Treatment of Cultural Differences in Translation

YANG Lihua[a],*

[a]Ph.D.. Lecturer, School of Foreign Studies, Yangtze University, Jingzhou, China.
*Corresponding author.

Abstract

With more and more frequent interaction between China and the West, translation plays an extremely important role in communication. Translation is no longer viewed as simple linguistic transference between two languages; cultural factors should be taken into consideration in translation process. This paper tries to analyze how the cultural differences should be dealt with in translation process. Three concrete methods are proposed to deal with different kinds of cultural factors: literal translation with cultural explanation, loan translation, and faithful translation. It is the translator's responsibility to choose the best strategy to render cultural differences. This paper emphasizes that translation shoulders the responsibility of making the original culture intelligible to the target reader and enriching the target culture. Therefore, when a translator is confronted with cultural factors, he/she must try his/her best to overcome the untranslatability caused by the incomparability between two cultures by choosing proper translation strategies. Only through this way, the translator could play the medium role in disseminating culture.

Keywords: Cultural differences; Translation strategies; Cross-cultural communication

INTRODUCTION

There is more and more frequent communication between different countries in recent years, so translation plays an important and necessary role in bridging the communication gap. Many scholars have accepted the view: translation is not simply a mechanic linguistic transference process, that is, rendering the meaning of a text from one language into another; instead, translation involves a complex cross-cultural communication process. Therefore, translation pays much attention to the equivalence in different cultural contexts and expects to find such equivalence.

Since the 1980s, with the "cultural turn" appearing in translation field, the cultural study and the culture criticism begin to appear. Many scholars started to look into translation from a wider cross-cultural viewpoint. They think that culture helps to deepen the current understanding of translation and a more comprehensive conclusion can thus be reached. Some translators, like Susan Bassnett and Andre Lefevere (2002), claim that: the study of translation has taken "cultural shift" (p.1). WANG Zuoliang, a prestigious Chinese translation scholar, once wrote: "In the domain of translation, the cultural difference is the most difficult field to analyze" (1989, p.13). Generally speaking, translation is not simply a mechanic linguistic transference between two languages, but a pattern of cultural shift. Based on the reasons mentioned above, the paper is devoted to a discussion of cultural differences in translation.

1. TRANSLATION: A CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

To be a good translator, we must have to understand the relationship between culture and translation. Firstly, let us have a good look at the two concepts of "culture" and "translation". Only in this way, we can achieve the goal of successful cross-cultural communication.

1.1 Concept of Culture

As is well-known, each people in the world has it own specific national psychology and deep historical accumulation. None of us could be separated from the psychological genetic genes that are unique to our own nation. We are born with these genetic genes, which determine our thinking mode and behavior and so on. Eugene Nida (2005), an American translator and researcher once said that: "for truly successful translating, familiar with the two cultures is even more important than to master two languages" (p.5). Based on this, the meaning of the word "culture" is especially important for the translator to understand. What is on earth the meaning of the word "culture"? The most aspect of culture includes traditional ideas, such as those of history, ethics, art, philosophy and politics and so on. Therefore, culture systems may be regarded as products as well as conditioning dements of further action. This definition of culture is very broad and could cover various domains of culture, which include religion, hierarchies, values, customs, special relations, material objects and so on.

1.2 Concept of Translation

At present, there exist a variety of the definitions of translation. In geometry and physics, translation is to move the points or objects to a new place. *Ci Hai* offers the definition of the verb "translate": "translate" is to apply one language to express the meaning of another language. However, *Soviet Encyclopedia* defines the word "translation" as: translator uses their mother tongue to paraphrase the source language. This paper also provides the definition of the term "translation": translation is to understand the meaning of a text firstly, and then to use another language to produce a text that has the same meaning with the source text. Translator thus should try their best to find the equivalent text that has the same meaning with the source text. As a matter of fact, we tend to use different translation criteria because of the different function and usage of words, the different theme of the text and text types, the different literary quality and the different social and historical backgrounds. If the translators don't understand the meaning of the source text, or if the language that has been translated is somewhat vague, the translator will apply literal translation strategy to translate.

Because translation is an extremely complex process, many obstacles will be in the way of translator's translation activity. The translator must try his/her best to overcome these difficulties. The goal of translation is to achieve equivalence between the source text and the target text. However, it is really not easy to build the equivalent relation between the source text and the target text. When the translator starts to translate a text, he/she will be visited by all kinds of difficulties. A successful translation must obey two conditions: accuracy and readability. An accurate translation is one which faithfully conveys the meaning of the source text. If it adds or deletes the information, the accuracy criterion has been disobeyed. A readable translation is one which reads smoothly without any translationese part.

1.3 Relationship Between Translation and Culture

It has been widely accepted that language and culture are closely related with each other. Nida (2005) once wrote: "Since culture is defined succinctly as totality of beliefs and practice of a society, nothing is of greater strategic importance than the language through which its beliefs are expressed and transmitted and by which most interaction of its members takes place. When it is used in contexts of communication, it is bound up with culture in multiple and complex ways" (p.105). KIuckhohu, a famous anthropologist also agrees that it is unacceptable to think of human culture without language.

In order to have a better understanding of translation process, we have to firstly explain the relationship between culture and language. Culture and language can not be separated. Lotman once wrote that: "No language can exist unless it is steeped in the context of culture" (1978, p.21). To a great extant, the close ties between language and culture determines the close ties between translation and culture. In his book entitled *Translation Studies in the Context of Cultural Studies*, WANG Ning once said that translation studies involves two kinds of research: in its narrow sense, it attempts to transfer the material in one language to that of in another language; next, in its broad sense, it aims at achieving the cultural equivalence between two different language. It is easy to come to the conclusion that translation concerns only the transference of two different languages, but also two different cultures. Susan Bassnett (2002), also tells us her opinion about the relationship between translation and culture: "In the same way that the surgeon, operating on the heart, cannot neglect the body that surrounds it, so the translator treats the text in isolation from the culture in his peril" (p.105).

2. CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN TRANSLATION

English-Chinese translation is the communication between Chinese and western cultures. American translation theorist Eugene Nida (2005) pointed out: "For truly successful translating, biculturalism is even more important than bilingualism, since words only have meanings in terms of the cultures in which they function" (p.5). English-Chinese translation has to take both Chinese culture and western culture into consideration, so the communication between the two languages can be really achieved.

With the help of cultural similarities and cultural universals, it is possible for people to translate and thus

they could communicate with each other. Although cultural universals or cultural similarities make translation plausible, cultural differences also exist. These cultural differences can be mainly categorized in the following five aspects.

2.1 Influence of Religious Culture on Translation

While English proverbs have close relationship with Christianity, Chinese proverbs have close relationship with Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, which reflects different religious beliefs of Chinese and Westerns. As an important part of culture, religious belief should be taken into consideration in translation process. If the translator ignores religious factor, he may meet serious problems in translation process. Take *A Dream of Red Mansions* for instance. As one of the traditional Chinese classic works, it is filled with expressions of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. In order to retain the original color of religion, YANG Xianyi used "Heaven" to translate "天" in the original text. Taking the advantage of the English proverbs, Hawks used "God" to translate "天", so the Buddhism was changed into Christianity. For Western readers, Hawks' translation version, of course, is more natural, more readable, and more easily accepted, but, Buddhism was unfortunately turned into Christianity.

2.2 Influence of Historical Culture on Translation

Every country has its unique history, so translator must take history background of the source language into consideration. Take the word "individual" for instance, which is usually translated into "个人主义". However, these two words are not equivalent if observed from the perspective of historical culture. In China, the group has been given priority than the single person since ancient times. Therefore, individualism in Chinese has unfavorable meaning since it disobeys the spirit of group. Americans think highly of individualism, which implies personal struggle, enterprise, initiative and other favorable meanings. Thanks to individualism, the earliest European settlers could survive in the harsh new world. In English-Chinese translation, a better translation of individualism should be "自我主义" (egoism).

2.3 Influence of Customs on Translation

Custom culture refers to the activities of social life and social communication. Different ethnic groups and cultures have different customs, so the customs in the source text are difficult to be faithfully translated. Let have a typical example of the translation of Chinese appellation. Chinese have strong family idea and family relationship, but in western countries there are not. As a reflection of this, Chinese have more specific appellation than English. In English, "brother" includes "兄" and "弟" and "sister" covers "姐"or"妹". "aunt" is a general term of "伯母", "婶婶", "舅妈", "姨妈" and "姑妈", while "uncle" can be rendered into "伯伯", "叔叔", "姨父", "姑父". Let have another example, that is, the translation

of animal words. China has been an agricultural nation for a long time, so oxen are given special priority and preference. It is endowed with abundant cultural connotations so we have such as expressions: "力大如牛", "马牛其风", "多如牛毛", "庖丁解牛" and so on. While the horse is given priority in western countries, many idioms are related with "horse", such as "dark horse", "as strong as a horse" and so on.

2.4 Influence of Thinking Difference on Translation

Each nation is characterized by its own unique thinking mode and English and Chinese is no exception. Due to the different understanding of the same thing, it often results in the different linguistic expressions in Chinese and English. Take "color words" for an instance. Though color words are exactly the same in Chinese and English, its cultural meaning are not the same. Please look at the following contrast between English and Chinese words: black tea 红茶, black coffee 浓咖啡或不加糖或牛奶, white sale 大减价, white lie 善意的谎言, in the black 赢利.

2.5 Influence of Different Geographical Environment on Translation

Since China and the west have different geographical environment, both sides have different feeling to nature. In the translation process, the Chinese and the westerns will adopt different linguistic forms to express the same kind of geographical environment. Take "东风"（east wind, "dong feng"）and "西风"（west wind, "xi feng"）for an instance. Since China is located in the southeast of Eurasia, its east wind is warm, whose connotative meaning is "warmth, hope, comfort". Correspondingly, China's "west wind" is very cold, whose connotative meaning is "hopelessness, desperation". Britain is located in the northwest of Eurasia, and its east wind is cold and dry and its west wind is warm and comfortable. So in Chinese and English, east wind and west wind have totally different connotative meaning. Translator should pay attention to their geographical difference.

3. TANSLATION STRATEGIES FOR CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

The culture difference is the biggest problem in the process of translation, which makes our translation difficult, so we need use translation strategies to achieve translational goal.

3.1 Transliteration or Literal Translation With Cultural Explanation

When you translate cultural terms, that is, the names of person and place that are unique to their own culture, it is workable to use the specific method of transliteration or literal translation with cultural explanation. By resorting to this translation strategy, not only the target reader can get to understand some knowledge about the source language

culture, but also the target culture will be enriched by the totally new cultural concepts. Here are two examples:

Source Text: the Gordian knot

Target Text: 戈尔迪结——比喻棘手的问题。源自希腊传说。戈尔迪在木桩上系了一个众人皆无法解开的绳结，后由亚历山大王一刀斩开。

Source Text: 清明节

Target Text: Qing Ming, a traditional Chinese holiday to commemorate the dead observed in late spring

The translation method is often applied to translate proverbs with obvious cultural connotation. To a large extent, proverbs serve as a reflection of the unique history, customs and habits of a nation. In other words, through proverbs, one could observe the history, customs and habits of a nation. The reason why the strategy of transliteration or literal translation with cultural explanation is frequently applied to translate proverbs is that literal translation can display the images and national characteristics of the proverbs and cultural explanation can render the cultural connotation of proverbs to readers.

3.2 Loan Translation

A great number of Chinese and English idioms and proverbs are semantically same, but they have different images. Loan translation can be used to translate this kind of idioms or proverbs. Translator can use the semantically equivalent images of the target language to translate the images of the source language. Although loan translation will result in the loss of some of the original color of the source text, the target text is more acceptable and easily understood by the target text readers because it is closer to the target culture. Here are some examples:

Source Text: Among the blind the one-eyed man is king.

Target Text: 山中无老虎，猴子称大王。

Source Text: 一个和尚挑水吃两个和尚抬水吃三个和尚没水吃。

Target Text: One boy is a boy; two boys are half a boy; three boys are none boy.

3.3 Free Translation

If the two translation methods mentioned above can not be applied to translate the original text, the translator has another choice, that is, to use free translation. Free translation puts the sense of the source text above its form, that is, to focus on the rendition of the meaning of the original text. Here are some examples:

Source Text: It was another one of those Catch 22 situations: you are damned if you do, you are damned if you don't.

Target Text:这真是又一个左右为难的尴尬局面。

注：Catch．22这一词源于20世纪美国小说家Joseph Heller的小说《第二十二条军规》，a Catch 22 situation 常用来比喻难以摆脱的困境。

Source Text: 望子成龙

Target Text: To expect one's son to become an outstanding personage

In Chinese and English culture, the image of "long" (龙, dragon) are totally different, so literal translation can not be used. In traditional Chinese culture, "long" symbolizes power, authority and good luck. To some extent, it symbolizes China himself. From the ancient time up to now, "long" is endowed with favorable associations, so we have such expressions in Chinese as "龙马精神", "生龙活虎", "龙凤呈祥" and so on. However, the westerners view dragon as the symbol of evil. Its image is "a huge lizard with two wings and a long tail which is covered by sharp and long scales all over its body and exhales flames from its mouth". Therefore, dragon should not be used to translate Chinese "long".

CONCLUSION

To sum up, the process of translation can be viewed as a process of cross-cultural communication. With the help of translation, people of different cultural contexts can communicate with each other. Translators can not deliberately use the strategy of literal translation to achieve equivalence; instead, they should pay attention to the deep meaning of words. A good translation can be obtained by considering the cultural differences and conforming to the criteria of "faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance".

REFERENCES

Juri, L. (1978). *Culture and explosion*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Nida, E. A. (2005). *Language, culture and translation*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.

Susan, B., & Andre, L. (2002). *Constructing cultures*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.

Susan, B. (2002). *Translation studies*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.

Wang, Z. L. (1989). *Translation: thinking and practice*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.