A Contrastive Study of the Differences and Similarities of English and Chinese Idioms and Translation Methods

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ABSTRACT. Based on the translation of English and Chinese idioms, this paper introduces the differences between English and Chinese idioms and their influencing factors, foreign idioms in Chinese and some animal-related idioms in English and Chinese, and the allusions in Chinese and English idioms, and finally expounds the translation methods of idioms. This paper argues that the translation of Chinese and English idioms should be based on a detailed understanding of their respective cultural backgrounds and connotations and the corresponding translation methods should be adopted.

KEYWORDS: Chinese-english idioms, Influencing factors, Translation method

1. Introduction

1.1 Definition of Chinese Idioms

What is Chinese idiom? “New Modern Chinese Dictionary” defines idioms as: “people have long been used to the form of concise and penetrating meaning, stereotyped phrases or short sentences. Chinese idioms are mostly composed of four Chinese characters[1].”

Zhang Peiji, the predecessor of modern English-Chinese translation, once said: “English and Chinese are two highly developed languages, so they both have a large number of idioms. Idioms are fixed phrases or short sentences refined after a long period of use, which are the crystallization of the wisdom of the masses. Idioms are mostly vivid images, suitable for figurative things, and therefore often with a strong national color and local color “[2].

1.2 Definition of English Idioms

The 2002 Oxford Advanced English-Chinese Dictionary defines “idiom” as: “phrase or sentence whose meaning is not clear from the meaning of its individual words and which must be learnt as a whole unit”[3].

The 2005 edition of Longman Dictionary of Contemporary Advanced English defines “idiom” as: “a group of words with a meaning of its own that is different from the meanings of each separate word put together”[4].

2. Reasons for the Differences between Chinese and Foreign Idioms

2.1 Historical and Cultural Factors

Many Chinese idioms are derived from historical allusions. These idioms which contain historical allusions can be said to be household names in China, but they may not be understood by foreigners who do not understand Chinese history and culture by direct translation. Taking “高山流水” as an example, the literal translation of high mountains and flowing water as “lofty mountains and flowing water” could not reveal the profound meaning of the cultural and historical allusions of our country[5].

2.2 Factors of Traditional Practices

Since ancient times, dragon has represented the beautiful expectations in Chinese traditional culture. Many idioms
express the Chinese people's yearning for a better life and a better person through the image of dragon. In foreign myths and legends, dragon is often associated with evil or used to describe someone who is disgusting and bossy. Dog is often used as a derogatory term in Chinese idioms.

2.3 Geographical Factors

China is located in the eastern part of the Eurasian continent. The topography is mainly mountainous, hilly and plateau, and the topography is high in the west and low in the east. The vast land area and complex geomorphology contribute to the rich and diverse national culture and the wide distribution of cultural elements in China. Britain is an island country composed of the northeast of Ireland and its affiliated islands and Great Britain. It is characterized by a marine temperate broad-leaved forest climate, abundant marine resources and scarce land resources.

2.4 Metaphorical Differences

China and Britain are distributed on both sides of the earth, both in climate and environment are very different, which results in significant differences in their lifestyles. Thus people often use different metaphor carriers while creating idioms related to life.

3. Foreign Idioms in Chinese

Like other languages, Chinese has absorbed some foreign words, including a small number of idioms. After the Opium War, many new words were introduced because of learning from the West, but few of them belonged to the scope of idioms. The reason is: “Chinese idioms have always been very rich, when we encounter a foreign idiom in translation, it is easy to think of a Chinese idiom that has the same meaning.” In order to master the idiom easily, we often use the idiom inherent in our own language instead of the foreign idiom, which is why we often refuse to use foreign idioms in our articles.”

4. Comparison of Animal-Related Idioms in English and Chinese

Animal metaphors are widely used in many languages, including English and Chinese. As far as English is concerned, according to L.P. Smith in Words and Idioms, “dog” and “horse” are the most common idioms that contain animal images. Let's first look at the idioms that refer to these two animals.

4.1 Dog

For the British, dogs can be used as gatekeepers or hunters, as well as companions. Therefore, the British generally do not hold a bad feeling towards dogs, but rather have a feeling of love. But in Chinese, dogs are ignoble animals. When dogs are used to refer to people, they mean scolding. When people hear the word “dog”, they feel that it is not a good thing. The image of the dog is so bad that it is quite different from the English situation mentioned above. This leads to some difficulties in translation.

4.2 Horse

There are also many idioms in English that use “horse”. First of all, in terms of the color of a horse, “dark horse” used to mean a horse that won a race without being known, but now it generally refers to an unexpected winner or a competitor whose strength is uncertain. “Iron horse” means “locomotive”, “bicycle” in spoken English. Strangely enough, salt horse refers to “salty or corned beef,” not horses, but sailors' jargon. A Willing horse means “a hard-working person”[7-8].

5. Comparison of Allusions in Idioms

Some idioms come from historical events, fables, stories and so on, which can become allusive idioms. Many allusive idioms are rich in content and have abundant national color, which constitute a special problem in translation.

5.1 Comparison of Chinese and English Allusions
Since Chinese and English allusive idioms have their own national origins, they have little in common. But we can still find some similar idioms and allusions to compare. Contrastive allusions can provide interesting background knowledge and deepen our understanding of idioms.

5.1.1 “朝三暮四” And Blow Hot and Cold

These two idioms have the same meanings and can correspond to each other. They are both allusive idioms and their allusiveness has basically disappeared. Interestingly, from the allusions, they are also close.”朝三暮四” comes from Chuang Tzu. Blow hot and cold comes from Aesop's Fable. The original metaphor refers to “avoiding people with ambiguous temperaments” and now refers to “wavering and capricious”.

6. Methods of Translating Idioms According to Chinese and Foreign Differences

6.1 Literal Translation

The so-called literal translation means to translate Chinese idioms in a straightforward form, which can not only retain the characteristics of Chinese characters, but also show the original meaning of idioms. The translator should pay attention to using the literal translation only when the literal meaning of an idiom is similar to the metaphorical meaning.

6.2 Annotation

Due to the different cultures in English and Chinese, in the process of translating some idioms, there will be cultural gaps. So annotation is the best solution to explain the characters or events in the idiom, so that the target language readers can better understand the meaning of the idiom expressed in the source language. After annotation is added, although it is lengthy, it more accurately expresses the meaning of the original text.

6.3 The Application of Free Translation in the Translation of Chinese-English Idioms

Free translation refers to the abstract description of Chinese idioms while preserving their religious, social and cultural connotations when there are great cultural differences in English translation. For example, “塞翁失马,焉知非福” can be translated literally as “an old man cold lost his mare and who could have guessed it was a blessing in disguise?”. The literal translation is too long, but the translation of “a loss, no bad thing” can not only show the clear meaning of idioms, but also show the concise language features of Chinese idioms.

7. Conclusion

Translation is not only to express the meaning expressed in one language in another language, but also to express the thoughts expressed in one culture in another culture. Therefore, translation is both linguistic and cultural. Idioms contain profound historical and cultural information and rich cultural connotations. Correct and complete translation of idioms can better promote the exchange and development between the two cultures. Translation, as a bridge between different cultures, is particularly important. Therefore, when translating Chinese and English idioms, the translator should first make sure to understand the historical background, cultural differences and language habits of the two languages.

References


