

A Probe Into the Translation of Internet Buzzwords

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In recent years, the emergence of Internet buzzwords in Chinese, as both a linguistic and social phenomenon, has not only documented the evolution and progress of society, but also reflected the popular culture and public mentality. The translation of Internet buzzwords is of great significance in letting the world know the transformations undergoing in Chinese society so as to spread our national culture and promote better communication, bridging the gap between China and the English-speaking world. This paper gives analyses of the translation of the Internet buzzwords and explores the guiding principles and strategies employed in buzzwords translation, pointing out that in C-E translation informativeness and acceptability should be given first consideration.

Keywords: Internet buzzwords, guiding principles and strategies, C-E translation

Introduction

An article in People's Daily (2010) pointed out that "from the virtual world to real life, buzzwords have become a striking social phenomenon and cultural existence", from which people can not only capture the latest breaking news and hot topics, but acquire a wider perspective on those thought-provoking social phenomena, and find an outlet for recreation and a release of their feelings. A multitude of buzzwords like: 山寨 (copycat), 碰瓷 (car crash scams), 躺平 (lie flat), and 内卷 (involution) have become commonplace words in daily life after the wide coverage of them on Internet and traditional media. As a linguistic phenomenon, the spread and proliferation of Internet buzzwords are all-powerful. In the tide of globalization, in order to let the world know China better, the translation of these buzzwords and introduction of them into the English-speaking world is of great importance. Translation of buzzwords has also become a research interest to some translation lovers in that it helps foreign readers "know and grasp the dynamic changes of Chinese language and China's popular culture in a timely fashion" (Wang, 2011, p. 73). What principles should be followed and what strategies should be adopted in translating the Internet buzzwords? This paper tries to discuss it by analyzing the C-E translation of some buzzwords.

Guiding Principles of the Translation of Internet Buzzwords

The Internet buzzwords carry distinct characteristics of the times and the brand of popular culture. As a form of popular oral and verbal communication language, its translation strategy is different from that of literary translation. Buzzwords use figurative images or homophonic sounds to break the boundary and monotony of traditional language, often characterized by conciseness, humor, and vivid images. In translation, we need to consider these rhetorical features and find the corresponding or the closest translation in style and pragmatics. According to the rhetorical features of buzzwords, what principles should be followed in translation? The

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traditional translation principles of “faithfulness”, “expressiveness”, and “elegance” are more suitable for literary translation as opposed to the translation of Buzzwords. According to Eugene Nida, “translation consists of reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source language message, firstly in terms of meaning, and secondly in terms of style” (Nida & Taber, 1969, p. 178). Briefly speaking, translation is the communication of meaning from one language to another language, and strives to reserve the similar style of the original text. Because of the differences in language structures, it is difficult to achieve formal equivalence, while the semantic and pragmatic equivalence between the target text and the original text is an obtainable goal.

Translation of buzzwords is a kind of publicity text translation. According to Huang Youyi’s (2004) proposal of “three approaches to external publicity translation” (That is, close to the reality of China’s development, close to the foreign audience’s demand for information, and close to the foreign audience’s thinking habits), the English translation of buzzwords needs to consider the needs of readers in English-speaking countries and seeks to reproduce the information of the source language. In view of this, the author proposes that the translation of buzzwords should consider two aspects, namely, informativeness and acceptability, with the former considering the semantic perspective and the latter the pragmatic perspective and readers’ response.

Translation Strategies of Internet Buzzwords

Translation of buzzwords should fully understand the uniqueness and characteristics of buzzwords on the premise of considering the linguistic and cultural differences between Chinese and English while striving for keeping the meaning intact, catering to the readers’ needs of information and cultural curiosity. With this in mind, the following strategies are often adopted in buzzwords translation.

Literal Translation

Literal translation is to put faithfulness to the original form and content in the first place. In other words, literal translation keeps the original content and form unchanged. However, literal translation is not mechanical word-for-word translation. Because Chinese and English have different sentence structures, it is impossible to translate word for word. Literal translation means that it is highly necessary to figure out the meaning of the original text without any distortion of the content by adding or deleting something at will, while maintaining the original formal style. The following are applications of literal translation. Examples of literal translation of buzzwords on the Internet abound, such as “团购” (group buying/purchasing), “秒杀” (second kill), “富二代” (the rich second generation), “蛮拼的” (pretty strenuous), “人肉搜索” (human flesh search), and even the British media talks about “straight man cancer” (“直男癌”, referring to male chauvinism).

Example 1:

China’s “straight man cancer”: Are Chinese women finally on the rise?

中国的“直男癌”：中国女性终于崛起了吗？

In the past few years, the appearance of a number of buzzwords has demonstrated the shifts in Chinese society, relating to domestic events of the year. Some of them are given literal translation with approval by the public.

Example 2:

躺平 lie flat

内卷 involution

双减 double reduction

双循环 dual circulation
 凡尔赛文学 Versailles literature
 小镇做题家 a small-town swot
 云监工 online supervisor
 神兽 mythical creatures
 破防 broken defense
 人民至上, 生命至上 People first, life first

Literal Translation Plus Explanation

Many popular buzzwords are “created by reactivating old words, extending their word meanings or using some rhetorical devices. Therefore, they cannot be understood literally and translated literally” (Yu, 2010, p. 46). For instance, the buzzword “躲猫猫” should avoid being translated as “seek and hide”, while some buzzwords that can be literally translated need supplementary explanations to be understood by foreign audiences, such as “裸婚”, literally translated as “naked marriage”, which can be given some additional explanation as “getting married without buying a house and a car or even holding a wedding”. However, in most cases, a literal translation plus an explanation is the most commonly adopted approach in buzzword translation. Similar examples are:

Example 3:

“内卷”指的是不合理或过度的竞争。现在这个词不仅仅在大学生中，也在许多其他领域流行。

Involution refers to unreasonable or excessive competition. Now, the term is not only popular among university students, but also in many other sectors.

Example 4:

“双减”旨在解决义务教育最突出的问题——中小学学生过重作业负担和校外培训负担。

The “double reduction” policy aims to address the most prominent problems in compulsory education—the excessive academic burden on primary and middle school students, and the over-heated off-campus tutoring.

Paraphrasing

Due to the cultural differences between English and Chinese, some buzzwords have connotations which cannot be conveyed literally or find English equivalents. In such instances, paraphrasing is an alternate choice. Paraphrasing, also called free translation, is a technique to deliver the intended meaning of the source text without paying attention to details such as syntax, style, and the like of the original text. It is applicable in cases where the translation is difficult to be understood or accepted by the readers or the translation seems not as attractive or powerful as the original text by approach of literal translation.

Take the buzzword “给力” for example. It first appeared in a cartoon and then became very popular among Chinese netizens. On November 10, 2010, “给力” appeared in the headline of People’s Daily. In the same year, New York Times reported that the word had been given official approval by People’s Daily. Some translators suggest translating the word as “geilivable”, combining Chinese Pinyin “geili” with the English adjective suffix “able”. However, this is not an ideal translation because “geili” has not been widely accepted by the English-speaking community. Therefore, the word “geilivable” is not successful in conveying the information and its pragmatic effect. The New York Times describes “给力” as a popular Internet word in China, meaning “cool”, “awesome”, or “exciting”, which in itself is a paraphrasing or free translation. In order to achieve the functional equivalent translation of “给力”, the translator should flexibly choose the corresponding translation according to the context. Such as in the following example, “给力” is translated as “function well”.

Example 5:

新能源公交不“给力”，故障频发引顾客不满。

New energy bus does not function well. Regular faults dissatisfy passengers.

Similarly, the literal translation of “碰瓷” as “touching porcelain” is hardly accepted or understood by foreign readers. Therefore, free translation or explanatory translation is the main strategy of translating “碰瓷”. From the rhetorical perspective, “碰瓷” carries the characteristics of conciseness and vividness as a buzzword; then it is necessary to avoid information redundancy caused by lengthy translation in English.

Example 6:

北京警方提醒司机警惕公路敲诈，此前已破获一小撮团伙蓄意碰瓷借机索赔敲诈。

Beijing police have warned drivers to beware of highway extortion after breaking a ring of blackmailers who deliberately crashed into cars and demanded huge compensation.

Considering the above translation is somewhat lengthy, we can adopt a more authentic and idiomatic expression by referring to foreign media, such as the following:

Example 7:

Atwater made the remarks less than a week after the topic of fabricating car crashes for cash grabbed several headlines, including a front-page story in the Jan. 16 edition of the Miami Herald.

In the above sentence, “fabricate car crashes for cash” is almost a perfect equivalent translation of “碰瓷”.

Borrowing

Borrowing is a translation technique that involves using in the target text the same word or expression found in the original text. Considering the requirement of informativeness and acceptability of the target text, words and expressions with similar semantic meaning and equivalent pragmatic effect in the target text are the best choices for buzzwords translation, such as the translation of the popular buzzword “山寨” as copycat. Another typical example is the translation of “网红” as influencer. According to Webster dictionary, an influencer is defined as “One who exerts influence: A person who inspires or guides the actions of others” and “A person who is able to generate interest in something (such as a consumer product) by posting about it on social media”. Such a definition of “influencer” coincides with the meaning of “网红” in Chinese.

Example 8:

懒散和稳健的旧主题跟当今的网络红人完全不搭，他们都是商人，定位高端，以充满感染力的方式宣扬进取的生活。

The old theme of laziness and mellowness runs counter to today’s influencers, who are businesspeople and upscale inspirational promoters of a go-getter way of life.

Take “工具人” for another example. The buzzword refers to someone who works hard for others, pays on call, is not treated equally emotionally or economically, and is always used as a tool by the other party. The literal translation of “工具人” can be expressed by “tool man”, which does not convey the same semantic meaning and pragmatic effect of the original unless it is annotated or given further explanation. To get the readers understand the intended message, the translator can borrow an expression from English with the exact meaning. Cat’s paw (puppet, exploited person) is a match for “工具人” in the following context.

Example 9:

这个愚蠢的家伙从来没有意识到他在老板眼里只是一个工具人罢了。

The stupid fellow had never realized that he was a mere cat’s paw in the eyes of his boss.

Conclusion

The Chinese Internet buzzwords exhibit a distinctive popular culture and characteristics of the new age. Defined as a popular colloquial communication language, its translation cannot follow the principles of literary translation which emphasize expressiveness and elegance of the target translation. Instead buzzwords translation should focus on conveying accurate information from the perspectives of informativeness and acceptability as well as keeping close to the thinking habits of the target readers. Literal translation of some buzzwords is the best choice if it can arouse the same feelings of the target readers. However, some “false friends” in literal translation of buzzwords should be avoided. Some buzzwords have certain cultural background or semantic connotation, which requires translators to know their etymology and true meanings so as to convey accurate pragmatic meaning. If there are loan words or expressions in the target language and they are equivalent in semantic and pragmatic meaning, it is undoubtedly a commendable translation. Through the analysis of the C-E translation of some Internet buzzwords, this paper hopes to provide an insight into and a reference for buzzwords translation.

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