

A Contrastive Analysis of Translations of Chinese Distinctive Vocabulary From the Perspective of Translation Ethics

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Translation is an ethical interaction activity. Translation ethics is an important branch of translation research theory, which aims to find translatability between different cultures in order to achieve the best communication and understanding in cross-cultural communication. Chinese distinctive vocabulary is a testimony of Chinese history and culture, and it rooted in traditional Chinese culture, thought, folklore, and beliefs. There are many existing translations of Chinese distinctive vocabulary of different levels, and the issue of translation principles for Chinese distinctive vocabulary needs to be further discussed. In view of this, this paper categorizes and discusses different translations of some Chinese distinctive words in the context of Chesterman's five ethical translation models, with the aim of spreading Chinese traditional culture and enabling people around the world to better understand Chinese thinking and cultural traditions through accurate translations of Chinese characteristic words.

Keywords: translation ethics, Chinese distinctive vocabulary, five ethical translation models, traditional Chinese culture

Introduction

Chinese characteristic vocabulary is the vocabulary containing traditional Chinese thoughts and culture, concepts, customs, and habits with profound cultural imprints. In the process of cross-cultural communication, the difficulties of translating Chinese characteristic vocabulary brought about by ideology and culture are yet to be solved. The purpose of translation ethics is to study the moral and ethical standards in translators' work, translation theory and criticism, and all aspects of translation (Peng, 2013, pp. 6-10). In recent years, some scholars have examined translation ethics from the perspective of ethics and explored the phenomenon of translation.

However, the previous studies on translation ethics have not dealt with the comparison of English translations of words and phrases with Chinese characteristics, which is what the author would like to explore. With the deepening development of globalization, cultural exchanges are becoming increasingly frequent as countries become interdependent in politics, economy, and trade. Exploring the translation of words and phrases with Chinese characteristics from the perspective of translation ethics is conducive to Chinese culture going global and enhancing cultural self-confidence.

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Literature Review

Current Situation of Translation Ethics Research in Western Countries

Translation ethics formally entered the world of translation after Berman put forward the concept of “translation ethics”. He believed that the main purpose of translation is communication, and in literary translation, it also includes aesthetic goals. According to Berman, the requirement of invisibility of the translator reflects that translation is “subordinate”, thus reflecting a tendency of national narcissism. Translation is an act of breaking through national narcissism and nationalism. Translation needs to be open, and it is a dialogue, hybrid, and decentralized activity. Translation has to build relationships; otherwise it is useless. Therefore, from an ethical point of view, translation should be “non-ethnocentric” and the focus of attention has slowly shifted from other theories of translation to a translation theory perspective. Subsequently, Anthony Pym (1997, pp. 26-37) put forward the “translator’s ethics”, which aroused a great response from other scholars.

Andrew Chesterman (1997, pp. 147-157) later put forward the famous “five ethical models”. The contemporary translation theorist Lawrence Venuti (1998, pp. 39-46) proposed the “ethics of difference”. Venuti put the deconstructionist idea of translation into practice and put forward the translation strategy of opposing the smoothness of translation. The purpose is to oppose the colonialist view of translation and Anglo-American ethnocentrism and imperialist cultural values in ideology. In translation principles and methods, he proposes to “preserve differences” instead of “seeking common ground”.

Current Situation of Translation Ethics Research in China

On the contrary, scholars in China have been relatively late in studying the issue of translation ethics. It was not until 2005 that domestic scholars really began to carry out research in this area, and the main research direction was the basic concept of translation ethics. Later, some domestic scholars used translation ethics to specifically study the translation activities of a certain translator.

In general, the research on translation ethics in China is not considered mainstream, and there are still fields that need to be explored.

Five Models of Translation Ethics

In 2001, Chesterman put forward the pioneering five modes of translation ethics: (a) reproduction ethics, i.e., the translation should faithfully reproduce the information of the original text, which is one of the most basic translation ethics and a criterion for translation to become a translation; (b) ethics of service, i.e., the translator needs to have the reader’s consciousness. The translated work should be easy to understand. Translators need to be responsible not only for the original text, but also for the readers; otherwise the translation will lose part or all of its meaning; (c) communicative ethics, which regards translation as cross-cultural communication and considers the effect of translation on the readers of the translated language; (d) normative ethics, which is a criterion to measure the goodness of translation, is divided into expectation norms and professional norms. It requires that the translator’s translations should be acceptable to target readers. Xu Hong (2016, pp. 5-6) points out that the main foothold of translation ethics is “the special moral relations and conflicts of interest in the translation industry”, and the ultimate goal is to provide “good translation services”; and (e) ethics of commitment, which requires that translators be responsible for their own translations and to be professional.

Translators must choose among these five ethical modes to fit the original text in the translation process, and different types of source texts with different purposes affect the choice of translation ethics.

Comparison of English Translation of Chinese Characteristic Vocabulary Under Five Ethical Modes

Chinese characteristic vocabulary is formed under China's unique historical, political, and cultural background, and in order to translate Chinese characteristic vocabulary appropriately, it is necessary to understand the cultural connotations and colors behind the vocabulary. For translators, the highest goal of translation ethics is to make the most perfect translation and to promote the communication and common development of all cultures (Li, 2022, pp. 10-19). Adhering to such professionalism, translators can translate Chinese characteristic vocabulary under the guidance of the five ethical models. Depending on the connotation conveyed by the vocabulary, the spirit is different, which can be roughly divided into the following four types.

Characteristic Words and Phrases of Ecology and Nature

Ecological and natural featured words and phrases mainly refer to those words that are closely related to China's unique geographic environment and climatic features. These words have formed stable basic connotations in the long history of Chinese culture, and their connotations do not change due to external conditions. Therefore, when translating these words, the translator should focus on the equivalence of the information in the translated language and the information in the original language. In view of this, this kind of vocabulary should be guided by the reproduction mode, which is faithful to the original text and reproduces the information in the original language, but does not make a rigid word-for-word translation.

For example, the Chinese phrase “鱼米之乡” refers to an area rich in producing foodstuff, such as fish and rice. The common versions of the translation of it are as follows: “land of plenty”, “the land of fish and rice”, “a land flow with milk and honey”. The first translation points out the abundance of resources; the second expresses the land of fish and rice; and the last translates “milk and honey”, which is a staple food in the West, while fish and rice are staple foods for the Chinese. From this point of view, such a free translation does not do word-for-word translation, but find an object with the same status and function in Western culture and translate it instead, so that Westerners can immediately understand the meaning of the sentence, which makes it easy for Western readers to understand, so as to achieve the role of cultural resonance. If the phrase is translated as “the land of fish and rice”, Westerners may have a vague understanding of the phrase and may not be able to understand it immediately, not to mention the importance of this area.

Similarly, the Chinese phrase “雨疏” usually presents in Chinese poetry, and it means a kind of light rain. The translations of it include “light rain”, “small rain”, and “fine rain”. The first two translations indicate that the rain is small, which only describes the degree of the rain. Although this translation is accurate and specific, it does not reflect the literary and beautiful translation of the original text. The last translation of the word “fine” has the meaning of small, and in addition, has the meaning of beautiful. Double meaning can better reflect the original author's mood and the beauty of the original text.

Another example is the translations of the Chinese cultural connotation phrases “西风” and “东风” (which mean west wind and east wind respectively). Some people directly translate them as “west wind”, “east wind”. However, Wu Juyan and Wang Bin (2019, pp. 6-7) thought that due to the variable nature of the lexical meaning in the context, this kind of translation is not accurate. In China, the west wind is usually used to express the bleak mood, and the east wind is used to express the proud and high mood, which is used to describe the positive state of things. The west wind in Western countries has a positive and warm connotation due to its geographical

location. Therefore, “东风” can be translated as “warm east wind”. In this way, Western readers will better understand the connotation of “east” in Chinese culture.

Chinese phrase “梅雨” refers to the rain that falls when the plums are ripe, so some people translate it as “plum rains”, while in the rainy season, the air is humid and the temperature is high, and the clothes are easy to get mouldy, so “梅” also has the meaning of “霉” (whose pronunciation is same with “梅” and meaning is mould). Therefore, it is also can be translated as “mould rains”. In the author’s opinion, these two translations only express part of the information of the original text, and it is better to combine these two translations into the form of “plum rains in mould seasons”. In this way, the translation reproduces the information of the original text as much as possible, and the reproduction mode helps to achieve the guideline of clarity of the translation and the original author’s intention in the translation of the featured vocabulary of the category of ecology and nature.

Characteristic Words of Material Concepts

Characteristic vocabulary of material concepts mainly refers to some Chinese objects closely related to Chinese cultural values and traditional customs, which are unique to China and cannot be found in foreign countries. Foreigners do not know these unique Chinese substances. In view of this, the difficulty for translators to translate this kind of vocabulary is to make foreigners understand Chinese specialties. Therefore, the translator should pay attention to the understanding of the target language, make his translation serve the target language, and make his translation faithfully reflect the original form of the thing while using the new linguistic features to satisfy the readers of the target language. Therefore, when translating such words, the translator must understand their origins and connotations and be guided by the ethics of service and norms in order to complete the translation task better.

For example, the term “唐三彩” is usually translated as “three color glazed pottery of the Tang Dynasty”, or as “Tangsancai wares”, with the addition of “a type of ceramics using three intermingled colors for decoration”. The second translation consists of transliteration and free translation. In fact, the actual colors are not limited to three, so the second translation shows its color composition more accurately. In view of this, the principle of translating the characteristic words of material concepts is that the characteristics of the original language must be conveyed rather than being translated superficially to form a clear conceptual image in the minds of the readers of the translated language.

Characteristic Words of Ideology and Culture

Ideological and cultural vocabulary mainly refers to words reflecting Chinese people’s thoughts, sayings, and culture. These words reflect Chinese people’s likes and dislikes. In the process of translation, the biggest difficulty is to understand the positive and negative meanings of these words in Chinese people’s mind. A proper translation requires translator to have an in-depth exploration of hidden connotations. When translating, translators need to pay attention to the communication mode as a guide to achieve cross-cultural understanding between different cultures, in order to facilitate the smooth progress of communication.

For example, “狗”, that is dog, has the meaning of “inferior” in Chinese culture. “癞皮狗” obviously has a pejorative connotation. However, in Western countries, dog has a positive connotation; therefore, when translating it, it is necessary not to translate the word “dog” as it is, but to replace it with a translation that Western readers can understand. When translating the word “狗”, the direct translation “dog” is incorrect and should be translated as “a bad thing”. If it is translated as “dog”, Westerners will think that it is a positive word,

which will bring misunderstanding and thus not effective communication. Therefore, in dealing with this kind of vocabulary, it is necessary to pay attention to the cultural differences and adopt the communicative-ethical mode of translation.

Religious Vocabulary

Religious vocabularies are abstract in nature and have a certain threshold of understanding. Therefore, the translator needs to consider the target language readers' acceptance of these beliefs and take into account the beliefs of the imported readers. Translators can use normative models as a guide to promote readers' understanding of the ideologies of both societies.

For example, “无为” is the Taoist doctrine, and it means that people should follow the laws and let things follow their own laws of evolution. Its translated versions are “inaction” and “let things take their own course”. In fact, “无为” does not mean passive inaction. Therefore, the first translation is a kind of mistranslation, which misunderstands the connotation of “Wuwei”. In contrast, the second translation is more relevant, focusing on the deeper connotation of abstract terms. A literal and superficial understanding of religious terms inevitably leads to a crude translation. Translation necessarily involves values (Li, 2018, pp. 3-10). In view of this, when translating such words, it is important to explore their connotative roots and even their origins.

In addition, when translating religiously related natural attractions or humanistic landscapes, we should also focus on translating their religious connotations. For example, the Buddhist attraction “飞来峰” literally means flying mountain in Chinese. It is translated as “Stone Statues on Feilai Peak” and “Statues on Peak Flying-From-Afar”. When translating words with strong religious colors, it is necessary for us to understand their historical origins first in order to better grasp their connotations. The historical legend of “飞来峰” is related to the monk Jigong of Lingyin Temple, who suddenly realized that a mountain was about to fly from afar. Fearing that the flying peak would crush people to death, he performed a magic spell to dissolve the disaster and save all people, and thus the mountain was called “飞来峰”. The first translation is a phonetic translation, which is difficult to form the impression of the landscape of Flying Peak to the readers of the translated language and unable to describe its appearance. Except that, this translation does not reflect the religious connotations of our country. On the other hand, the second translation, “Flying-From-Afar” accurately describes the image of the peak, which is both concise and evocative, and the religious meaning is also embodied in this translation.

The above analyses selected representative Chinese vocabularies and categorized and compared the different translation versions of the featured vocabularies. Different types of vocabulary correspond to different ethical modes, and different ethical modes of translation are chosen according to the connotations of specific vocabulary. However, it is worth noting that different ethical modes impose different requirements on translators, and these requirements may even be contradictory. Translators need to judge the importance of each ethical relationship and rank them according to the context in which they are placed in the translation process (Li & Zhang, 2021, pp. 6-12).

Conclusions

The five modes of translation ethics proposed by Andrew Chesterman are a good guide for translating Chinese characteristic words, and different modes of ethics are adopted according to their different characteristics when translating a characteristic word. In this paper, some Chinese characteristic words are classified, and their different translations are comparatively analyzed using Andrew Chesterman's five ethical models.

After a detailed study on the comparison of the English translations of these four types of vocabularies, the author believes that there may be contradictions and overlaps among the five ethical models, and that two or more ethical models should be used simultaneously when translating certain vocabularies.

In order to make the translation close to perfection, the translator must understand that what kind of ethical mode of translation is adopted in the translation process depends on both the source language and the readers of the translated text, but it does not mean that the translator is completely subjected to the differences between Chinese and Western cultures and thus carries out a direct translation. On the contrary, due to the limitations of the source language, the author of the source text, and the readers of the translated text, the translator must be able to truly understand the two cultures, intervene between the two cultures, find the best point of compatibility between them, and at the same time, actively exert his own subjective initiative to adopt an appropriate mode of ethical translation, so as to produce a translation that is the closest to the source text.

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