each other, when we are doing translating, we should observe the translation criterion so that translation can be accurate, fluent, and appropriate, and make it easy for people to understand each other.

Cultural Barriers

Habits and Customs

Britain is an island country, while China is a continental country. Let us take idiom as an example. The idioms in English are often related with water and boat. While in Chinese, the idioms are often related with land. For instance, when we talk about someone who spends money wastefully, in English we can use the idiom “spend money like water” (花钱如流水), while in Chinese the idiom of the same meaning is “挥金如土”. When we talk about someone who is very powerful, in English we use the idiom “turn the tide” (旋转潮流), while in Chinese the idiom of the same meaning is “扭转乾坤”. It is also related with land. Greeting is another clear example. No matter where English people meet with each other, they like talking about weather. Because Britain is an island country, the weather there is very changeable. “Lovely weather isn’t it.” Such kinds of words are very common. While in Chinese, people are used to say “你好吗, 最近怎么样” which means “How are you” or something about food when they meet. Because in China, there is an idiom “民以食为天” which means that food is the most important thing for people’s daily life, so talking about eating or drinking something is also a kind of greeting. People like to say “吃过了吗” or “吃饭了吗”. Even in some provinces, when people meet for the first time, they like to say “吸烟吧”, “喝茶吧”, and “喝酒吧” or something like these. But in fact, people do not really care about whether others have had their meal or not. It is just a kind of greeting. In reply, people often say “吃了”, “吃了, 你呢”. They just thank for the care from other people. In English, the greeting words which have the same meaning as “吃过了吗” or “喝过了吗” are just as simple as “How do you do” or “Hi”. If people use some words which are related with food as greeting in English, it will be very strange. If person A asks person B “Have you had your meal”, person B will commonly think that “Do you mean to invite me to have a meal”. If B is a Chinese, it is sure that he will not misunderstand the meaning.

There are lots of other differences of habits and customs between Chinese and English. The difference of the attitudes to dog is a most typical one. In Chinese, dog has a low position. Most Chinese idioms which are related with dog all have derogatory senses, such as “狐朋狗友”, “狗急跳墙”, “狗腿子”, “狼心狗肺”, and “猪狗不如”, etc.. While in English countries, dog is considered as the most loyal friend to humans. Most English idioms which are related with dog all have commendatory senses. For example, “you are a lucky dog” means “你是个幸运儿”, “every dog has his day” means “凡人皆有得意日”.

Religious Beliefs

Chinese people believe in Buddha and Bodhisattva. The most popular religion in China is Buddhism. Most English people believe in God. In English speaking countries, Christianity is a very popular religion. Differences of culture and language between Chinese and English bring about different religious belief. Let us take a look at

the differences between Buddhism and Christianity. Christianity believes that God dominates the whole universe and God creates all things. In Buddhism, people believe in Buddhist, Bodhisattva, and other gods. But these gods do not dominate universe or create world. In Christianity, God is almighty. God can live forever. God will never disappear. God is always right. God creates truth. God can save all people. While in Buddhism, Buddhist, Bodhisattva, and other gods will die. They make mistakes just like common people. They have no magic power so they just can lead people to find the way how people can save themselves. God is born as a god, and then he becomes human. While in Buddhism, it is just contrary. Buddhist and Bodhisattva are born as common people. When they grow up, they want to change their life and they want to practice themselves, and then they become gods step by step.

Being compared with Buddhism, Christianity is more fair and simple. Everyone who believes in Christianity can be saved. There is no limitation of the jobs that the believers of Christianity do. A Christianity believer can be a business man, a politician, or any other else. They do not need to pay attention on their belief. In Buddhism, there are two types of believers. One type is just common believers. They can have their own jobs. But they still live their own life. Another type is that the believers are monks or nuns. They just eat vegetables. Everyday they pray to Buddha. They practice themselves both mentally and physically. These two types of believers are considered to be two levels in belief. Those common believers can only have good luck in their common life. It is believed that only monks and nuns will get out of abyss of misery in common life, because they devote most energies of their life to practice themselves in mental and physical.

Different religious belief causes lots of differences in culture between Chinese and English. For example, Chinese people say “菩萨保佑”, while English people say “God bless” (上帝保佑). Chinese people say “天知道”, while English people say “God knows” (上帝知道). In Chinese idioms, there are a lot that are related with Buddhism such as “借花献佛” and “闲时不烧香, 临时抱佛脚”. In English, there are also such kinds of idioms, for example “God helps those who help themselves” (上帝帮助自助的人).

Views of History

There are lots of historical allusions in both Chinese and English. Some Chinese and English words though they have the same literal meaning, according to some historical factors, when we are doing translating, we can not use them directly. For example, Chinese poet LIU Chang-qin (刘长卿) (AD781) wrote the poem “逢雪宿芙蓉山” and in this poem there is a sentence “日暮苍山远, 天寒白屋贫” (p. 20). The word “白屋” here can not be translated into “white house”, because it will cause people to understand it as the White House in Washington. Then another Chinese poet DU Mu (杜牧) (AD836) wrote the poem “遣云”. In it there is a sentence “十年一觉扬州梦, 赢得青楼薄幸名” (p. 25). The word “青楼” here can not be translated as “green house”. As we know that “green house” means “building with sides and roof of glass, used for growing plants that need protection from the weather” (温室, 暖房). While in China, in ancient times “青楼” means “house where men pay to have sex with prostitutes”.

Language Barriers

Lack of Word Meanings

In Chinese, there are a lot of words which is related with the meaning of eating, such as “饭桶”, “吃不开”,

“吃不了兜着走”, “吃不消”, “吃不住”, “吃老本”, “吃软不吃硬”, “吃闲饭”, and “吃香”. While in English, the phrases which have the same meaning of the above mentioned Chinese words have nothing related with eating. In English, “饭桶” means “good for nothing”, “吃不开” means “be popular”, “吃不了兜着走” means “land oneself in serious trouble”, “吃不消” means “be unable to stand”, “吃不住” means “be unable to bear or support”, “吃老本” means “live off one’s past gains”, “吃软不吃硬” means “be open to persuasion, but not to coercion”, “吃闲饭” means “lead an idle life”, and “吃香” means “be very popular”. There are also some English idioms which are related with eating food. For example, “He has taken the bread out of my mouth”. It is better to translate it into Chinese as “他砸了我的饭碗” rather than “他从我嘴里拿去了面包”. In Chinese, the meaning of the English idiom is “他抢走了我的工作” or “他断了我谋生的路”.

Misunderstanding of Word Meanings

Let us take the translating of business field as an example. Several years ago, there was a lipstick brand called “芳芳”. In Chinese, “芳芳” is a very beautiful word. When we see the word, we will have the image of a beautiful girl in our mind. But if we transliterate the word “芳芳” into the Chinese Phonetic Alphabet as “Fang fang”, when English people see it, it will feel terrible. Because “fang” is an English word which means: (1) along, sharp tooth of a dog (狗的长牙); and (2) a snake’s poison tooth (蛇的毒牙). So when English people see the word “fang fang”, they will have the image of ugly, wild dog or poison snake. So, because of the brand name, the lipstick could not sell well.

There is a well-known brand of dry cell called “白象”. It is all right to translate “白象” into “white elephant”. But “white elephant” is an English phrase which means “a burdensome possession” (沉重的负担) or “a useless thing” (无用而累赘的东西). So it is also not a good translation.

The soap brand “蜜蜂” seems not strange to Chinese customs. But when it is translated into its English brand name “Bees”, it is not welcomed by most English customs. Because when they are using the soap, they will imagine about the downy thorn of the bee and it will make them feel uncomfortable. Such kind of matter also happened to the poker brand “马戏”. As it is translated into the Chinese Phonetic Alphabet as “Mixupuke”, it is also an improper translation. Because “maxi” and “puke” are two English words. “Maxi” means “very large or particularly big” (特大的) and “puke” means “vomit” (呕吐物; 令人作呕的人或物).

The alarm clock brand “金鸡” is well-know not only in China but also in other countries. But its translation is still a very serious problem—“golden cock”. As we know that the word “cock” has several meanings and here we should pay attention to two of its meanings: (1) adult male bird of the domestic fowl (公鸡); and (2) organ with which a male animal copulates and urinates (雄性器官). At first, when “golden cock” was used, the alarm clock could not sell well. Then in order to make the brand name better, the translation has been changed into “golden rooster”. As a result, the alarm clock brand became much more popular than before.

Linguistic and Cultural Barriers in Translation

Translation can be understood as a kind of writing that is restricted by certain rules. Translation is using a language to express the message that is expressed in another language. We should not only focus on the meaning, when we are doing translating, we should pay attention to all things such as the structure of sentence, the style of the passage and something like these. So in order to make translation accurate, fluent and appropriate, we should break down the language and cultural barrier between Chinese and English.

Accuracy

Accuracy means that when doing translation, we should accurately understand and analyze the central idea, key point, structure, style, and means of rhetoric of the passage in target language. And we should accurately translate the passage into the receptor language, and make the translation accord with the rule of the receptor language. So if a lot of translators all translate a same passage, everyone has his own expressing way. But first of all, the translation should be accurate. Translators should choose the accurate words in translation. For example, there is a word “亚洲四小龙”, though we can translate it as “the Asian four dragons”, English people would rather use “the Asian four tigers” or “four tigers in Asia”. Because in their mind dragon is something similar to crocodile or snake. It has wings and can pour out fire. It always guards money and valuables. Idioms are also the same. For example, “don’t teach your grandmother to suck eggs”. If we just understand the literal meaning of it and translate it into “不要教你奶奶磕鸡蛋”. It will surely make readers confused. Then if we translate it into “不要班门弄斧”, it both expresses the meaning clearly and makes Chinese readers understand easily. There are lots of other idioms such as, “like talking to a brick wall” (对牛弹琴; 瞎子点灯白费蜡) which means to waste one’s breath trying to persuade someone who is so obstinate to listen to reason. For instance, “He is so dogmatic. It’s like talking to a brick wall arguing with him.” “To make bricks without straw” (巧妇难为无米之炊) which means to try to achieve some result with inadequate means. For example, “We were unable to give you an opinion because you didn’t give us the information we needed. We can’t make bricks without straws.” “The rotten apple”(害群之马) which means the one bad person among a number of good ones. For example, “His youngest son was the rotten apple.”

Form the translating of these idioms we can see that it is hard to make the English expression and the Chinese expression literally equivalent. So we can say that using accurate words to express the meaning clearly is the first step of doing good translating. For instance, the Chinese character “头” has several usages: (1) 这孩子头真大—The baby has got a big head; (2) 她正在梳头—She is combing her hair; and (3) 他是我们组的头—He is the head of our group. Only in the first sentence that the English translating has the same usage as the Chinese one. The other two do not translate literally. They just express the meaning clearly.

Fluency

Fluency means that translation should not only be accurate but also be fluent and accord with the rule and habit of the receptor language, every part in the article should coordinate well with each other and the expression should be logical. Fluency should be achieved in both structure and logic. For example, in a Chinese sentence “他走得很快”, here “他” is subject, “走” is verb and “很快” is complement. As we translate the sentence into English: “He walks very fast.” Though the word order is same, “very fast” here is adverbial but not complement. There is another sentence “我在中国银行工作”. In it the adverbial “在中国银行” is before the verb “工作”, while we translate it into English: “I work in the bank of China”, the word order is changed. If we translate it back into Chinese according to the same English word order, the sentence will be “我工作在中国银行”. Chinese and English are different in sentence structure. We should change the word order in order to make translation fluent. For example, “Formerly a worker himself, he is now an engineer”, if we translate it into Chinese according to the English word order, it will be “以前的工人, 他现在是一个工程师” and it does not accord with the rule of Chinese. It will be better to translate it as “他过去是一个工人, 现在当上了工程师了”. Another sentence as

this: "Never before has our country been as united as it is today." It is better to translate it as "今天, 我们国家空前团结" than "从来没有以前我们国家像今天这样团结". There are also some particular sentence patterns should we pay attention to. For example, "All the answers are not right". It is wrong to translate it as "所有答案都不正确". The right translation should be "并非所有的答案都正确". Then let us look at this sentence "Every one of us don't like him". The right translation is "并不是我们每个人都喜欢他" while it may easily cause us to misunderstand it as "我们每个人都喜欢他". In fact, the expressing way of Chinese and English people is different. As we say "您先请" while English people usually say "After you". It seems just contrary. The view of time of English people is also different from ours. CHEN Zi-ang (陈子昂) (AD696), a poet of Tang Dynasty wrote a poem "登幽州台歌": "前不见古人, 后不见来者, 念天地之悠悠, 独怆然而涕下" (p. 30). Here "前" means the past time and "后" means the future. While in English, "back" means the past time and "forward" means future.

So we can see that fluency is also necessary in translation and it should not be separated from accuracy.

Appropriateness

Accuracy, fluency, and appropriateness are three necessities that can not separate from each other. Among them appropriateness is the most difficult one to achieve. Appropriateness means that we should show out the manner of speaking even the style of the passage in the target language.

In the American magazine *Business Week* (January 27, 1992) there was an article "A Death Knell at Macy's". In it, there was a sentence explaining an elusion picture of it: "CEO Finklestein: He needs to pull a rabbit out of his hat". The Chinese edition of the magazine translated the sentence as: "总经理芬克斯泰因: 他需要拿出一个绝招来". At that time, Finklestein was the new manager of the company and the company was in a big trouble. He really needed to take something out to save the company. In such a circumstance, the translation expressed the worry of the manager clearly and attracted the attention of readers at the same time.

"The Westminster Abbey" is an essay written by Washington Irving (1840). Here is one paragraph from it:

On one of those sober and rather melancholy days in the latter part of autumn, when the shadows of morning and evening almost mingle together, and throw a gloom over the decline of the year, I passed several hours in rambling about Westminster Abbey. There was something congenial to the season in mournful magnificence of the old pile, and as I passed its threshold, it seemed like stepping back into the religious of antiquity, and losing me among the shades of former ages. (as cited in ZHAO, 1999, p. 50)

Let us compare two paragraphs of translation: (1) 在晚秋暗淡而悲哀的一天, 当曙光和夜色几乎混而为一, 而将这年终酝酿成一片凄凉的分, 我在那威治明士德院里徘徊, 消磨了数小时的光阴, 在这古屋悲壮的外观上, 有种情调是正和那气候相称的, 当时, 在我跨进门槛的时候, 仿佛是走回到古代的境地之中, 把自己消失在前朝黑洞洞的影子里。 (2) 时方晚秋, 气象肃穆, 略带忧郁, 早晨的阴影和黄昏的阴影, 几乎连接到一起, 不可分割, 岁月将暮, 终日昏暗, 我就在这么一天到西敏寺散步了几个钟头。古寺巍巍, 森森然似有鬼气, 和阴森森的气候正好调和, 我跨进大门, 觉得自己已经置身远古, 相忘于古人的鬼影之中。 The original work has a slow rhythm. Reading it can make people feel leisure and comfortable. The words in the essay such as shadow, mingle, throw, gloom, and decline, etc., form a feeling of classic beauty. Although the first paragraph of translating expresses the original meaning clearly, it is too flat and it even seems a bit dull and it has no rhythm. While the second paragraph of translating uses lots of idioms and has a rhythm between the lines. And the most important thing is that it expresses the style of Irving's work.

Conclusions

Language and cultural barrier brings lots of difficulties to translation. Translation can be understood as a kind of writing that is restricted by certain rules. Translation is using a language to express the message that is expressed in another language. We should not only focus on the meaning, when we are doing translating, we should pay attention to all things such as the structure of sentence, the style of the passage and something like these. So in order to make translation accurate, fluent, and appropriate, we should break down the language and cultural barrier between Chinese and English.

References

- CHEN, Y. F. (2007). *English Chinese cultural differences and translation*. Beijing: Peking University Press.
- JIA, D. J. (2000). *Comparative study of English and Chinese translation*. Xi'an: National University of Defense Technology press.
- Nida, E. A. (1980). *Language and culture—Contexts in translating*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- WANG, J. W. (2000). *On cross cultural communication in the translation*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- WANG, N. (2001). *Discussion on "loyalty" in translation*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- WANG, S. P. (2000). *Cultural differences in English-Chinese translation*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- YANG, F. N. (2001). *Comparative study of English and Chinese translation*. Tianjin: Tianjin University press.
- YANG, Z. Y. (2006). *On the negative transfer of Chinese thinking pattern*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- ZHAO, L. J. (1999). *Understanding and translating of cultural differences*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.