

A Study on English Translation of Chinese Idioms

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Abstract

Idioms are considered the embodiment of human wisdom and are viewed as the essence of national languages. Both English and Chinese are replete with idioms, which reflect the well-established, extensive, and profound cultures of the East and the West. Nowadays, with the flourishing of international communication, the translation of idioms has become increasingly frequent and important. The cultural information conveyed by idioms is so distinct that it can pose challenges in idiom translation. Failure to handle the different cultural elements appropriately may inevitably lead to misunderstanding and loss of culture in the translation process. When translating Chinese idioms into English, the translator should endeavor to preserve the language style and rich connotation inherent in them. In this paper, the theory of domestication and foreignization was initially discussed. Based on the analysis, the author mainly recommends applying the method of domestication and foreignization.

Keywords

Idioms, Chinese, English, Translation

1. Introduction

Translation plays a crucial role in facilitating cultural exchange between different ethnic groups. However, it's important to note that translating from Chinese to English is not an easy task, as the two languages differ significantly in terms of language structure and cultural connotations. This often leads to translation problems due to the gap between the source and target languages. According to Bell, translation involves "translating content expressed in a source language into another language (or target language), maintaining semantic and stylistic equivalence" (Bell, 1991).

In any translation process, it's essential to pay close attention to the relationship between culture, language, and translation. Culture reflects the lifestyle and values of a specific society that uses a particular language. In the translation process, the translator must understand the content and style of the original work accurately and choose corresponding language expressions that align with the author's original intention to convey all the thoughts, emotions, styles, and artistic conceptions. This is a complex and meticulous thinking activity that requires creative labor (Newmark, 1988).

As seen above, the definition of translation focuses on changing expressions from one language to another, with the target being the closest equivalent word in the target language. Each nation has different language structures and expression habits, and its history, culture, lifestyle, and natural environment vary widely. The translator's thoughts and feelings may also differ from those of the author, adding to the challenges of translation work. Translating culturally relevant expressions is an integral part of translation culture. Color words in metaphors, idioms, and idioms constitute the core of real communication between Chinese and English native speakers.

According to Armellino (2008), it is impossible to replace a culturally bound word or idiom in one language with its equivalent in another language because the cultural meaning embedded in such a word is always related to the specific culture in which the text originated. The context is associated with the cultural context it aims to reconstruct.

2. Reason of Choosing This Topic

Idioms have been an enduring feature of language for centuries due to their vitality, reflecting the environment, life, history, culture, as well as the innermost spirit and emotions of native speakers. They are considered the essence of language and culture. In today's world of international communication, idiom translation has become increasingly important. A flawless translation of idioms can broaden the cultural perspective of the target readers and enrich the vocabulary of the target language. However, idioms are closely tied to specific cultures, which can make translation challenging. Therefore, to fully understand the cultural elements in idioms and to adopt proper translation strategies, it is necessary to explore their origins and examine the relationships between idioms and significant cultural aspects such as historical backgrounds, geographical conditions, social customs, religious beliefs, and cultural heritage.

Language and culture are deeply intertwined and cannot be separated. Idioms, which are considered the essence of language, are inevitably linked to national culture. However, differences between languages and cultures can lead to misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication. To avoid confusion and misinterpretation, individuals must acknowledge these cultural disparities and attempt to understand the true intentions of other participants. This paper aims to explore the cultural aspects of English and Chinese idioms through a compara-

tive analysis, providing insights into the relationship between language and culture and the importance of cross-cultural communication.

While many scholars have proposed valuable insights on the translation of English and Chinese idioms, the use of domestication and foreignization in idiom translation has been largely overlooked. This paper aims to address this gap and not only offers a new perspective on bilingual translation but also inspires further research into the intricate relationship between language and culture, as well as cultural translation. Through this paper, the author hopes to shed light on a better understanding and appropriate translation of idioms.

3. Literature Review

Numerous studies conducted in China have examined the use of domestication and foreignization strategies in translation. Scholars hold divergent opinions on which strategy is most suitable. While some advocate for domestication, others argue in favor of foreignization. Additionally, some scholars suggest a combination of both strategies depending on the specific context of the translation.

Qian Zhongshu (1985) asserts that high-quality translations should read as though they were originally written in the target language, without any evidence of the original text. In contrast, Cai Ping (2002) argues that translations should convey the culture of the source language to target language readers, and should therefore be clear and easy to read. In literary translation, domestication is often preferred.

In recent decades, Chinese scholars have reassessed the translation methods of domestication and foreignization, with some predicting an increased importance of foreignization in the future. Liu Yingkai, one of the first scholars to question the dominant trend of domestication, argued in his 1987 article “Domestication—A Wrong Way of Translation” that foreignization was a superior strategy due to the shortcomings of domestication.

Sun Zhili (2002) notes that in the past century, domestication was the dominant strategy in English-Chinese literature translation. Many Chinese translators, such as Yan Fu, Lin Shu, and Fu Lei, favored domestication to make translated works more accessible to Chinese readers. However, Sun Zhili believes that foreignization will take the lead as the primary strategy in literature translation in the 21st century. He argues that the purpose of foreignization is to accurately convey the original meaning, language style, and cultural factors of the source text. Sun Zhili (2020) also emphasizes that foreignization should be employed to translate literary works in order to preserve their cultural significance.

4. Theatrical Backgrounds

Domestication and foreignization are two fundamental translation strategies created by the American translation theorist L. Venuti in 1995 that provide guidance on language and culture. According to Venuti, the domestication approach involves minimizing the exoticism in the translation by making the con-

tent and language easily understandable and accepted by the target readers, and by providing a natural and smooth translation. On the other hand, foreignization aims to transfer the cultural information of the source text and maintain the same degree of grammatical and lexical properties as the original text, preserving the exoticism of the original text (Venuti, 1995).

In general, domestication refers to the type of translation that uses a transparent and fluent style to minimize the foreignness of the original text for target language readers, while foreignization involves intentionally breaking the expression habits of the target language by retaining some of the original style.

This article analyzes the English translations of Chinese idioms from a cultural perspective based on the Functional Translation Theory. It concludes that when Chinese and English idioms have the same meaning, direct translation is an easy option. However, when direct translation is not possible, translators should strive for a balance between the source language culture (foreignization) and the target language culture (domestication), with a preference for domestication and foreignization as a supplement. This approach ensures that English translations of Chinese idioms are more accessible to readers, allowing them to better understand the meaning of the idioms and potentially sparking their interest in exploring Chinese language and culture, which can contribute to the dissemination of Chinese culture.

5. Strategies Used in Idiom Translation

5.1. The Domestication Method for Translation Strategies

“The message of the original text has been so transported into the receptor language that the response of the receptor is essentially like that of the original receptors” (Shuttleworth & Cowie, 2004: p. 47). The development of a language is closely tied to the history, culture, customs, and habits of the people who use it. As a result, in translation, it is rare for a single word to have only one meaning. Polysemy, or the phenomenon of a single word having multiple meanings, is common in all languages. The more frequently a word is used, the richer its meanings become, making it more challenging to accurately determine its specific meaning in a given context. Sometimes, certain words that express something unique to a particular culture have no equivalent in another culture’s language. The complexity of matching words and their meanings can present numerous challenges to translators, such as creating original Chinese in the translation, the lack of unique words in the source language, selecting polysemous words in the source and target languages, expressing words with the same basic meaning but different semantics in translation, and translating words with similar superficial semantics but different underlying semantics. To solve these problems, translators must first understand the corresponding relationships between the source and target languages.

Fernando defines idioms as “conventionalized multiword expressions, often but not always, non-literal.” (Fernando, 2000: p. 1) Translating idioms poses the

greatest challenge due to cultural differences between two languages. If a literal translation risk leading to misunderstanding or obscurity due to social and cultural differences, translators can use the domestication method to convey the pragmatic meaning of the idiom directly without preserving the image contained in the original. This ensures correspondence in meaning and similarity in function, as the goal of translation is to efficiently communicate meaning to the target readers. The following examples illustrate this approach well:

The two-part Chinese allegorical saying “外甥打灯笼——找舅(照旧)” is a symphonious pun. The pronunciations of “找舅” and “照旧” in Chinese are similar, while the referential meanings are different. The former means “look for uncle,” but the latter means “things will be back to what they were before.” This two-part allegorical statement uses pun to convey its linguistic meaning and serves both informative and aesthetic purposes. However, the pun cannot be fully realized in English with the phrases “look for uncle” and “things will be back to what they were before.” The word “灯笼” only refers to a tool for illumination and if literally translated as “lantern,” it may confuse English readers who cannot grasp the connection between “lantern” and “look for uncle.” Consequently, the translator may have to abandon the use of figures of speech (pun) that create aesthetic value in the source language, while still conveying the informative function through free translation. Let’s examine more examples.

For example, the Chinese idiom “山中无老虎，猴子称大王” (There are no tigers in the mountains, but monkeys are kings) may be translated using domestication as “Among the blind the one-eyed man is king,” which is a ready-made English proverb that conveys a similar meaning. Domestication translation typically uses words with cultural relevance in the target language and conforms to its expression norms, resulting in a natural-sounding translation that is well-received by readers. Here are a few more examples:

打破砂锅——问(纹)到底: A casserole is a pot made of clay, which is commonly used by people as a utensil for boiling Chinese medicine or cooking soup in the winter. This type of pot is fragile and can easily break if mishandled, with cracks extending all the way to the bottom once it breaks. This serves as an allegory, and its metaphorical meaning can be translated as: “Breaking an earthenware pot, (lit)-cracked to the bottom; (pun) interrogate thoroughly; to get to the bottom of a matter.”

朽木不可雕也: Means that rotten wood cannot be carved. It is used to describe a person who is unchangeable or whose character is extremely corrupted and cannot be fixed. It can also be used to describe situations that are doomed and irreversible. Therefore, it should be translated as “One cannot make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear.”

智者千虑，必有一失: What a sage doesn’t know may not be known by a fool, and what a fool can do may not necessarily be impossible for a sage to do. Therefore, a wise man may have many thoughts, but he may still make a mistake. Thus, the wise can learn from the humble, the virtuous can learn from the unworthy, and the old can learn from the young.

In general, or “institutional” contexts (such as news reports, publicity materials, official guides, handbooks, instruction manuals, etc.), both the pragmatic and referential meanings of the text may be important. However, in literary contexts, the pragmatic and linguistic meanings are usually of greater importance. In other words, the context determines which meaning of signs should be given more importance in translation.

Translating idioms can be a challenge because they are often infused with national and cultural elements, making it difficult to preserve both formal and content equivalence. As a result, to achieve pragmatic equivalence, the translator may need to prioritize the intended meaning and context over literal and linguistic accuracy, and use free translation.

Munday, J. frames the ‘cross-cultural’ concept of translation as an interface of representation, transmission and transculturation (Munday, 2001: p. 10). The translation process should adhere to the expression norms of the target language and aim to find the most appropriate equivalent expression to the original text. The translation should also sound natural and avoid sounding like a literal translation. According to Nida, it’s crucial to consider the perspective of the reader. If there’s an expression or statement in the original language that doesn’t have a direct equivalent in the target language, the translator must find a suitable equivalent or corresponding expression to ensure that the translated text elicits the same response from the reader as the original text.

Therefore, when translating idioms, it is important to adapt the images and cultural references to the target language and culture in order to accurately convey the meaning of the source culture. Substitution can be a useful technique to make the translation more comprehensible to the reader, but it can also result in the loss of the national flavor of the source language culture and may not always be accurate. Therefore, it is important to be cautious in adopting this method.

5.2. Foreignization Method: A Strategy for Idiom Translation

“Language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communication ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols.” (Finochiaro, 1964: p. 8) Although there are many differences between the English and Chinese languages, the people of these two nations still share some basic life experiences and values. These similarities give rise to many idioms that are similar in both form and meaning in English and Chinese languages. Therefore, if the implied meanings of idioms correspond, or the referent and the pragmatic effect are equivalent, or the image in English and Chinese idioms refer to the same thing or have similar associations, the translator can choose the foreignization method for translation. For example:

一寸光阴一寸金: is an idiom that expresses the idea that time is precious and should not be wasted. It means that one inch of time is worth as much as one inch of gold, but time cannot be bought with gold. There are two ways to translate this idiom into English: “Time is money”, which is a commonly used Eng-

lish proverb, and “An inch of time is an inch of gold”. In Chinese, “cun” is approximately 3.3 centimeters, while “inch” is only 2.54 centimeters in English. In this sentence, the pragmatic meaning is more important than the referential meaning since “cun” is used to indicate smallness in quantity and the proverb intends to encourage people to value their time. Therefore, when translated literally as “an inch of time is an inch of gold”, the informative function of telling people to cherish their time and the pragmatic meaning of the source language are both fully conveyed.

癞蛤蟆想吃天鹅肉: A Toad’s Desire for a Taste of Swan, the metaphor of a toad desiring a taste of swan represents a person who desires something that is impossible for them to attain. When translating idioms, it is important to recognize and interpret them correctly. If there is no corresponding idiom in the target language that conveys the same literal and associative meanings, the target-language idiom cannot fully substitute the original one.

Many idioms are figurative and rely on vivid images, but these images may be unfamiliar or difficult to understand for readers from different cultures. To ensure proper comprehension, translators may replace unfamiliar images with more familiar ones that have the same pragmatic meaning. For example, the English expression “Kill the goose that lays golden eggs” and the Chinese idiom “杀鸡取卵” convey the same figurative meaning but use different images, which can be replaced with more familiar ones for the target audience.

The main advantage of foreignization is that it preserves the unique essence of the source text. In the context of modern development, the merging of diverse cultures has become a widespread trend, making foreignization an inescapable facet of history. Its theoretical foundation is rooted in the concept of cultural openness and infiltration. Culture operates as an inclusive system that can absorb and accommodate new elements with great flexibility and ease. The people in the target language culture readily accept the novel cultural aspects from the source text and integrate them into their own culture. As a result, they are able to adapt to their new cultural environment with ease. For example, the Chinese idiom “有眼不识泰山” can be translated into “has eyes but didn’t recognize Mount Taishan.” Given that Mount Tai is a world-renowned landmark, the target language readers are likely to be familiar with it or have heard of it. Readers in the target culture can discern the implicit meaning of the phrase beyond its literal translation. As a result, the idiom can become embedded in the foreign culture and be widely used in the same way as it is in the source culture.

“Language is the principal means whereby we conduct our social lives. when it is used in contexts of communication, it is bound up with culture in multiple and complex ways” (Kramersch, 2000: p. 3). When idioms have complex allusions or strong cultural characteristics, adding annotations in the target language can help maintain the national flavor of the source language and enrich the target language. These idioms usually have pragmatic meanings rather than referential meanings. Therefore, the strategy of literal translation with annotation can be

employed.

6. Suggestions for Learning and Practicing Methods

This section of the paper aims to provide suggestions to students on how to effectively learn and practice methods that will help them incorporate domestication and foreignization strategies. These strategies can be applied to better handle Chinese culture-based expressions in their future interpreting work.

First, interpreting these expressions presents a significant challenge, making it essential for translators to comprehend their meaning. To achieve this, translators should immerse themselves in Chinese literature, including classics, poems, and prose, to gain a thorough understanding of Chinese traditional culture and accumulate a broader knowledge of Chinese culture-based expressions. Throughout this process, translators can also utilize domestication and foreignization strategies to translate these expressions and create a glossary. This groundwork will enable them to manage Chinese culture-based expressions more effectively in their future translating practice.

Second, it is crucial for translators to engage in frequent communication with native English speakers and acquire an in-depth understanding of the cultures present in English-speaking countries. As previously mentioned, there are considerable cultural disparities between China and English-speaking nations. As such, translators must develop a heightened sensitivity to cross-cultural communication and acknowledge their responsibility in bridging cultural differences when interpreting culture-loaded expressions. This is particularly true when implementing the foreignization strategy in translating Chinese culture-loaded expressions.

7. Conclusion

The translation of Chinese idioms into English should be analyzed from a cultural perspective. It is important not to be biased towards either the source language culture (foreignization) or the translated language culture (domestication). Instead, a balanced approach should be taken, with domestication as the primary strategy and foreignization as a supplement. This approach brings the English translation of Chinese idioms closer to the readers, making them easier to understand and more interesting, and is therefore beneficial for the dissemination of Chinese language and culture.

While it is important to adopt domestication as the primary strategy in English translations of Chinese idioms, it does not mean that Chinese culture should be completely assimilated into English culture. If translators always cater to the target language readership when dealing with cultural differences, reader may lose some of the unique characteristics of Chinese idioms. This could result in the gradual disappearance of the novelty and essence of Chinese idioms for target language readers, which is not conducive to the sustainable development of Chinese culture. Therefore, a balance must be struck between domestication and

foreignization in specific translation tasks. As there are many Chinese idioms to be translated, it is necessary to explore ways to minimize cultural barriers for target language readers while maximizing the dissemination of Chinese culture.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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