



Chinese Translation of English Human Body Idioms Based on the Functional Equivalence Theory

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Received 23 June 2013; accepted 25 September 2013

Abstract

There have existed a large number of idioms related to human organs in both English and Chinese, which are set phrases or sentences abstracted from language. They form an essential part of the whole vocabulary of language and have been used for a long time, which reflect the national colors of the native speakers and are said to be considered as the sinew of the language possessing various cultural characteristics. It is because those idioms bear certain features of ethnic cultures that the human body idioms translation becomes a real problem for translators. So it's necessary for translators to do their utmost to pursuit the most proper way of translation. Only under proper translation strategies can the human body idioms be translated with the national features and convey the meaning of the original. This thesis is about Chinese translation of English human body idioms based on Nida's equivalence theory. After the general understanding and introduction to the source and characteristics of English idioms and the general comparison between Chinese idioms and English idioms associated with human body, much more practical methods of the idioms translation, such as rhetorical devices, are discussed in this thesis.

Key words: Functional equivalence; English human body idioms; English to Chinese translation; Strategies

FANG Jinming (2013). Chinese Translation of English Human Body Idioms Based on the Functional Equivalence Theory. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 7(2), 52-58. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/j.sll.1923156320130702.1055>
 DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.sll.1923156320130702.1055>

INTRODUCTION

Many English idioms show lots of cultural phenomena, therefore there seems to be a close relationship between culture and English idioms translation. In other words, cultural factors play a crucial role throughout the course of English idioms translation.

Cross-cultural differences in English and Chinese idioms are a growing and important area of research primarily because an understanding of these differences is needed in order to take up the creative challenge of communication to people of diverse cultural backgrounds. Social cultures are reflected in language, while languages are restrained by social cultures at the same time. Language is colorful, and vocabulary which belongs to languages has close relationship with ethnic cultures, while idioms are the most sensitive part of vocabulary in the development of ethnic cultures. Idioms take a large account in every language. To a large extent, idioms are essence of languages, which bear extremely concentrated messages of cultures with prominent ethnic features. It is a rigorous and challenging job for translators to make people with different cultural backgrounds understand the connotation of each others' culture accurately. Superficially speaking, translating seems to be the transition from one language to another, but in fact it is a cross-cultural communication activity. Translation is a significant medium in making ethnic groups using different languages communicate with each other. Therefore, it is very important for translators to compare different cultures with various characteristics and make proper changes and transformations in the process of idioms translation.

The significance of the study mainly lies in: first, the writer advocates that the theory should combine with practice instead of just talking about the theory or listing successful examples; second, the writer introduces Nida's functional equivalence theory and analyzes the application of the theory to English idioms translation according to translation strategies such as direct transfer, adaptive transfer and so on.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will have a review of the development of Nida's equivalence theory. Equivalence is a central issue in translation studies. Many different theories on the concept of equivalence help to enrich translation studies. Therefore, it is necessary to have a brief review of the development of the study of equivalence.

1.1 Equivalence Studies in China

Xuan Zang, a very famous Chinese Buddhist monk in the 7th century, put forward the criterion of translation, that's to say the translation "must be truthful and understandable to the populace". He emphasized the equivalent responses of the populace, which should be firstly taken into consideration, so to some extent, Xuan Zang's notion of "be truthful" means "equivalent" and his concept of "understandable to the populace" was similar to equivalent theory in the west.

At the end of the 19th century, Yan Fu put forward the triple principle of translation—faithfulness, intelligibility and elegance. "Faithfulness" means equivalence, concerning the content; "intelligibility" refers to the relationship between the message and the receptors and "elegance" is associated with style. As for the significance of intelligibility, Yan Fu argued "if we strived for faithfulness but took intelligibility for granted, it was no better than doing nothing. Mere faithfulness would mean work to no avail" (2004). Afterwards a lot of translators such as Mao Dun, Qu Qiubai and Lu Xun etc. also put forward some theories similar to equivalence theories in the west. All of them have contributed a lot to the research and development of equivalence theory.

1.2 Equivalence Studies in the West

Translation equivalence has been an important issue in modern western translation theories. The translation term "equivalence" first appeared in J.R Firth's writing when he points out that "the so-called translation equivalence between two languages is never really equivalent".

Although equivalence is a central issue in translation theory, yet it is also controversial. Approaches to the question of equivalence can differ radically: some theorists define translation in terms of equivalence relations (Catford, 1965; Nida & Taber, 1969; Toury, 1980) while others reject the theoretical notion of equivalence, claiming that it is easily irrelevant (Snell-Hornby, 1988) or damaging (Gentzler, 1993) to translation studies. Yet other theorists steer a middle course: Baker uses the notion of equivalence "for the sake of convenience because most translators are used to it rather than because it has any theoretical status" (Kenny, 1998, p.77).

Generally speaking, Jakobson, Nida, Catford and Baker, all of these theorists have endeavored to approach equivalence from different perspectives and all have contributed a lot to this area of research.

1.2.1 Jakobson's Concept of Equivalence

Jakobson conceives the translation task as something that can always be carried out from one language to another, regardless of the cultural or grammatical differences between source text and target text. He believes that the translation has to recode the source text message first and then transmits it in to an equivalence message for the target receptor, just as his theory points out: "Translation involves two equivalent messages in two different codes" (Jakobson, 1959, p.233).

1.2.2 Wilss and Newmark's Concept of Equivalence

Wilss claims that "the concept of TE (translation equivalence) has been an essential issue not only in translation theory over the last 2000 years, but also in modern translation studies. According to his definition, translation is a transfer process which aims at the transformation of a written source language text into an equivalent target language text, and requires the syntactic, the semantic and the pragmatic understanding of the source language text.

Newmark says "communicative translation attempts to produce on its readers an effect as close as possible to that obtained on the readers of the original" and "that semantic translation attempts to render, as closely as the semantic and syntactic structure of the second language, the exact contextual meaning of the original (2001).

Wilss and Newmark are making great contribution to the formation of the concept of equivalence because they draw their study away from the linguistic aspect of translation and bring communication into translation theories.

1.2.3 Nida's Functional Equivalence

One of Nida's great contributions to translation theory is the concept of functional equivalence, which was first put forward as dynamic equivalence as opposed to formal equivalence in his book *Towards the Science of Translation* in 1964. The concept of functional equivalence in translating has been described as "dynamic equivalence". This concept was first put forward in *Towards the Science of Translation* and elaborated in *The Theory and Practice of Translation*. By the mid-1980s, dynamic equivalence was replaced with functional equivalence.

In fact, Nida's focus on receptor's response in his new concept of translating is actually the theory of dynamic equivalence, which is "directed primarily toward equivalence of response rather than dynamic equivalence of form" (Nida). Nida's definition of translating "reproducing in the receptor language the closest equivalence of the source language text, first in terms of meaning and second in terms of style" (Nida) is another way of defining his dynamic equivalence translation. Dynamic equivalence is defined as "that in terms of the degree to which the receptors of the message in the receptor language respond to it is substantially the same

manner as the receptors in the source language” (Nida). “A translation of dynamic equivalence aims at complete naturalness of expression, and tries to relate the receptor to modes of behavior relevant within the context of his own culture; it does not insist that he understands the cultural patterns of the source language context in order to comprehend the message” (Nida, 1964). In Nida’s view, a dynamic equivalent translation must fit the receptor language and culture in order to make the translated message intelligible and natural to the target language receptors.

In his work *From One Language to Another*, Nida starts to use the term functional equivalence instead of dynamic equivalence, but he explains that the meaning of functional equivalence is the same that of dynamic equivalence. As to the content of functional equivalence, Nida describes it as follows:

“Basically, dynamic equivalence has been described in terms of functional equivalence. The translation has been defined on the basis that the receptors of a translation should comprehend the translated text to such an extent that they can understand how the original receptors must have understood the original text” (Nida, 1969).

In the 1990s, Nida further perfects his theory by taking the language and cultural differences into consideration. In his book *language, culture and translating*, according to the degree of adequacy, Nida puts functional equivalence into two levels. Thus, functional equivalence implies different degrees of adequacy from minimal to maximal effectiveness on the basis of both cognitive and experiential factors. A minimal, realistic definition of functional equivalence could be stated as “the readers of a translated text should be able to comprehend it to the point that they can conceive of how the original readers of the text must understand and appreciated it.”

Functional equivalence is receptor-oriented, which allows adaptation in grammar, lexicon and cultural information to achieve naturalness in target text. Functional equivalence thus is categorized into different levels of adequacy, with the minimal effectiveness and the maximal effectiveness at the two extremes. It is hard to achieve the maximal level of adequacy in translating while a translation under the standard of minimal level adequacy of equivalence can hardly be effective in communication. In one word, functional equivalence is a flexible concept with different degrees of adequacy. Of course, the closer the maximal level a translation is, the better it is.

2. A GENERAL DESCRIPTION ABOUT ENGLISH HUMAN BODY IDIOMS

In part two the author has reviewed the development of theories of equivalence and talks about Nida’s functional equivalence in detail. In this part, the writer will elaborate on a description of English idioms related to

human body, which is devoted to the definition and origins of English idioms, the prominent features of English human body idioms and the contrast between English and Chinese idioms related to human body, laying a sound foundation on English human body idioms translation in the next part.

2.1 Definition of Idioms

This section presents definitions of English idioms according to three authorized English dictionaries with a brief analysis about them.

Oxford Advanced Learners’ Dictionary of Current English (1979, p.428) defines an idiom as: (a) Language of a people or country; specific character of this; (b) (gram.) Succession of words whose meaning is not obvious through knowledge of the individual meaning of the constituent words but must be learnt as a whole.

Longman Dictionary of American English with Chinese Translation (1992:613) defines an idiom as: (a) a phrase which means something different from the meanings of the separate words; (b) the way of expression typical of a person or a people in their use of language.

And *Webster’s New World College Dictionary* (1996, p.670) defines an idiom as: (a) The language or dialect of a people, region, class, etc.; (b) The usual way in which the words of a particular language are joined together to express thought; (c) A phrase, construction, or expression that is recognized as a unit in the usage of a given language and either differs from the usual syntactic patterns or has a meaning that differs from the literal meaning of its parts taken together; (d) The style of expression characteristic of an individual; (e) A characteristic style, as in art or music.

An idiom means a kind of a set phrase or the common people often quote sentence, like a stock expression.

2.2 The Prominent Features of Human Body Idioms

The origins of English idioms are mostly from human body, Smith claims that English human body idiom is the real core of English idiom. It is not so difficult to find that English idioms have close relationship to parts of human body and human organs. According to Smith, other languages share the same phenomenon. The reason why the human body idioms play such an important role is that people are very familiar with their bodies and the functions of their bodies for they use them a lot in their daily life, work and communication. They try to associate various functions of their bodies with what happens around them. For example, people have pretty good understanding of their hands. They can know what happens to their hands even without looking at them, therefore when people want to express the idea of understanding sb/sth really well, they use the Chinese idiom “了如指掌” and English idiom “know sb/sth like the palm of one’s hand”. Another example, people’s feet are used for standing and walking, so when people try

to express the abstract concept of “independence”, there comes the idiom “stand on one’s own feet”.

Accurately speaking, some human body idioms are not right concerning the actual functions of human organs, and then the misunderstanding to human bodies could generate idioms. For example, people say “allow the heart to rule the head” (感情用事). Actually, this idiom is unreasonable according to its literal meaning because it is the head that rules the heart. There is an equivalent phrase of the idiom in Chinese: 我心里想. It is known to us all that the heart cannot think.

Another interesting feature of human body idioms is found by Fernando who is a famous linguist. She found out that most idioms related to human organs below men’s chests have negative meanings expressing disgust, wrath, and frustration and so on. Here are some examples: go belly up (失败, 倒闭), turn one’s stomach (使某人恶心).

2.3 Origins of Idioms on Human Organs

It is believed that an analysis of definition and origin of body idiom can not only make idiom translators recognize systematically why and how a body idiom comes into use, but also help them achieve natural equivalence more effectively in the process of translation.

By human body idioms in English, we mean the English idioms that are related to a part of human body, (e.g. eye, ear, hand, arm, etc.). Head: The head is thought to be the most important part of the human body, so a leader is often compared to a head. The head is where the brain is located. It is naturally associated with ideas and intelligence. Eye: The eyes are extremely precious to us. That is why we say “Mind your eye!” Not only human beings and animals have eyes, many things also have “eyes”—the eyes of a ship, the eye of a needle, the eye of a typhoon, and so on.

2.3.1 Idioms on Human Organs from Religion

Religion is an important source of human-organ idioms. Owing to different religions, English and Chinese people use different figures in their own part of body idioms with religion allusions. Here is an example: apple of the eye which means favorite people.

Since the sixteenth century, no other English works had so much influence on written and oral English as the Bible did. Legends, myths, figures, fables and maxims in the Bible are known to all in European countries. When talking with each other or when writing something, people quote from the Bible so often that many allusions enter daily life through long usage. For example, an eye for an eye, meaning a punishment, which hurts the criminal in the same way as he hurts someone else, is from the New Testament.

There are also some other human body idioms from the Bible, such as

Eat one’s own flesh
Lead by the nose

Shake the dust from one’s feet
End of all things is at hand
Lift up somebody’s head
Pour out somebody’s heart
Shoot out the lip
Smite somebody under the fifth rib
Have itching ears

2.3.2 Idioms on Human Organs From Great Works

Next to the bible, Shakespeare’s works are the richest literary sources of English idioms. Expressions from classical works are one of the main sources from which human body idioms are derived. The following human body idioms from Shakespeare’s works are familiar to us:

Green-eyed monster means to be jealous. It is from Othello, “Be war, my lord of jealousy; it is the green-eyed monster which doth mock. The meat it feeds on”. A pound of flesh means to blackmail somebody or to racketeer somebody. It is from The Merchant of Venice: SHYLOCK

This kindness will I show: --
Go with me to a notary, seal me there
Your single bond; and, in a merry sport’
If you repay me not on such a day’
In such a place, such sum or sums as are
Exprest in the condition’ let the forfeit
Be nominated for an equal pound
Or your fair flesh’ to be cut off and taken
In what part of your body pleaseth me.

Wear one’s heart on one’s sleeve means to express one’s feelings overtly; to be very frankly. It is from Othello as in “but I will wear my heart upon my sleeve/ for daws to peck at: I am not what I am”.

2.3.3 Idioms on Human Organs From Daily Life

People have created a great number of human body idioms in practice. Some idioms may come from workers, sportsmen, and even soldiers. In English there are to cool one’s heels (to have to be kept waiting long for an assignment or an audience with a VIP). Some human body idioms may originate from geographical men, historical events, or social customs. Take cold shoulder for example. In the Middle Ages, when a knight went by a town, people there would offer him luxurious food while ordinary people went by, people would only offer them ordinary food “the cold shoulder”. Therefore, cold shoulder is equal to “cold reception”. Other examples are: to pull the wool over one’s eyes (to deceive somebody), to keep hands to yourself (not touch everywhere; keep off), to keep your nose out of this (mind yourself; it is none of business).

2.4 The Contrast Between English and Chinese Idioms Related to Human Body

Idioms are essence of the language. The phenomenon that parts of human body are widely used as figures of analogy is very common in human language. The duality of

evolution, generality and peculiarity, decides that ethnical cultures have their similarities, but their individuality remains. The similarities of English and Chinese culture make it possible for people of the two countries to use human body idioms in almost the same way, however, the differences of the two cultures like history, religion and ways of thinking cause difficulty in comprehension and cross-cultural communication due to the reason that many human organs as figures of analogy are used in completely different way.

2.4.1 Similarities Between English and Chinese Human Body Idioms

According to Darwinism, the evolution of creatures has the duality of general evolution and specific evolution. As the creature with natural and social characteristics, there exists the duality in the process of human being's evolution. All ethnic groups share same life experiences and the understanding to the world at certain levels. These common characteristics causing different languages acting as communicative tools bear certain features which are universal. These common characteristics are reflected in English idioms related to human body. Therefore, many English and Chinese human body idioms have similar or common corresponding relationships. The so called common corresponding relationships refer to English and Chinese idioms expressing same meanings with same images. For example, English human body idiom "walls have ears" and its Chinese counterpart "隔墙有耳" are extremely similar both in meaning and image. This idiom comes from history: It is said that special walls were built in Louvre when Catherine was the queen. The sound in one room could easily be heard in another room, and the suspicious queen gain many secrets in this way, while Chinese idiom "隔墙有耳" comes from "古有二言: 墙有耳, 伏寇在侧" (As two old sayings go: the wall have ears, and some dishonest people are overhearing beside it). Therefore, both idioms mean that something secret is being overheard. With same meaning and images, they can be treated as equivalent idioms, and direct translating is the best choice for translators. Other examples:

Stick in one's throat 如鲠在喉

As pale as ashes 面如土色

One's belly is bigger than one's eyes 眼大肚子小

2.4.2 Differences Between English and Chinese Human Body Idioms

Every culture has its own unique features. Every ethnic group has its own culture which is formed in specific natural environment, history, geography and social reality. There exist a few idioms with same meaning and figures coincidentally in different cultures. However, most idioms with different cultural backgrounds are quite different from each other in cultural features and language habits. The diversity of human's living environments and customs diverse human's cultural characteristics.

English and Chinese human body idioms come from different origins. A large number of English idioms come from Shakespeare. For example:

Give every man thine ear, but few thy voice. (多听少说) from *Hamlet*

"Give every man thine ear, but few thy voice.

Take each man's censure,

But reserve thy judgment."

While many Chinese idioms originate from the ancient philosophers, ancient classic works, legends and folk tales. For example, "手舞足蹈" comes from "说之, 故言之; 言之不足, 故长言之; 长言之不足, 故嗟叹之; 嗟叹之不足, 故不知手之舞之, 足之蹈之也" (《礼记》)。

3. THE APPLICATION OF FUNCTIONAL EQUIVALENCE TO TRANSLATION

The above chapters discussed the English human body idioms and functional equivalence theory. This chapter mainly focuses on the application of functional equivalence in English human body translation by employing different strategies. To a great extent, the key to successful translation is mainly dependent on correct application of translation strategies.

3.1 Feasibility of Applying Functional Equivalence Theory

3.1.1 Content Over Form

Content over form is a core principle of Nida's functional equivalence. He points out that "to preserve the content of the message the form must be changed". Therefore, content enjoys priority over form when the conflict between content and form arises.

3.1.2 Reader's Response

In order to achieve functional equivalence, reader's response should be put in the first place. Nida considers the response of the target receptor as the criterion of translation, so the quality of translation should be measured by reader's response.

3.2 Seven Practical Translating Ways of English Human Body Idioms

Translation is an art, a bilingual art, which is considered as the cultural bridge and media between two languages. As there exist wide differences in vocabulary and syntax between the oriented and occidental languages, translation is no easy job, especially the translation of English idioms. In order to keep the flavor of the original English human body idioms as well as cater for all the Chinese readers, translation skills should be reasonably employed in the process of translating based on functional equivalence.

3.2.1 Literal Translation

Literal translation refers to the complete representation of the original when the original almost accords with the

Chinese language in the form of vocabulary, grammatical structure and rhetoric device. In terms of idiom translation, literal translation can keep the original form of English idioms without causing confusion in meaning. What's more, it transfers the original cultural information effectively and narrows the gaps between the two languages. The most important point lies in the function of keeping the full flavor of English idioms. (Zhang, 1980, p.160)

For example, "He learns the present situation like the palm of his hand."

他对目前的情况了如指掌。

他非常清楚目前的情况。

Obviously A fits the original sentence better than B because the English idiom "learn something like the palm of one's hand" and "了如指掌" in Chinese are perfectly equivalent. B cannot express the original meaning accurately.

3.2.2 Literal Translation With Notes

Effective literal translation can help Chinese readers to acquire the direct cultural information of English idioms, but sometimes the direct literal translation without any notes will puzzle readers. This kind of translating skill may supply notes to English allusions, backgrounds, figure meaning, context and sources, etc. strengthen the acceptability of English idioms and keep the original flavor of English idioms.

For example, "the Achilles heel of the Australian economy today is that, although its structure is geared to international trade, its participation in trade has declined." (澳大利亚今天经济中的阿克琉斯脚后跟是: 虽然它不断参与世界贸易, 但是它在世界贸易中的地位已经下降) [Note: "the Achilles heel" 的典故来自《伊利亚特》。阿克琉斯是海神Thetis 和国王Peleus 的儿子, 他母亲把他浸在冥河水里, 使他刀枪不入, 但他母亲忘了把握着的脚后跟沾湿。而他的死敌Paris知道了这个秘密用箭射死了阿克琉斯。] (余卫华)。Through the note Chinese readers can get a better understanding of Australian economic situation.

3.2.3 Liberal Translation

Liberal translation is also called free translation, which does not conform strictly to the form or word order of the original.

For example, "The horrible scene makes his hair stand on end."

恐怖的景象让他感到毛骨悚然。

恐怖的景象让他的头发竖起来了。

Comparing two versions of translation, we can see that A employs liberal translation and B uses literal translation. From the view point of sentence structure and grammar, they are both right, but according to functional equivalence theory, the version of "头发竖起来了" has no link with the reason of the original logically. Though

"毛骨悚然" in version A has no meaning of "make somebody's hair stand on end", it may express the logical reason of the sentence. So the readers will not be confused why his hair could stand on end. On the contrary, B would make readers puzzled.

3.2.4 Liberal Translation With Notes

Liberal translation can transfer the English cultural information effectively. However, it is sometimes difficult to find out a suitable Chinese word or expression to employ. Therefore, in order to achieve natural equivalence, another kind of translating skill may be employed, that is, liberal translation with notes.

For example, I warned him he would die if he didn't go to see the doctor, but he didn't want to listen to me. For the last three months he has buried his head in the sand.

我警告过他如果他不去看医生, 他会死的, 但他不想听我的话。在最后的三个月里, 他是听之任之。

我警告过他如果他不去看医生, 他会死的, 但他不想听我的话。在最后的三个月里, 他把头埋入沙中。

我警告过他如果他不去看医生, 他会死的, 但他不想听我的话。在最后的三个月里, 他是听之任之。

[注: "bury one's head in the sand" 出自一个典故, 据信鸵鸟在遇险或被追捕时会把头埋入沙中。因此, 该习语转变为 "对问题听之任之", "采取鸵鸟政策"]

Observing those versions, we can find C is more preferable. Though B expresses the literal meaning of the idiom, but B has no link with the context. A lets readers know the explanation of "bury one's head in the sand", but don't know why. Only C makes Chinese readers respond the same as English readers.

3.2.5 Liberal Translation: Replacement With Similar Chinese Idioms

In the process of translation, it is better to discover the Chinese idioms which contain the similar contents, forms, metaphors or other rhetoric devices. Crossing-point between English and Chinese idioms can be found in this way, which is the common sense shared by people of the two countries. Examples:

Two heads are better than one 三个臭皮匠顶过一个诸葛亮。

Justice has long arms 天网恢恢, 疏而不漏。

the apple of one's eyes 掌上明珠。

A light heart lives long 不恼不愁, 活到白头。

3.2.6 Combination of Literal and Liberal Translation

Sometimes, literal translation reduces the readability of the translation, leading to the boring feeling of reading as well as the ineffective cultural transfer; liberal translation used improperly often destroys the faithfulness of English idioms. To solve this problem, the combination of literal and liberal translation may be employed. Examples:

Beauty lies in lover's eyes. 情人眼里出西施。

To lift a rock only to have his own toes squashed. 搬起石头砸自己的脚

3.2.7 Rhetorical Devices

Rhetorical devices would be adopted in translating human body idioms in order to make the version more vivid and living. This device can make the version more readable.

For example, the peasants and workers were hand in glove with one another in the struggle against the landlords and capitalists who worked hand in glove with each other

在反对地主和资本家联合的斗争中，工人和农民团结在一起。

在反对狼狈为奸的地主和资本家的斗争中，工人和农民团结在一起，亲如手足。

Comparing the above versions, B is more suitable. The translator not only uses amplification but also metaphor.

CONCLUSION

This thesis studies the English human body idioms translation under the guidance of positive elements of Nida's functional equivalence with abundant examples.

Generally speaking, the translation of English human body idioms is a challenging work, demanding a great deal of practice and broad knowledge about their culture. That is to say, a translator should understand his or her role in English human body idioms translation and must have a sound mastery of both the source and target languages and cultures to produce effective translation.

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