

## On Concepts of Culture and Its Links With Translation

ZHONG Jing<sup>[a]</sup>; YANG Lihua<sup>[b],\*</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup>Postgraduate. College of foreign language, Jiangxi Normal University, Nanchang, China.

<sup>[b]</sup>Associate professor. College of foreign language, Jiangxi Normal University, Nanchang, China.

\*Corresponding author.

Received 9 August 2019; accepted 25 October 2019

Published online 26 November 2019

### Abstract

This paper is focused on the evolution of culture concepts from the perspective of cultural anthropology, and summarizes the main points, limitations and my own views towards some main concepts, then connects culture with translation so as to put forward the translation principles under cross-cultural context, bringing new inspiration and practical significance to translation study.

**Key words:** Culture concepts; Evolution; Limitations; Translation principles

Zhong, J., & Yang, L. H. (2019). On Concepts of Culture and Its Links With Translation. *Canadian Social Science*, 15(11), 66-70. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/css/article/view/11334>  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/11334>

### INTRODUCTION

What is culture? The word “culture” has a profound history which has been defined in thousands of ways through the ages. In English, the word is one of the most complicated words with a very complex history of semantic evolution.

The word “culture” was derived from Latin words “colo, coleman, colic and cultum” in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, which meant “to till the ground/to tend and care for.” (Don Cupitt, 1997)

Therefore, the initial meaning of culture was to meet people’s living need by farming and planting on land.

The meaning of culture changed a lot since the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century with a more extensive semantics which included art, the cultivation of plants, domestication of animals, human skills, training of interpersonal relationship, science and the worship of God, etc. Until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the word “culture” began to refer to a holistic life style covering materials, spirit and knowledge.

### 1. RESEARCH BACKGROUND

#### 1.1 Main Definitions of Culture and Their Limitations

As a scientific term, culture had six different definitions before 1920 according to statistics, and had increased to 260 by 1987. Among them, anthropology or culturology has made great contributions to the formation of cultural concepts.

Among so many definitions of culture, culture concepts can be roughly summed up in the following four categories.

The first view thinks that culture is civilization with human knowledge and ability. The study of culture was first used by the pioneer English anthropologist Edward B. Tylor in his book, *Primitive Culture*, published in 1871. Tylor said that culture is the complex whole, which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. (Taylor, 1987)

Tylor, known as the father of anthropology, was the first person in the field of social science to define culture with the meaning of science, which made the category of culture clear.

This view summarized the original fragmented definition of culture, although the first definition of culture had certain progressive significance at that time, it also had some limitations.

Firstly, this definition is one-sided by focusing on the content of civilization, and the holistic, spiritual and universal characteristics of culture, but only on the surface description of culture phenomena, and had not revealed the deep essence of culture. In fact, culture has a broader connotation. Secondly, this definition had not yet clearly pointed out the specific characteristics of culture.

Scholars of cultural studies regard Tylor's definition as the first classical one to define culture which had a long-term impact on the study of cultural concepts. Some American sociologists later supplemented Tylor's definition with cultural phenomena of material objects because Tylor's definition of culture lacks the content of material culture. Tylor's definition is descriptive, but for the first time gives culture a whole concept.

The second view holds that culture is the way of life of a group of people. American cultural anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn put forward three important points of view:

First, he thought culture is a term which can't be confused with the concepts of ordinary language or historical literature; second, he believed that culture exists in ideas, emotions and various patterns which constitutes the achievements of human groups with their own characteristics. He emphasized that the basic core of culture consists of two parts, one is the traditional ideas, the other is the values related to them; Third, he held that culture is a system of living patterns created in history, which tends to be shared by the whole group or a specific group. (Hong, 1986)

It can be seen from the above that Clyde Kluckhohn elaborated his views from three aspects including the definition, the existing form and the structure of culture, presenting a systematic concept of culture with some characteristics of it.

On the one hand, the second definition of culture is more progressive than the first one with higher systematism and hierarchy. Culture is the accumulation of history with a reflection of human life and a record of human activities. It is human being's advanced spiritual life covering people's needs and aspirations. It follows that culture, originates from life, is closely related to life.

Compared with the first definition, this definition is more in-depth and concrete which pays attention to the close connection between culture and life, groups and human thoughts as well as the material culture and the value it brings.

On the other hand, this definition of culture differs from the first one in terms of perspective and method of observation. This definition thinks that culture comes from life, and it is true. But in reality, it is much higher than life. Culture is not the same as life, which includes many aspects, such as material culture, spiritual culture, institutional culture and so on. So it is the limitation of this definition.

The third view was proposed by Hetch et al, He defined culture as "the way of life of a group of people, including symbols, values, behaviors, artifacts and other shared aspects. Culture continually evolves as people share messages and often, it is the result of struggle between different groups who share different perspectives, interests and power relationships." (Hetch et al)

This viewpoint is an extension of the second definition which stresses the close relation between life and culture. This view points out that culture can be shared and evolved when it happens in a group of people. Hetch et al narrowed the focus of study from culture as a general concept to smaller units within culture, concrete and useful details rather than generalizations.

However, this standpoint is basically close to the former which defines culture from the perspective of life, but there is not so much innovation and breakthrough.

The last view believes that culture is the product of evolution which is embodied in cultural tradition. In 1859, British scientist Darwin published a book *on the origin of species* and put forward the theory of biological evolution. Many anthropologists had set up the theory of cultural evolution after that.

The famous contemporary philosopher Friedrich August von Hayek, a cultural evolutionist, proposed that culture is not natural or artificial, and neither inherited by heredity nor designed by reason. It is a tradition consisting of acquired rules of conduct. (Friedrich von Hayek, 2000)

This view has certain progressive significance because it looks culture from a new perspective which pays more attention to cultural tradition by highlighting the historical and national factors of culture.

As is known to us all, culture is a process of human civilization which move forward towards a higher level. "Culture evolutionism" is the inheritance and development of Darwin's evolutionism. It explores the laws of human, human society and human history, transforming from the blind and passive cultural state to the conscious and proactive cultural era.

What's more, the establishment of this theory ended the confused state of human social science, thus advancing the progress and growth of human social science.

However, Culture is not equal to tradition. Tradition refers to the social attitudes, beliefs, customs, systems inherited from history; While culture has richer connotations, it also includes more important factors such as cognition and value except for the factors of mental state and behavior patterns.

Therefore, we should take into account the traditional culture and cultural innovation instead of blindly adhere to our tradition.

## 1.2 My Opinions on the Four Culture Concepts

Culture concepts are so numerous that it is difficult to delimit or redefine it one by one. The author will analyze the four concepts listed above and clarify some misunderstandings about them.

First and foremost, Culture should not be all-encompassing, it should be understood mainly from the conceptual or spiritual level. Culture is mainly composed of some knowledge, norms, codes of conduct, values and other factors. The definitions of the early anthropologists used to include utensil culture, conceptual culture and institutional culture, causing a very vague concept of culture.

Huntington, an eminent American scholar, once said bluntly that if culture is all-inclusive, then nothing can be explained. Therefore, we define the meaning of culture from a subjective aspect referring to the values, attitudes, beliefs, orientations and opinions generally held in a society. (Huntington, 1999)

I think that this understanding grasps the essence of culture, in essence, culture is an idea which influences and shapes people's behaviors and feelings.

More importantly, culture is not equivalent to civilization. In the early discussions of anthropologists, their meanings are mixed. In fact, I tend to think that although both of them are formed in the group life of human beings, civilization lays stress on material aspects while culture stresses on the spiritual aspects. What's more, Civilization is an integral concept while culture is an overall concept that can be separated, such as Chinese culture or Chinese catering culture, etc.

Thirdly, the purpose of cultural studies is to explain social phenomena. The main purpose of cultural studies is to explain and explore the social phenomena in a cultural way so that we can have an understanding of the conflicts and integration between various cultural elements as well as their functions in the development of culture and society.

---

## 2. LINKS BETWEEN CULTURE AND TRANSLATION

---

As we all know, Language, an important carrier of human nature, is inseparable with culture. Translation, an important medium for people to exchange ideas under different cultural background, is influenced by cultural context.

Cultural context can reflect many aspects of one country including society and culture, historical background, religious beliefs, ideology, geographical environment and modes of thinking, all of these are necessary knowledge for every language learner.

From here we can see that cultural context is influenced by many factors and plays a normative role in verbal communication activities. Therefore, cultural environment is important to translation activities.

Translation, a cross-cultural activity, is not only a simple literal translation, but also an accurate expression of the author's thoughts, feelings and attitudes through taking into account cultural differences and backgrounds.

Only by accurately understanding and grasping the deep cultural connotation of language, can the translator faithfully express the content of the original text, thus further the intercultural exchanges.

Intercultural groups and individual exchanges regard language as a link to communicate with each other by translation activities. In the process of communication, we must consider the characteristics of original language culture, and also combine the meaning of the target language culture so as to achieve smooth and barrier-free communication through translation.

We will inevitably penetrate the thinking mode of local culture in the process of learning English. Therefore, It is necessary for us to pay more attention to the intercultural learning in order to shorten both the cultural and psychological distance between non-English speakers and English speakers. If we lack the basic understanding of the target language culture, even if we master the skills of English expression and disciplines, it just means that we have the basic ability to speak in English.

However, we will inevitably be disturbed by native language culture when communicating with people with cultural differences. And this is especially true in English translation, we will be influenced by cultural differences between China and the West, and even cause untranslatability. If we want to achieve the faithfulness and expressiveness of translation, we must have a deep understanding of the social culture behind the language and follow some translation principles.

---

## 3. PRINCIPLES OF ENGLISH TRANSLATION UNDER THE CROSS-CULTURAL CONTEXT

---

### 3.1 Principle of Cultural Respect

Translation is a tool for communication between two or more different cultures, we must fully respect each culture when translation instead of subjectively changing the cultural connotation covered by English, or weakening our own cultural background. We should respect culture and understand the differences between Chinese and Western languages so as to convey the linguistic features and cultural connotations of the countries.

Therefore, in the process of translation, we should realize cultural representation by reappearing the cultural characteristics and cultural information of the original language, let's look at the following example:

《红楼梦》第二十四回贾芸对卜世仁说：“巧媳妇做不出没有米的粥来，叫我怎么办呢？”

Version 1: .....and I don't see what I am supposed to do without any capital. Even the cleverest housewife can't make bread without flour. (Cao & Gao, 1973.)

Version 2: Even the cleverest housewife can't cook a meal without rice. What do you expect me to do? (Cao & Gao, 2007.)

The meaning of this sentence“巧媳妇做不出没有米的粥来”is that even the intelligent and capable people cannot do things without necessary conditions. In the version of David Hawkes, he translates the Chinese word“米”into “flour”, this is because considering that bread is the traditional staple food in the UK and the US, such translation is conducive to the understanding of the UK and the US, however, the bread with western style appears in Chinese classical novels, which is not in harmony with the text atmosphere of the whole work, thus this translation method doesn't convey the cultural characteristics of China to foreign readers.

While in the version of Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, the translation remains the concept of material culture of the Chinese word“米”, which is in line with the social and cultural background of the work, it reappears the cultural features of the original language.

This principle embodies the nature and tasks of translation. As a translator, we should always remember to represent the original culture and exchange the cultural information through interlingual transformation.

### 3.2 Principle of Objectivity

Every translator has his or her own knowledge system as well as their own opinions in the process of translation. But if a translator subjectively adds his or her own thinking too much, then the true meaning of the source language will be changed largely, causing an invisible barrier to communication between different languages.

So translators should suppress their subjective initiative and ideas as much as possible, and make great efforts to preserve the features of the original languages and thoughts and feelings of the authors.

### 3.3 Principle of Moderation

The author has his own feelings and expectations in his language, we should grasp the criteria of quality and quantity and try to translate the real meaning that the author wants to express. Translators should deal with the information of both languages according to the linguistic environment including the cultural differences and contextual differences in order to make the language of translation vivid and concise.

Next, let's look at some examples to help understand the translation principles in depth.

E.g. Shall we meet on the first floor of the restaurant?

This sentence has different understanding between British and Americans because of their cultural

differences. The British understand “the first floor” as “the second floor” while Americans refer it to “the first floor”.

Thus, the same language expression will be restricted by different cultural contexts, otherwise ambiguity and misunderstanding will occur.

E.g.

The original text: 这对年轻夫妇并不相配，一个是西施，一个是张飞。

Translation: This young couple is not well matched; one is Xi Shi—a famous

Chinese beauty, while the other is Zhang Fei—a well-known ill-tempered brute.

The version transliterates the two names “Xi Shi” and “Zhang Fei”, then introduces the cultural connotations reflected in the names to the target language readers by adding annotations, which shows the respect to the original culture and the cultural context, successfully conveys the cultural meaning of the text.

E.g. mouse (老鼠), It has a derogatory meaning in Chinese, while in the west, it is a symbol of agility, wisdom, courage and kindness. This example also reflects the different meanings of the same vocabulary in different cultures.

There are countless examples like this, so I won't list them all here.

In a word, there must be some differences between two or more cultures. Actually, we can't eliminate these differences among cultures. Hence, we must respect their differences and learn to adopt appropriate methods to weaken the interference caused by cultural differences.

At the same time, translation is a cross-cultural activity of information transmission which should not be simply regarded as the transformation between two languages, but as the transmission of the information contained in the original text in another language. So translators should improve their own cultural awareness as well as rich cultural knowledge.

---

## 4. RESEARCH SIGNIFICANCE AND MY FINDINGS

---

This study is conducive to have a deeper and clearer understanding of culture concepts by summarizing major definitions of culture as well as to provide help for cultural research by explaining social and cultural phenomena by applying culture concepts.

What's more, this study also explores the principles of translation from an intercultural perspective which will help to bring new inspiration to translation practice and studies.

This study focuses on the evolution of culture concepts and the relationship between culture and translation, and then sums up translation principles from a cross-cultural perspective, with a view to making progress in both cultural studies and translation studies.

This study finds that culture concepts developed and changed over time under different perspectives and research methods, which was also the result of the interaction of political, historical and economic factors at that time.

This study also finds that culture is closely related to languages and translation practice. Hence, as translators, we should have intercultural awareness and advance our own cultural knowledge and translation ability in order to properly adopt translation methods to make our translation correct and faithful, thus promoting communication in different cultural contexts.

---

## CONCLUSION

---

Culture has very rich meanings which covers lots of aspects of our social life. The author expects readers to attach more importance to the impacts of culture on our social life and recognize the close relationship among culture, language and translation through the analysis and exploration of culture concepts, thus providing some help for cultural research and translation practice.

---

## REFERENCES

---

- Cao, X. Q., & Gao, E. (1973). *The story of the stone* (D. Hawkes, trans.) London: Penguin Books Ltd.
- Cao, X. Q., & Gao, E. (2007). *A dream of red mansions* (H. Y. Yang & G. Yang, Trans.). Beijing: Foreign Language Press.
- Don Cupitt (1997). *After god: The feature of religion*. London: Weidenfeil and Nicolson, 1997.
- Friedrich von Hayek (2000). *Law, legislation and freedom* (Vol. 2&3, Z. L. Deng, et al, Trans.). Beijing: China Encyclopedia Press.
- Hetch, et al. (1860). *Concepts of culture*. London: Routledge.
- Hong, C. (1986). *Culture and individual* (J. Gao, et al, Trans.). Hangzhou: Zhejiang People's Press.
- Huntington, S. (1999). *The important role of culture*. Beijing: Yilin Press.
- Taylor, E. (1987). Definition of culture. In X. M. Gu (Trans.), *Cultural theory in many perspectives*. Hangzhou: Zhejiang People's Press.