



Translation of English Idioms From the Perspective of Cultural Context

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Abstract

The English language is particularly noted for its wealth of idioms—those ways of expressions peculiar to the dialect of a language that frequently disobey logical and grammatical rules. Idioms are the most precious part of the culture heritage, they not only carry the information they want to express, but also the special language pleasant impression. A good idiom, often gives rise to endless association of ideas, let the readers think deeply in the spirit it contains. Sometimes some English idioms are similar to Chinese idioms, and then it is easy to translate it into Chinese. But most of the time, they are quite different from Chinese idioms, there is no corresponding terms exist, and then we should take some means into consideration.

Key words: Idioms; Culture; Translation; Means

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1. INTRODUCTION OF ENGLISH IDIOMS

An idiom is a fixed group of words whose meaning is not clear from the meaning of each single word and must be understood as a whole. In a broad perspective, idioms are composed of set words, phrases, proverbs, colloquialisms, two-part common expressions and so on. There are a lot of idioms in both Chinese and English. They carry out complicated information about their cultures, and are an important aspect of their traditional cultures.

Culture is a unit of beliefs and practices of a society. It covers customs, religions, arts and social instructions of each individual group or people in a society. Putting it simply, culture refers to the whole way of life in a society, the ways of people. Language reflects culture, provides access to culture, and in many aspects consists of a model of culture. Just in this case, we say that translation is a kind of communicative activity involved in many distinctive aspects of different cultures.

Idioms are usually semantically opaque, metaphorical rather than literal. So, a feather in somebody's cap is not at all connected with feather or cap; it means "an honor, success, of which one can be proud", as in "It was a feather in his cap for the new teacher when he was made head of the History Department". In linguistics, idioms are widely assumed to be figures of speech that disobey the principles of combinations; but this has shown to be a subject of contradictions. It may be appropriately to define idioms as John Saeed says: words collocated together happen to become fossilized, becoming staid as time goes on. These combinations—words usually used in a group—change the meaning of each of the words that can exist. As an expression, the word-group becomes a unit, so to speak. That is, the collocated words develop a specialized meaning as a whole, and so an idiom is born. He really threw me a curve when on our first date he asked if I could pay for the dinner. Notice, in some customs, when a man and a woman are courting each other, the male is traditionally the one who takes up the bill and pays the bill; but, times change and in many modern societies, a lot of couples go Dutch (yet another idiom).

In the English idioms, to kick the bucket, for example, a reader or listener who knows only the literal meaning of bucket and kick would not be able to infer the phrase's real meaning, which means to die. Although it can deduce literally to the action of kicking a specific bucket with a foot, native speakers' seldom use it in that way. It cannot be literally translated into other languages, for example,

the similar expression in Polish is *kopnąć kalendarz* (to kick the calendar), with the calendar being as separated from its usual meaning as the bucket in the English language is. The similar expression in Dutch is *het loodje leggen* (to lay the piece of lead), which is quite different from the English expression, too. Other phrases include *break a leg* and *fit as a fiddle*. It is said that William Shakespeare produced more than 9,000 idioms still being often used today.

1.1 Classification of English Idioms

Of the various aspects of the English language, idioms show perhaps the greatest variety and are hardest to classify. There are a number of different criteria. Idioms are classified by structural criteria into three main groups: phrase idioms—a bed of roses, easy on the eye, in one piece; clause idioms—eat one's words, catch sb. red-handed, deal somebody a bow, and sentence idioms—the proof of the pudding is in the eating, give sb. an inch and he will take a mile. Within these three main groups are several dominant subcategories. All phrase idioms have a noun, verb, adjective, preposition or an adverb as the central word, they correspond to the familiar parts of speech, and are capable of giving syntactic function in sentences. Phrase verbs are usually more lively and expressive than single verbs. The English language is copious in clause idioms containing objects or complements. Most of these idioms are rare, colloquial, and vivid and changed with life. They are just the kind that are sought and welcomed in animated speech. There is no need to provide syntactic pattern for sentence idioms, because those complete sentence idioms allow are proverbs or saying and typical conversational expressions.

2. CULTURAL CONTEXT

2.1 Introduction of Context

Context, which is often used both in English and Chinese, is a linguistic phenomenon as well as a cultural one. There are, of course, different kinds of context to be considered. In a matter, without a good knowledge of context, rightful understanding would be impossible while the fact is that the context of culture is the most vital and intricate parts of context as a whole. To have a good knowledge about the context of culture has become one of the most basilica jobs for a translator as they come to know the importance of the context of culture. The presented thesis has a discussion on the context of culture in its relationship with translation. It gives particular attention to the specific classes of the context of culture, material context of culture, mental context of culture and political context of culture and then lists out that the choice of words in translation is mainly impacted by the specific cultural context. Before this thesis, there are some works attach importance to the relationship between the context

of culture and translation. But no one of them have done a clear classification of the context of culture, they attached most of importance to the specific example they have collected. The present thesis will classify the context of culture into three categories and try to dig out the way for translation when translators are confronted with the context of culture.

2.2 Classification of Context

Modern linguistics has not only placed great emphasis on context but has considerably broadened its scope, and has also probed deeply into its influence on word meanings. Context in its narrowest sense consists of the lexical items that come immediately before and after any word in an act of communication. The range of the term context has been widened in several directions. It is no longer restricted to what immediately precedes and follows, but may cover the whole passage and sometimes the whole book in which a word occurs, and in some cases even the entire social or culture setting. The non-verbal elements of the situation in which a word is uttered (i.e. extra-linguistic context of situation) are also important factors to be taken into consideration, because they have a direct bearing on word meaning.

So the meanings of words, especially these of polysemous words may be viewed as determined either by linguistic contexts or extra-linguistic contexts.

2.3 The Vital Role of Culture Context in Determination of Word Meaning

Idioms are a kind of cultural phenomenon. So, they are not the outputs of the individual personal but that of the common intellectual in the society, which are influenced by politics, economy, literary, religion art and so on, and then they influence those things the other way round. English idioms are in this way greatly affected by English culture, which focus on almost the expectations of social activities. As a particular part of culture, English, especially English idioms, inescapable reflect the characteristic of the nationality. There is no irregularity to English idioms. It is explicit that much translation of idioms needs some explanation from their physical or linguistic context. The influence of cultural context on meaning varies from one word to another and from one example to another. Many idioms are culture-bound like polysemous and homonyms, particular such phrase as *to put*, *to get* and *to take*, whose meanings depend mainly on the cultural context. Scientific words, by their most specific meaning, are often independent of cultural context.

3. SUGGESTED WAYS FOR CORRECT COMPREHENSION OF IDIOMS' MEANING

Not only Chinese translations are showed here, these means are also useful to other target languages.

Literal translation, it is a way by which the rhetoric, national and regional characteristics are kept in the target language. In this way, the meaning and form of the source language are unchanged. Sometimes, equivalent translation can be found, but mostly there are only similar ones.

Literal is usually necessary in the circumstances below.

3.1 Translation Principles of Idioms

About the translation criteria, Chinese and foreign translation theorists proposed different propositions. From the “fu faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance”, “fu lei like not heavy weight,” Mr. Baker similar to “put forward coherent” faithful; The “equal concept from qu qiubai,” to the famous American translation theorist Eugene a. Nidar “functional equivalence (functional equivalence)” or “dynamic equivalence (dynamic equivalence)”, we can see, these propositions are mutual influence, and constantly improve the complement, although have all different emphases, but centers are to the faithful accurately express the meaning of original text, keep the original style, faithfully reflect the original appearance.

In translation and the method of literal translation and free translation theories is always the focus of debate. We through to some translation theory and material study and practice think, literal and free is relative, both between mutual connection, and there is no absolute boundaries. Big to film, small to a sentence translation will both literal and free. A good translation always has namely literal translation, and free translation, combining literal translation and free. We think that if choose literal translation can accurately convey the original many meanings, literal translation, if not translate the original many meanings; especially not accurate translation of an implicit meaning is using free translation.

To sum up, we can put the translation of English and Chinese idioms principles and methods to materialize.

3.2 Syntactic, Structural and Stylistic Analysis of Idioms

The syntactic function of a idioms which contains several words, often identical with its central word, such as, an adjective idiom often function as a complement. So in studying an idiom, we should firstly find out its grammatical category, and then see how it operates in a text. Idioms are structural unmodifiable. As a principle, one should change any component in idiomatic expression. Stylistic features of idiomatic expressions are variation, and what is informal maybe slang tomorrow.

3.3 All corresponding English and Chinese Idioms and Literal Translation

Although English and Chinese have different historical and cultural backgrounds, because of the similarity in human thinking and the regular pattern of the development of languages, many idioms may be same or similar in form and meaning. Generally, if English and Chinese

idioms have the same form and meaning, we can use direct translation. For example, from forging iron English people get: “Strike while the iron is hot.” We Chinese also have “趁热打铁”. In our daily life “ear” is connected with “hearing”, and we often do not use words exactly, Englishman often warns: “Walls have ears”, and we Chinese people have “隔墙有耳”. The followings are also good examples: Happy is who is content, 知足者常乐。Great minds think alike, “英雄所见略同”. Well begun is half done, “好的开端是成功的一半”.

The above example both English language in form and content of the same and similar character, so when translation can use literal translation. In addition, when the original idioms parable or shape can be accepted by the target language, we also choose literal translation. For example: Knowledge is power, “知识就是力量”. To draw a snake and add to it, “画蛇添足”. If it does not affect the original meaning in the premise, we can use this to press literally. Literal translation approach to translation, not only can well reappearance original text form and meaning.

3.4 Half Corresponding English and Chinese Idioms and Adapted Translation

Adapted translation is also called borrowing method. Many English idioms can find similar expressions in Chinese, also Chinese idioms can find exactly the similar expressions in English. To this kind of idioms, we may use adapted translation. The vantage is it can keep the translated context have the similar way to express with the original context, such to compensate the damage due to fail to reflect images in the original context. For example, “Among the blind the one-eyed man is king” is similar to “山中无老虎, 猴子称霸王”. If we directly translate it into “In the people who are blind, person who has one eye could be the king of them, although it retains the image in the original context and basic meaning, it is the way which the Chinese used to be. Translations, mountain without tiger, the one-eyed man is king. Although with the original image is different, but its implied meaning is almost the same with the original, and can thus to each other.

3.5 Uncorresponding English and Chinese Idioms and Free Translation

When direct translation and adapted translation causes obscure, we should use meaning translation. For example, “When he came out on stage dressed like an old king he brought down the house”, we should translate it into “当他打扮成一个老国王出现在舞台上, 观众们都热烈的鼓掌, 放声大笑”. The phrase “bring down the house” is related to the activities in the theater, when the audience likes an actor’s show, they would applaud warmly that the sounds of mirth and applaud would shake the theater, as if it would dismantle the house. So “bring down the house” can be translated “热烈鼓掌, 放声大笑”, it loyally expresses the meaning of the original context.

Some idioms with a thick national culture colors, single literally couldn't understand, this kind of circumstance, we needn't pursue the original form of the original, and to the meaning of deep contains translate; let the reader know the original meaning directly.

3.6 Notation Translation

Only by literal translation can we hardly express the real style of the original idioms, although sometimes we could use another way to help us, especially when it's hard to find out a suitable Chinese word or phrase to express. Therefore, another kind of translating method may be employed, it is, liberal translation with notes.

In this means, we can supply readers some necessary information about the idioms to ensure them comprehend better. For example: Pour oil on troubled waters “平息风波，息事宁人” (note: It is a story that if we pour the oil into the sea when sailing in the storm, the oil can calm the sea down.), Open sesame “敲门砖，过难关的秘诀” (note: It came from a well-known—“All Baba and the Forty Thieves. There were a large amount of valuable things in a big cave. But the door of cave is firmly closed and only can be unlocked only by the code open sesame.”)

CONCLUSION

To put it in a word, English idioms are the production of culture. They are limited by English culture and have exclusive characteristics of it, contain adequate cultural substance. It has to be memoried that it is difficult to say which idiom is actively used in English and which are disappearing or have already died. Idioms are continuously disappearing and new-ones are being created. Some idioms may have gone through fundamental changes in terms of meaning. The change

in meaning is yet unexplained. All dialects of English have different groups of idioms and situations where a certain idiom can be used. Languages grow and change. So is the situation between English language and idioms. The development of idiomatic expressions in the English language seems certain. The growth will continue through new ways like the Internet and mass mediums. We are not certain what it will do with idioms and what kind of new idioms are produced but it will be an interesting growth to follow, and by no means does it reduce the humor, variety and colour of English language. And so, one thing is true that, theoretically and practically, understanding English idioms has to take culture into full consideration, as English idioms are just a tiny drop in the vast ocean of English culture context.

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