

Translation Strategies Under Intercultural Context

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Abstract

Different cultural heritages and semiotic systems lead to differences in speech act and pragmatic uses of language among people with different cultural backgrounds, hence intercultural communication takes place. Cultural dimension of translation has been given ever emphasis in the era of globalization. Translation is generally considered as the significant channel of intercultural communication. Since translation is the most comprehensive cultural manifestation of human being, the study of translation and translation strategies shall be placed under intercultural contexts.

Key words: Translation strategies; Intercultural communication; Domestication; Foreignization; Reception theory

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INTRODUCTION

Pragmatic errors frequently appear in communication among people with different cultural backgrounds and thus people fail to achieve desired objectives. Similarly, cultural untranslatability has long been the greatest obstacle to communication and translation. Translation study could never underestimate cultural differences; on the contrary, it has to take it into serious consideration and

analyze the causes of such distinctions in depth to find the optimum strategies in overcoming such obstacles.

1. CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

There are numerous causes of cultural differences. To begin with, communicative behaviors are inevitably connected with people's values. Every culture has its specific system of value, which helps to distinguish good from bad, right from wrong, Dos from Don'ts, and thus forms a system of moral standards and behavior norms. Although the standards differ among cultures, their existence is reasonable in their own cultural system, and therefore it is incorrect to say some cultural system is more advanced or backward than some other one. Take Chinese culture for example, values as being modest and prudent, not being assertive or aggressive, being satisfied with what things are and collectivism are much preferred in Chinese culture. As the old saying goes, if one behaves better than the others, everyone else will discredit him. In contrast, western culture is more of individual standard, and individualism is greatly advocated. Consequently, always being satisfied with what things are equals to a lack of entrepreneurial spirit and being incompetent in western culture.

Secondly, religious culture penetrated in people's lives also has significant influence on people's thought and action. Traditional religious cultures can be reflected through the differences in worships and taboos among people with different beliefs. In China, Confucianism being the most influencing religion, along with Taoism and Buddhism has been exerting an extensive and far-reaching influence among Chinese generation after generation. While in English-speaking countries, the Judeo-Christian and the Western Philosophy compose the most part of traditional religious culture. Different religious cultures result in the distinctive viewpoints among people, and it is quite obvious that the oriental and occidental modes of

thinking are quite different. In the process of cognition, for example, Chinese pay more attention to their experiences, senses and intuitions, thus their mode of thinking is generally ambiguous and they rely on their experiences and senses to judge others. However, westerners consider more about logic and analysis and thus are more concrete in thinking. The modes of thinking formed by different cultures will directly affect and may cause failure in the process of intercultural communication.

Besides, Chinese thinking is predominantly more holistic. Holistic thinking people are interested in the full understanding of the unity of the world and emphasize the inseparable unity of human and nature, individual and group. They view the world as having many units organically interrelated to one another and forming a whole. This is exemplified in Chinese traditional medicine. The principle of Chinese medicine is that the human body is an organic whole whose balance needs to be maintained. Any illness can be finally interpreted into the imbalance of certain system within the organic whole, and can be cured by resuming the balance. On the contrary, reductionism features the western way of thinking. It is the belief that an object can be perfectly understood by separating it into the constituent parts, and ideas can be comprehended by consecutively analyzing the ways, the principles and motifs of its construction. The basic assumption of it is that each component of the whole matter is an independent part, from the analysis of which the general knowledge of the whole can be obtained.

What's more, rules of language use are certainly varied, since social norms differ in cultures. The technique of speaking is a combination of all kinds of factors, rules of language being the most important one. Abundant language rules, penetrated into various aspects of speech act, are reflections of cultural differences as well. These differences turned out to be not only pervasive but also immense. For example, when Americans make an invitation, they usually add *come if you want to* to express their respect towards guests' choice, but Chinese may sense a lack of sincerity from this very expression. While Chinese accept an invitation, they usually add the words *I will try to come* to show their politeness, which may make Americans at a loss for being not sure whether they will come or not. Meanwhile, both cultures in the above example have courteous invitation, which is only made for being polite, however, their expression is rather different. Consequently, if the participants of the communication have no knowledge of the rules within the two languages, they may take the polite expression serious or may not take the sincere invitation serious, neither of which is desirable for the other side.

To summarize, during the process of intercultural communication, people take it for granted to use their own cultural standards and norms as the explanation and metric of other people's verbal or non-verbal behaviors. Thus, differences in speech act and rules of language use among

people with different cultures, and the awareness of these differences would determine whether the communication can be successful or not.

2. INFLUENCE OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES ON TRANSLATION

It is said that there is no language, which does not root in a specific culture and no culture is not based on the core structure of one natural language. Israel restored in 1947, and the first act they took is restoring Hebrew, an old language we now call Israeli. Only when the nation has their unique language, can its culture be truly restored. The sociality of language reflects the influence of social culture on language, so the translator should pay close attention to source language's sociocultural background as well as the differences in geographical environments, living habits and customs and traditions of all cultures to avoid mistranslation caused by such misunderstanding.

Take Chinese-English translation for instance, the content with a strong historic culture constitutes the most difficult part in translation. For example, the translation of Confucian classics may encounter such translation barrier. As we know, *ren* is the core thought of Confucianism, and a translation of *goodness* can hardly reflect the original profound connotation of the word, hence the general translation is *benevolence*. However, most westerners need also some explanation to understand this Chinese word.

The two languages also differ a lot in linguistic image. A simple example may explain it: to express the idea that someone eats only a little, Chinese may say *Chi Mao Shi* (eat a cat's food), while English expression is *eat like a bird*. A similar example is shown in that *Dan Xiao Ru Shu* (as timid as a rat) in Chinese is equal to *timid as a rabbit* in English.

It is well known that polysemic words may cause difficulties in translation. Besides polysemic words, there is another kind of words which contains abundant connotation and denotation in one linguistic culture but hardly contains any meaning in another culture or even does not exist. Thus cultural differences lead to semantic gap, which is defined as that the cultural information contained in source language has no equivalence in target language, which means a kind of cultural phenomenon of one nationality does not exist in another culture. For example, Chinese words *Zongzi*, which not only refers to a kind of food but also contains profound cultural connotation, is void in English. To translate it, some note must be added, such as *pyramid-shaped dumpling made of glutinous rice wrapped in bamboo or reed leaves* and the story of *Qu Yuan*. However, during the translation process, some gaps are difficult to fill for their invisible existence in underlying cultural connotation.

Cultural differences can also be reflected through different perspectives in viewpoints. To explain it from

the linguistic aspect, examples of daily communication as greetings, acknowledgement, apologies, partings can be quoted here. Chinese people concern for others by asking their personal affairs. Chinese greetings usually take the other's situation and intention into consideration, such as: *Did you eat? Where are you going? Are you going to work?* etc. Such questions are the integral part of Chinese courteous language without any particular meaning, but they turned out to make westerners feel awkward. Such difference in perspectives can also be shown through the expression of discount. Apparently, Chinese care more about what they have to pay for the commodity, so they preferred the expression *Ba Zhe* (80% of the original price), while English preferred the expression *20% off*, which means they care more about how much less they would have to pay.

Beyond the above factors, language and thought are interconnected and influence each other on a daily basis with the mental activity of thinking and speech. Chinese is a typical analytic language, which is characterized by a relatively frequent use of function words, auxiliary verbs, and changes in word order to express syntactic relations, rather than of inflected forms according to *The Random House College Dictionary*. English sentences are combined in hypotactic way, in which the dependent or subordinate construction or relationship of clauses are linked with connectives. For example, when the English sentence *I shall despair if you don't come* is translated into Chinese, the connective *if* would be neglected with no loss of meaning.

Language is the carrier of culture. Translation involves the transfer between two different cultures carried by two different languages. The act of translation always process under a certain cultural background, thus the general knowledge and value positioning people holds toward translation is inevitably affected by their culture. Thus, the translation attitude of translators and even specific translation methods adopted are also restricted by their own historic culture.

3. AWARENESS OF INTERCULTURAL CONTEXT

Techniques of information transmission keep on advancing everyday and bring rapid growth of cross-cultural communication both in frequency and intensity, while translation, an intercultural communicative activity as well as an interlinguistic activity, plays an increasingly important role in bridging the gap among cultures, for it deals with dual barriers of linguistic and cultural level. Eugene Nida proposed, in his book *Language, Culture and Translation*, the idea that a successful translation depended more on the translators' familiarity with the two cultures than on their good command of two languages, because words could only work under their own cultural

backgrounds. Although Nida might overstate the necessity of culture for the completion of translation, it is true that awareness of the related cultures and languages is of the same importance to translators.

People's judgments and explanation of certain phenomena, things and behaviors are based on their own cultural perspectives. The main problem that causes the failure of an effective communication or a successfully translation is the ignorance of pragmatic transfer. Rules of language use differ as the cultures differ, and some cultural standards and norms, which are not generally accepted, can only be explained under its specific circumstances, and cannot be used to explain other cultures, otherwise, it may lead to the breakdown of intercultural communication.

Based on the particular social, cultural and the hidden communication rules, sometimes with the assistance of knowledge in accidents, syntax and other grammar rules of one language, people select and arrange corresponding expressions to form verbal or non-verbal messages to convey their meanings in communication. People encode the message in their own way, and assume that others will absolutely perceive the message in the same way. However due to different social, cultural backgrounds of the communication participants, in the real circumstances, people usually are not sensitive to the sociolinguistic differences and may adopt pragmatic transfer unconsciously. Thus, message receivers might hardly be able to perceive the original meanings in the original way. The translator, in between the message provider and receiver, would have to help decoding the message and protect the meaning from being misunderstood, not only from the literal aspect, but more importantly, the cultural aspect.

The starting point for translators to fulfill the task is to assume differences. Without the assumption of difference, translation work would be considered too easy or even unnecessary. Translators have to assume their different cultural backgrounds and be aware of the different ways of expressions, reexamine their own cultural patterns and build up a better comprehension on their own knowledge of themselves, which is very important in the preparation of the reestablishment of identity. Such a process enables translators to understand their own cultures and be aware of their culture influences on their behaviors. After that, by suspending themselves, translators would be able to break the separation between self and the other, and conduct a thorough analysis and prediction of the internal thinking and feelings of the original work. And at the same time, they bring their target readers into the picture, to whom the translated message is intended. Thus in the initial process of translation, translators show their cultural concern for both the author and the target readers by respecting the cultural differences, thinking and perceiving from the perspectives of both of them.

To succeed in the process of translation, translators

must be aware of cultural identities and emotional states of themselves and others, willing to step outside their own perspectives and show respect and politeness for the other person's value system. Only when they can fulfill these, can expected communication in translation be properly conducted.

Cultural differences are not something that can be eliminated; however the attitude towards exotic cultures is not impossible to be shaped by reasonable and practical modes of thinking. Since translation is not only a linguistic phenomenon, but a socioculture phenomenon as well, which reveals the interaction between speech act and socioculture factors, close examination of the relation between linguistic varieties and socioculture influences and illustration of variations from distinct perspectives would provide great theoretic guidance towards intercultural translation.

4. TRANSLATION STRATEGIES

While exploring the roots of cultural differences and their influence on translation practice, translators have to constantly improve their intercultural awareness and communication abilities to become competent in intercultural translation and thus approach the high standard of translation.

4.1 Translation Equivalence

In 1950s and 1960s, some translation theorists place translation equivalence at an important position in their theories, and equivalence thus becomes a key standard for the judgment of translation quality and a core concept in western translation studies. However, theorists also proposed that complete equivalence doesn't exist. Translation equivalence is a relative concept for the loss of source language's information during translation process is inevitable, and translators can only help to reduce such loss and achieve the equivalence as possible as it could be, which depends on how to deal with cultural differences and how to successfully transfer distinguished features of the source culture in target language. Thus it is rarely the case that the translation can achieve a complete equivalence. Knowledge of intercultural barriers reflected in the process of translation requires the translators to be capable of functioning effectively within diverse cultures, which might exert essential assistance in overcoming the cultural hindrances in the process of language conversion, and thereby the attainment of equivalent translation.

4.2 Domestication and Foreignization

In pragmatic translation, the most important strategy might be the proper use of domestication and foreignization. The concept of domestication and foreignization originates from a thesis of Schleiermacher, a German translator in 1813. He proposed that, in translation, there were two types of rendering by the translator: either moves the

reader towards the author; or moves the author towards the reader.

Based on this idea, American translator Venuti proposed that domestication was to shape source text to the target culture and bring the author to the target culture; while foreignization was to keep the distinguished features of the source text and bring the reader to the exotic world. Consequently, domestication can help readers better understand the cultural gaps from the linguistic level, while foreignization provides more original cultural information of the source language.

However, translators should keep a balance while adopting domestication and foreignization strategies: the excessive employment of domestication may lead to the loss of cultural connotation of source text, and the excessive employment of foreignization may cause the text too difficult for target readers to comprehend and hence such translation turns out to be a failure.

To translate cultural differences properly, translators should try to keep the distinguished features of source text and not cover up those differences. They also need to trust their target readers' ability of imagination and perception. After all, the purpose of target readers is primarily to enjoy a tinge of the exotic culture. As a matter of fact, foreignization strategy is meant to achieve a real domestication through readers' appreciation towards the original texts, which means in this process, readers screen, compare and store the foreign culture provided by translators in readers' personal viewpoints, and then reposition their viewpoints and absorb the distinguished culture of source language to enrich their own awareness of language and culture.

4.3 Consideration of Reception by Target Readers

In late 1980s and early 1990s, contemporary translation study put more focus on the receptive action of target readers. Reception Theory argues that absolute interpretation of the meaning does not exist, and text shall only take on meaning in the reception process by the reader. Consequently, the reader plays a subjective and positive role in such a process. The role of target readers in the translation process as well as influences of readers' acceptance on translation strategies have been highlighted.

As a result, fulfilling reading experience of target readers shall be taken into consideration by translators. The reception of translation by target readers serves as another key standard for the evaluation of translation work. As the privileged reader of the original text, translators have to take up their responsibility to compose credible and readable translation. The argument of untranslatability shall be discussed under intercultural context, and so well perception and prediction of target readers' aesthetic orientation and cultural acceptability is of great necessity for translators.

While trusting the target readers in their exotic cultural perception, translators have to make valid and effective intercultural communication by way of rewriting and reconfiguration. Any cultural barrier in the process of translation, usually in figurative speech, image transfer or puns, etc., has its own meaning in the context, and how to make such a meaning realized in a different language and cultural context depends on translators' efforts. To rewrite under intercultural context intends to illustrate the delicate meaning derived from deep-rooted cultural heritage and associate reading experience of target readers more closely with the readers of original work. On the other hand, reconfiguration in translation could eliminate unnecessary strangeness from the alien culture. By such coordination, loss of meaning in language or cultural connotation is avoided to the utmost level. Translators are able to break away from the dilemma between literal translation and free translation, and accomplish the reconstruction and reassemble of the meaning through flexibility based on thorough understanding of the original text. Thus, intercultural translation realizes the interaction between two cultures.

The ability of rewriting and reconfiguration requires translators to cultivate themselves into those individuals who not only value a variety of cultures, but are constantly defining their own identity and evaluating behavior and values in contrast to and in concert with a multitude of cultures as well. Rising above the limitations of living in one cultural context, such translators would integrate aspects of target readers' cultural perspectives with those of other cultures and well manage the cultural diversification and finally realize the ultimate goal of intercultural translation.

CONCLUSION

Cultural exchange is of great importance to intercultural communication in the increasingly integrated world; intercultural translation, a significant channel of

communication among cultures, shall be studied under the intercultural context. Translators shall constantly re-examine and explore the ever-existing contradiction between untranslatability and intercultural readability of their works.

It is necessary for translators to adapt well in cross-cultural communication for the purpose of bridging the cultural gap among diverse nationalities. Cultural transfers are implicated in every aspects of translation, and thus move the emphasis of translation study from the text-oriented to the culture-oriented level. In addition, it also involves specific cultural and historical contexts of the works. Cultural and hence pragmatic transfer inevitably led to the coordination between the text format and content. Equivalence in language format and function shall be carefully observed in order to represent the aesthetic emotion as well as the dynamism of the language of original works. It's crucial that reconfiguration and rewriting should be adopted properly in order to overcome the cultural barriers. Only in so doing, could valid and effective translation attract and touch target readers, and finally genuinely realize the interaction among different cultures.

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