English Lexical Mistranslation of Vocabulary List and Plausible Translation and Teaching Strategies[*]

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In this paper, the author analyzes different types of English lexical mistranslation of vocabulary list in 10 elementary teaching Chinese as the second language textbooks and also develops a series of possible translation and teaching strategies to assist students' understanding and full mastery of words.

Keywords: lexical mistranslation, vocabulary list, elementary textbooks, possible translation

Introduction

Vocabulary meaning is an integral part for full mastery of the second language. According to Nation (2001), vocabulary knowledge is composed of general proficiency of the second language which is prerequisite of successful communication. Furthermore, second language learners are typically hampered by the lack of a natural environment to use the target language for authentic communication purpose (as a means for "learning by applying"). Hence, understanding the authentic meaning of each word is paramount to second language learners, including the cultural additional meanings, affective meanings, and usage of context.

There is a considerable amount of translation errors in vocabulary list in textbooks and some of mistranslation cannot fully reflect their cultural additional meanings or affective meanings. The paper sheds lights to investigate different types of lexical mistranslation in vocabulary list (cultural additional meaning, differences of lexical meanings between English and Chinese, affective meaning, style differences, and classification of words). Based on the analysis results, the article puts forward some plausible suggestions about improvement of translation and teaching strategies.

The reason why author chose elementary textbooks is that elementary level Chinese learners are more dependent on the English interpretation when they learn new words compared to upper or advanced level counterparts, due to their limited Chinese language knowledge.

Types of Lexical Mistranslation in Vocabulary List

Cultural Additional Meaning

It is widely accepted that language is the carrier for its culture. Therefore, studying subtle cultural additional meaning of the words becomes necessity for the second language learners. A reasonable definition of

cultural additional vocabulary is that vocabulary belongs to a specific culture, which directly or indirectly represents its ethnic culture (CHANG, 1995). Based on the study conducted by WANG Huan (1987), every language has its unique cultural words which are nearly no equivalent words in other language. Similarly, a word in one language exists in a specific cultural context therefore lexical gap may occur in another language. Therefore, lexical gap exists in translation between source language and target language, which deserves to pay more attention.

A reasonable example is "小姐" (Chinese Course first volume 1). "小姐" refers to "Miss" in general context. However, this word also means someone who is spoiled and has patronizing attitude towards other people in particular situation and common collocation is "小姐脾气" (patronizing temper). Another example of "师傅" (master; elder strangers, such as taxi driver, shop assistant, etc.) illustrates the similar cultural gap in English. In general, "master" means teacher, but also means addressing for elder strangers for most frequently used in daily life. Therefore, translators or teachers should add cultural tips to students.

Differences of Lexical Meanings Between Chinese and English

Normally, only some amount of Chinese words have equivalent words in English (words with overlapping meanings). Consequently, cognitive concept for some words may differ to some extent, especially the range and intensity of those words.

For example, "营业员" (Chinese Course first volume 1) refers to salesperson in shops, while it is translated as "shop employee" including shop salesperson, product carriers, and also office employee. The mistranslation of this word can obviously expand the employee range. For another instance, "上午" (Chinese Course first volume 1) means period usually from 9-12 o'clock in the morning, however, the mistranslation in the textbook is "morning" which is lack of time range. There is another word "早上" (5-9 am in the morning) which also means "morning", so translating "上午" should add time range to distinguish from "早上".

As for intensity of words, "胖" (Chinese Course first volume 2) can be a convincing example. "胖" means overweight, but the translation is "fat" which is close to the extent of obesity ; "非常" (Chinese Reading Course) refers to "extremely", but the translation is "very", which cannot represent appropriately the intensity of the word.

Affective Meaning

Geoffery Leech (1981) classified semantics into seven kinds: conceptual meaning, connotative meaning, social meaning, affective meaning, reflected meaning, collocative meaning, and thematic meaning. In other words, language is not only the tool for expressing people's thoughts, but also the tool for reflecting people's emotion. Words in the usage can be classified into three kinds: commendatory terms, neutral terms, and derogatory terms.

Take "胖" (overweight) (Chinese Course first volume 2) as an example, "overweight" is a neutral word to describe a person's bodyshape, while it is mistranslated as "fat" usually with unsatisfactory attitude which is a derogatory term. "小姐" (Chinese Course first volume 1) is translated as "Miss" in neutral context, while as "patronizing (temper)" in derogatory context. Hence, translators should pay more attention to the affective meaning for effective usage of words, given the context. Otherwise, students may be confused with their affective meanings.

Style Differences

Nida (1969) gave a widely-accepted definition of translation: Translation refers to reproduce source

language to the closest natural equivalence of target language, first duplication of the meaning, followed by the style. To a large extent, Nida pointed out the importance of style equivalence other than the meanings of words itself. In other words, style can be a focal point in different context, especially the formal and informal reversion.

An example is "职业" (vocation, occupation) which is translated as "occupation, 工作 (job)" (Elementary Chinese Reading Course). "Job" is described as a specific work that people do for a living, which can be used both in formal and informal context, while "vocation or occupation" means career which is used usually in formal context when people talk about career development or in a formal report. For another example, "晚会" (Chinese Listening Course) means people usually hold a performance gala celebrating in the evening, usually Spring Festival Gala, Mid-Autumn Day Gala, or Chinese skill competition gala for overseas students. "晚会" is a formal word because it is usually held by schools, companies, and organizations. Nevertheless, "party" means informal or formal celebration evening small or large activities among friends or family members.

Other Types—Classification of Words, Inaccurate Interpretation

There are also other types of mistranslation such as the unequivalent classification of words in lexical translation. "乱" (New Practical Chinese Reader Textbook first volume) is adjective, thus should be close to "messy" other than "in disorder, in a mess". Classification of words is fundamental to employ words in sentences with correct grammar.

Furthermore, some inaccurate interpretation of words can cause confusion of word usage in different context. For instance, the translation of "有意者" (interested candidate) (Chinese Listening Course second volume) may have another meaning with people who are interested in something, while the true meaning is people who are willing to take participate in some activities.

Suggestions for Translation and Plausible Teaching Strategies

Translation is a mental process of understanding the connotation of words in source language followed by the employment of accurate source language to express equivalent information.

Based on the above classification of lexical mistranslation and analysis of some mistakes in related textbooks, possible translating strategies are involved for assisting improvement. First, machine-aided translation should be avoided in lexical translation. Most of translation tools are designed to use memory database to translate the information, which are suitable to the technical words or passages. Although machine-aided translation can automatically match equivalence of some words, it still can be inaccurate without considering connotations of words. Due to many cultural additional meanings or emotional meanings involved, translators should contemplate a sound method to relay faithful words combining automatic and human translation. Second, free translation or adding more explanations can be both used to achieve the goal of faithfulness of resource language (ZHANG, 1995). He also believed that translators should not be bound by the word limits during the translation process. Because translation is based on the full understanding of source language first, interpretation can add or abridge information. Third, adding collocations, respondent Chinese interpretation, and classification of words along with English interpretation can be more beneficial for avoiding errors of translation. Students tend to avoid misusage of words through acknowledging words in different context.

The same principles can be used in the vocabulary interpretation during the class teaching and even some mistakes of textbooks still exist.

Conclusion

English lexical translation in vocabulary list is imperative to assist learners' understanding the meaning and usage of words, peculiarly for those elementary level students. Unfortunately, there is a large amount of mistranslation in those elementary textbooks. With investigating the five types of mistranslation (cultural additional meaning, differences of lexical meanings between English and Chinese, affective meaning, style differences, and classification of words), the author discusses the importance of those elements to improve effective knowledge impart and word employment. Similarly, understanding the cultural additional meanings, affective meanings, or other connotations can reduce the misusage of words, while stimulating understanding the actual meaning of cultural-related phenomenon, including psychology and living habits from target language country.

In addition, the analysis of existing lexical mistranslation in vocabulary list reported has shown the feasibility of related translation and teaching methodologies. Employment of free translation instead of machine-aided translation can translate words without limits of word count after clarification of word meanings.

Although the analysis do not contain all the mistakes existing in the textbooks, the author still collect mistranslation and explore possible translation strategies in order to attain a satisfactory version of vocabulary list.

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Appendix Ⅰ : Lexical Mistranslation of Vocabulary List in 10 Textbooks

Book	Page	Chinese	English Lexical Mistranslation	Types of Errors	Improved Translation
Very Good, Elementary Chinese Speaking	P.68	好喝	good to drink	Classification of Words	tasty to drink (adj)
Elementary Chinese Reading Course (second volume)	P.11	职业	occupation 工作	Style Differences	occupation, vocation
	P.11	学历	record of formal schooling 一个人的学习经历, 比如高中、大学等	Style Differences	Certificate of formal education experience
	P.19	专业	Specialty 某种学科	Inaccurate Interpretation	major
	P.144	濒临	approach, close to 一个情况马上要发生了	Classification of Words	approach, close to 一个情况马上要发生了(adv)
	P.164	素质	quality 质量(常常用来说人)	Inaccurate Interpretation	characteristics or nature of person
New Practical Chinese Reader Textbook (first volume)	P.210	乱	in disorder, in a mess	Classification of Words	messy
New Practical Chinese Reader Textbook (second volume)	P.226	笑	laugh, smile 笑着笑着说别笑了喜欢笑大笑	Differences of Lexical Meanings (intensity)	laugh
Chinese Course (first volume 1)	P.66	小姐	Miss	Cultural Additional Meaning/Affective Meaning	Miss; patronizing (attitude)
	P.66	上午	morning	Differences of Lexical Meanings (range)	morning (usually 9-12 am)
	P.66	营业员	shop employee	Differences of Lexical Meanings (range)	shop salesperson
	P.67	要	want to	Differences of Lexical Meanings	would like; want to (buy)
	P.66	师傅	master	Cultural Additional Meaning	master; elder strangers, such as taxi driver, shop assistant
	P.42	肥	fat; loose	Cultural Additional Meaning /Collocation	fat; loose (clothes)
	P.42	胖	fat	Differences of Lexical Meanings (intensity)/Affective Meaning	overweight
	P.42	可以	may, can	Differences of Lexical Meanings (intensity)	may, could
Chinese Reading Course (first volume)	P.109	参观	to visit	Classification of Words	to visit (v); visiting (n) 参观博物馆
	P.109	顺便	by the way	Style Differences	on the way
	P.109	翻译	to translate	Classification of Words	to translate (v); translation (n)
	P.125	准备	to prepare	Classification of Words	to prepare (v); preparation (n)
	P.125	打算	to intend	Classification of Words	to intend (v), to plan; intention (n)

Book	Page	Chinese	English Lexical Mistranslation	Types of Errors	Improved Translation
	P.140	非常	very	Differences of Lexical Meanings (intensity)	very much
	P.140	喜欢	to like , to love-	Differences of Lexical Meanings (intensity)	to like
	P.148	一直	straight	Classification of Words	always; straight 一直走
	P.180	化验	to test	Style Differences	to test (formal)

Book	Page	Chinese	English Lexical Mistranslation	Types of Errors	Improved Translation
Chinese Listening Course (second volume)	P.4	晚会	evening party	Differences of Lexical Meanings /Style Differences	evening performance party (formal)
	P.22	学术	learning; science	Style Differences	academic
	P.34	分别	to part, to leave, to say goodbye	Classification of Words	to part, to leave, to say goodbye; separately
	P.59	指	refer to	Other Meanings	refer to; point to
	P.65	有意者	interested candidate	Inaccurate Interpretation	people who are interested in
	P.70	期间	Period; session	Differences of Lexical Meanings/ Style Differences	period; session (formal)
Road to Success 1	P.1	渐渐	little by little	Classification of Words	progressively
	P.43	吉祥	lucky, auspicious	Collocation	吉祥的食品
	P.43	分开	separate	Classification of Words	separate; separately
	P.54	交流	communicate	Collocation	交流感情
	P.70	开玩笑	joke	Classification of Words	make a joke
	P.77	时尚	fashion, vogue	Classification of Words	fashion, vogue (n); fashionable (adj)
	P.162	联络	contact	Classification of Words/ Style Differences	Contact (n/v) (formal)
	P.175	就业	get a job	Style Differences	employment
	p.194	调和	reconcile	Classification of Words	reconcile (n/v)
Developing Chinese Elementary Comprehensive Reading	P.220	光临	be present	Classification of Words	be present (v)
	P.243	肥 (adj.)	loose, loose-fitting	Collocation	loose, loose-fitting 衣服很肥
	P.252	突然 (adj.)	sudden, unexpected	Classification of Words	suddenly

Appendix Ⅱ: Textbook List

No.	Textbook	Publish Company	Author/Editor	Publish Time
1	Very Good, Elementary Chinese Speaking	Beijing Language and Culture University Press	LIU Songhao, MA Xiuli	2008/12
2	Elementary Chinese Reading Course (second volume)	Beijing University Press	ZHANG Shitao, LIU Ruoyun	2002/1
3	New Practical Chinese Reader Textbook (first volume)	Beijing Language and Culture University Press	LIU Xun	2009/12
4	New Practical Chinese Reader Textbook (second volume)	Beijing Language and Culture University Press	LIU Xun	2009/12
5	Undergraduate Textbook for Teaching Chinese as the Second Language —Chinese Course (first volume 1)	Beijing Language and Culture University Press	YANG Jizhou	2009/12
6	Undergraduate Textbook for Teaching Chinese as the Second Language —Chinese Course (first volume 2)	Beijing Language and Culture University Press	YANG Jizhou	2009/12
7	Undergraduate Textbook for Teaching Chinese as the Second Language —Chinese Reading Course (first volume)	Beijing Language and Culture University Press	PENG Zhiping	2009/1
8	Undergraduate Textbook for Teaching Chinese as the Second Language —Chinese Listening Course (revised edition, second volume)	Beijing Language and Culture University Press	HU Bo, YANG Xuemei	2010/1
9	Road to Success 1 Upper Elementary (first volume)	Beijing Language and Culture University Press	QIU Jun	2009/7
10	Developing Chinese—Elementary Comprehensive Reading	Beijing Language and Culture University Press	RONG Jihua	2011/1