

Changes in Chinese Transliteration Words^{*}

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With the intensifying of globalization and blending of different cultures, more and more foreign words, especially English words, are becoming Chinese transliteration words. The present paper, with many latest popular Chinese words that have been transliterated from English as examples, explores the four types of changes of those transliteration words: extension, narrowing, elevation, and degradation. The paper proves that although various changes are taking place during the process, extension of the meaning is the main trend. Reasons for those changes are briefly mentioned. The paper concludes that borrowing is a trend, because it can enrich other language and meanwhile retain their original characteristics.

Keywords: changes, transliteration words, extension

Introduction

With the development of human civilization, changes keep taking place in our societies and our daily lives, as a result, new concepts, ideas, and new things emerge continuously. All this is reflected in language. So “Language is just like a mirror, reflecting everything that exists in human society” (ZHANG, 1999, p. 153). As new things emerge continuously, and if there were no equivalent words in one language, we have to borrow the new words from other languages. “Words taken over from foreign languages are known as borrowed words or loan words or borrowings in simple terms” (ZHANG, 1999, p. 19). And in Chinese a loan word refers to “the words that have been borrowed from other languages both according to the sound and meaning; after long Chineselization, they have been accepted and become known as Chinese loan words” (HE, 2011, p. 23). English is a heavy borrower and has adopted words from all other major languages of the world. It is estimated that English borrowings constitute 80% of the modern English vocabulary. So is Chinese, which has never ceased the absorbing of new words in other languages since its existence almost 4,000 years ago. According to *A Dictionary of Chinese Loan Words* written by CEN Qi-xiang in 1990, Chinese has borrowed 7,704 words from English, Japanese, and Russia, and 3,426 of them are from English, which account for nearly 50%. After China’s reform and opening to the outside world, goods move, people move, idea move, and culture changes, so there are more and more loan words, especially English words, in Chinese now. The main approaches to turn those borrowings into Chinese is by translating. Generally speaking, there are two important ways to translate those foreign words into Chinese. One is to translate them according to the meaning and the other is to translate according to the sound. The latter one is known as transliteration words. During the process of becoming a

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Chinese transliteration words, they must be borrowed according to Chinese people's cognitive habit and thinking mode. And they also have to develop under the Chinese system of pronunciation, semantic, and meaning. Gradually, they are well assimilated into the Chinese language. The present paper, then, will briefly discuss what type of changes those English words have gone through during the process to become Chinese transliteration words.

Changes in Word Meaning—Extension

There are various type of changes for those loan words, which have been influenced greatly by different grammar, pronunciation, even places, peoples, social lives, and cultures, yet extension is the main changes for those English words (WANG, 1993, p. 19). "Extension of meaning is the name given to the widening of meaning which some words undergo. In other words, the term has extended to cover a broader and often less definite concept" (ZHANG, 1999, p. 145).

Take "bar" for example; its transliteration "Ba" has become a Chinese word "吧". But its original meaning is "a counter where alcoholic drinks are served" has been extended into "a place for relaxing". Now in Chinese, we have a lot of phrases with the morpheme "吧". For instance, you will find "网吧" (Internet bar), "氧吧" (oxygen bar), "陶吧" (pottery bar), "玩具吧" (toy bar), "迪吧" (disco bar), and "书吧" (book bar), etc., on the signs everywhere along the streets of China. We also have the phrase "泡吧", which means "spend or kill time in the bar". "吧" here serves as the object of verb "泡", while "吧友" means the friends in the bar or become friends in the bar; here "吧" is used as an adjective. People like those buzzwords, because "吧" now is associated with fashion and it sounds exotic.

If a loan word becomes Chinese, it is unavoidably influenced by Chinese grammar, pronunciation, etc. (YANG, 2007, p. 27). A popular transliteration word "秀" has been transliterated from "show". The phrases with the morpheme "秀" have extended meaning now. In Chinese, "选秀", "选" means to "choose or select" and "秀" here turns into a noun which has the meaning of "remarkable or extraordinary person". "脱口秀" is transliterated from the phrase "talk show". Under the influence of "脱口秀", we have the extended phrases "服装秀" (fashion show), "内衣秀" (underwear show), "模仿秀" (imitation show), and "模特秀" (model show). In fact, "模特" is another transliteration word from "model", its extended meaning in Chinese now is "someone who has good qualities or behavior that you should copy". We can even use "秀" as an independent morpheme to make a sentence: "秀出你的风采" (show your grace and elegance), in which "秀" is a verb that means both "show and perform".

Sometimes the extension is gained by adding new rhetorical devices to the loan words. "拜拜" is the transliteration of "bye-bye". But in Chinese its meaning has been extended. For example, when two lovers have to end their love, in Chinese now we can use "拜拜" to indicate that they have to say farewell to each other forever, and this kind of saying is more humorous and euphemistic. The transliteration word "拜拜" has new meaning in Chinese just because of the using of new rhetorical devices "euphemism and humour".

The extension of the transliteration words usually goes from specific term to general term. For example, another transliteration word "乌托邦" (Utopia) in Chinese originally meant "an imaginary perfect world where everyone is happy", but later it came to mean "any beautiful desires, plans, suggestions that can not be realized". "马拉松" is transliterated from "marathon", which means "a long race". Now in Chinese, its extended meaning is "an activity that continues for a long time".

The generalization of some special terms is another extraordinary way for the extension of the loan words. (WU, 1994, p. 22). For example, the Chinese equivalent of “engine” is “发动机 (Fadongji)”, but with the wide spreading of knowledge and computer, its transliteration “引擎” is becoming more and more popular now. So now we have “搜索引擎” (search engine), “思维引擎” (thinking engine), “身体引擎” (body engine), etc.. “引擎” in those phrases does not only means “a piece of machinery”, but refers to “something that can dominate or control something else”. “黑客” is the transliteration of “Hacker”, which means “someone who secretly change the information in another person’s computer system”. Now in Chinese, it has the tendency of being generalized, which can mean “a chance visitor or an ill-intentioned person”. Chinese and English belong to different language families. When an English word becomes a Chinese change is a must.

Changes in Word Meaning—Narrowing

Narrowing of meaning, also called specialization, is the opposite of extension. It is a process by which a word of wide meaning acquires a narrower or specialized sense (ZHANG, 1999, p. 147). Take “巴士” (bus) for example. In English, despite the first definition “a large motor coach that can carry passengers”, “bus” still has several other definitions, such as, an automobile, a bus bar, etc.. But when it become a Chinese transliteration word, only the first definition is used. And its extension is based on its first definition. We now have “大巴” (big bus), “中巴” (medium-sized bus), and “小巴” (minibus), which means the buses that can carry more than 20 passengers, more than 10 passengers and less than 10 passengers respectively. Furthermore, now in Chinese it does not only means “vehicles that people pay to travel on”, but can also refer to “the ferry that people pay to travel on” in an inland city, which is known as “Bus on Water” (水上巴士) in Chinese.

“坦克” is taken from English word “tank”, which has several meanings, but in Chinese “坦克” only takes one of its meanings: a heavily armored and self-propelled combat vehicle armed with guns and moving on full tractor treads. Its original meaning has been narrowed in Chinese.

“卡通” is the transliteration of “cartoon”, which was introduced to China during the May 4th Movement of 1919 in China. “卡通” denotes both “caricature” and “animation” at beginning. Later on, with the changes of culture and time, now “卡通” mainly denotes “animation”.

To sum up, the English word which used to have a more general sense or several definitions becomes restricted in its application and convey a special meaning in Chinese.

Changes in Word Meaning—Elevation and Degradation

Some transliteration words originally dignified something quite derogatory, but changed as time went by to designate something agreeable or pleasant. This is known as elevation (ZHANG, 2000, p. 176). For example, “gentleman”, at beginning, was transliterated “尖头鳗” (Its literal meaning is an ugly and hideous eel in Chinese) during the Revolution in 1911 in China. They regarded “a profligate, a fake foreign devil, even a sissy man” as a “gentleman”, because of the prejudice or ignorance towards foreigners at that time. But as time went by, Chinese people had increasing opportunities to get acquaintance with foreigners and got to know more and more about Western culture. Gradually, they know that “gentleman” was commendatory word which denoted “modest, honest, brave, just, honorable etc.”. So “gentleman” later was translated according to its meaning.

The change of “艾滋病” went through a similar process. “艾滋病” is transliterated from “AIDS”. At first, it was translated as “爱滋病” in Hongkong, but the literal meaning of these three words in Chinese can imply: You

get the disease because of love or sex. And “sex” in China is usually associated with pornography for a period of time. So later on in the mainland “艾滋病” is used, in which “艾” is a kind of vanilla plant.

Sometimes some transliteration words originally dignified something quite commendatory, but changed as time went by to designate something derogatory. This is known as degradation (ZHANG, 2000, p. 176). Another transliteration word “拷贝” (copy) changed from good origin into a non-affective word. The origin of “拷贝” is the equivalent of “copy” (to make something exactly like another thing). Later, it carries the meaning of “print”, and now it can also express “plagiarize”.

“Cool” becomes Chinese “酷”. Nowadays, “酷” is a buzzword in China, especially for young people, and its meaning has extended to “excellent, splendid, remarkable”. Yet, with its development, its derivation “扮酷” (pretended to be cool) has derogatory meaning, and it has turned from an adjective into a noun.

The word “秀” in the above examples has no derogatory meaning, yet in its extended phrase “做秀” (Zuoxiu), it denotes derogatory meaning: “做” in this phrase means “do”, while “秀” in means “spacious writing; false image”; so the phrase now denotes “seek popularity by doing/saying something sensational or shocking”. “Often, an old form of group or forms are presented into new service when a new linguistic need is felt” (ZHANG, 1999, p. 144).

Conclusions

Loan words are the result of the cultural communication and interaction of different nations. Because of the cultural differences, borrowing is a permanent phenomenon. And changing in word meaning has never ceased, since the language came into being and will continue in the future (ZHANG, 1999, p. 145); especially transliteration words, which reflect the latest development of the world, will continue to emerge and change. Furthermore, with the improving of people’s educational standards, more and more people can speak English, especially young people. So transliteration of those English words is the most convenient way to borrow English words. When words are first taken over from English, they have to be influenced by linguistic factors and non-linguistic factors (WU, 1994 p. 94). After various types of changes, with extension as the main changes, they become Chinese transliteration words. And with the intensifying of globalization and blending of different cultures, Chinese will keep receiving other cultures and words so as to bridge the gap in Chinese. Those transliteration words do not only retain the original meaning of the English words, but also denote new Chinese characters in them. They enrich the Chinese, meanwhile Chinese language, which has more than 4,000-year history, will become more and more international.

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