

Cultural Characteristics of Idiomatic Expressions and Their Approaches of Translation

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This paper elaborates that idiomatic expressions are very important parts of language. They have structural solidification and sense of integrity, contain rich connotation of national culture and show prominent personality characteristics of the language. Their meanings are not simple addition of literal meanings. It is very important to keep the national culture in the source language and deal with the relationship between cultural differences and communicative effects in translation.

Keywords: idiomatic expressions, cultural characteristics, translation methods

Introduction

Language is a system of vocabulary and grammar combined with sound and meaning. It is the most important communication tool for human being. As well as it is a tool for human thinking and social transmission of information (Wang, 1997). Idiomatic expressions are important parts and building materials of language. They are relatively fixed phrases and there can be variants in their forms. The meaning of idiomatic expressions are not mere addition of literal meaning. They are holistic and also have rich cultural connotations. In the process of language research, language lever should not only be studied, but also its potential cultural connotations. Edward Tylor said that, "Culture is a complex whole, including knowledge, belief, art, morals, law and custom. And people, as members of the society, get the ability and habits" (Tylor, 2010). Language is an indirect reflection to the objective world through the human brain. Objective reality will be solidify into language facts when the human brain is familiar with the object. Every word handed down in every language is a symbol of arbitrary and statutory convention (Whitney, 1979). The formation of language is arbitrary and at the same time will be affected by social convention. Saussure pointed out in *The General Linguistics Course*, "Assuming that the new discipline (Semiotics) accepts these natural symbols, its main object will remain the entire system based on the arbitrary nature of the symbols. In fact, any means of expressions used by people in society is, in principle, based on collective acts or, equally, on the basis of convention (Saussure, 1959). There is always inherent connection between language and culture. English and Chinese are completely different languages, and there are great differences between eastern and western cultures, which will undoubtedly be reflected in the idiomatic expressions that are full of cultural characteristics. Translation is a complex cross-cultural communication activity. In addition to passing information, There are also cultural tasks for transmitting the source language.

How to keep the ethnic culture in the source of language when translating, and how to deal with the relationship between cultural differences and communicative effect are very important issues in translation studies (Venuti, 1995).

Historical and Cultural Foundation of Idiomatic Expressions

Idiomatic expressions are very important parts of language. They have the relative solidification in structure and the integrity in meaning. Their expression contents are very rich and variety. As the equivalent of words, idiomatic expressions make up the sum of vocabulary with idioms and other words in a language (Xu, 2001). Language reflects the objective world through the brain. A considerable part of the objective reality is solidified into language facts through the understanding of the human brain. There are many similarities in idiomatic expressions of different languages. However, different ethnic groups have different ways of dealing with the objects due to different cultural traditions and historical backgrounds. Therefore, there are many differences in idiomatic expressions in different languages. From the relationship between the whole meaning and the lexical meaning of idiomatic expressions, the meaning of some can be inferred from the literal meaning. For example, “*peng ding zi*” in Chinese and “a hard/tough nut to crack” in English. “*peng ding zi*” can be expressed as “*peng bi*”, it indicates that someone is denied or reprimanded when he handles affairs. As the similar meaning of “*peng ding zi*”, the English expression “*a hard/tough nut to crack*” can be inferred for literal meaning. The metaphorical extension and solidification of the intrinsic features of objective things into semantics is a working mechanism for the survival of human languages (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

There are a large number of idiomatic expressions with a variety of forms. It is necessary to establish a rationale between overall meaning and individual meaning through multiple connections. For example, “*pai ma pi*” in Chinese and “*lick sb’s boots*” in English. They have profound historical and cultural foundation. The whole meaning and the individual words of “*lick sb’s boots*” are completely implicit, not explicit. The literal meaning of “*lick sb’s boots*” is “*tian xue zi*”. But Longman Dictionary of English Idioms explains it as “*to behave in a slavish manner to a person in power, in an effort to impress him*”. And Oxford Idioms Dictionary explains it as “*show too much respect for sb in authority because you want to please them*”. So the meaning of “*lick sb’s boots*” is not the literal meaning. The idiomatic expression of “*pai ma pi*” in Chinese originated from Yuan Dynasty. There are several versions. One of them was that the Mongolian people will own several horses to solve the problems of travelling and transporting. Herders are often proud of their good horses. Sometimes when people met with holding their horses, they often patted the other side’s buttocks, touched and praised in order to win the owner’s favor. At first, people sought truth from facts. When they thought the horse was good, they would say it was good. However, after a long period of time, regardless of the horse good or bad, strong or weak, people would flatter it was a good horse. The second, the Mongolians are the nationality of winning by the horse. A horse was a symbol of power, identity and status. A subordinate’s best compliment to his boss was to pat his horse and praised it. Gradually flattering boss was called “*pai ma pi*”. Although the words of flattering was not same, the action of flapping the horse was the same. So There are historical and cultural foundation and social conventions in idiomatic expressions.

The Psychological Characteristics of Different Nationalities

From the analyses of the idiomatic expressions we can find that there is a tendency towards different expressions of the same things in both English and Chinese, reflecting their national psychology. However, there are many similarities in the view of something reflected in the idiomatic expressions of English and Chinese. For example, “*po leng shui*” and “*pour cold water*”. “*po leng shui*” means “fighting the enthusiasm or ardour of others”. “*pour cold water*” means “discouraging or trying to prevent a plan, etc. from being carried out; be unenthusiastic about something”. They do not express the literal meaning, but the whole meaning. And the meaning of the expressions in English and Chinese is similar. The word “*po*” in “*po leng shui*” can be replaced by “*jiao*”, and the word “*pour*” in “*pour cold water*” can be replaced by “*throw*”. And the meaning can not be changed after replacement. As everyone knows, English and Chinese are two different languages. The Chinese and western peoples lived in a specific natural and geographical environment, formed their own way of thinking and possessed different ethnic characteristics. But there are so many similarities between “*po leng shui*” and “*pour cold water*”, which necessarily reflect some of the potential traits.

At first, people have the same feeling about the natural phenomenon “cold”. The words “*leng*” and “*cold*” both have the meaning of low temperature, not warmth, frustrating and despairing. The phrase with “*leng*”, e.g. “*leng bing bing*”, “*leng dan*”, “*leng yan*” and “*leng shui*” etc, can give people the feeling of cold and unenthusiasm. As the same time, he phrase with “*cold*”, e.g. “*a cold fish*”, “*give sb the cold should*”, and “*in cold blood*” etc, can give people the same feeling. So, people psychologically have the similar feeling toward the words “*leng*” and “*cold*”. The second, the idiomatic expressions of “*po leng shui*” and “*pour cold water*” are relatively fixed phrases. The meaning of their expression is not the result of the addition of the literal meaning, but it is still possible to find the traces of the literal meaning. Grice thought the semantic features of language can be explained by the semantic features of thinking because the content of thought is more basic and original than the meaning of language (Gu & Xu, 2002).

Humboldt thought, in general, although all the languages had roughly the same structure and followed the same principles, almost none of the languages did not differ in any particular way from other languages (Cheng, 1999). Language is an independent system. The best explanation for the common language, that is, the abstract grammatical characteristics to all natural languages, is that humans have an innate language ability (Chomsky, 1957). Without a profound understanding of linguistic theory and the language, and without contacting the background of national culture and national psychology, it is very difficult to find problems, let alone make correct explanations (Pan, 2008). By analyzing the idiomatic expressions between English and Chinese, we can see that different ethnic groups have their psychological characteristics, but have the same psychological feelings about something. These features are undoubtedly reflected in language expressions.

Closely Related to the Customs of People

Language is a social phenomenon, a communication tool between people and people and also a medium of integration between people and culture. Language is the carrier of culture and an important means of spreading it. Each ethnic group recorded and reflected its culture and conducted cultural exchanges through its own national language (Wang & Yang, 2003). Culture is the product of people through their creative activities (Qi, 2000).

Idiomatic expressions are very important part of language. They reflect people's understanding and attitude toward the objective world. The customs of people also appear in the linguistic phenomenon.

For example, "*chao leng fan*". It originally meant that the remaining cold rice was added to the pot to heat. But when people use it, they usually do not refer to its original meaning and use its extended meaning and metaphor. When people want to express to repeat what has been said and done and words or behaviors are lack of new conception, they often use it. On October 21, 2010, there was a headline on tencent website. One of three sins of "*chao leng fan*" in Chinese movies is remaking. The main content was Zhou Xingchi said in "*God of Cookery*" that to make a delicious fried rice must be cooked overnight meal. The trick has helped a lot of people struggling with this. But what about the movie? If you always come up with a cold, expired or even bored "*leng fan*" to stir again, and then an expensive price was marked on it. You just regard it as delicious food and force the audience to swallow it down. It is estimated that most of audience and fans will refuse it. The title of this article used "*chao leng fan*" highlighted the basic content of the news. When readers read it, they would be aware of the main idea of the report. And it reflected the core of news.

This shows that the idiomatic expressions come from life and are closely related to peoples' living customs. However, with the development of language, they are endowed with new ideas. In the process of language expression, the clever and flexible use of them will make the language more vivid and achieve better results.

Translation Methods of Idiomatic Expressions

Language is a psychological phenomenon and also a social phenomenon, but psychological facts still need to be set up before becoming a linguistic phenomenon. Society is a complex system of culture, and culture is the foundation for the survival and development of human society. In fact, language is part of culture and reflection of culture (Lin, 2002). Because language is one aspect of a cultural elements, culture must also be conveyed in a language. As Barthes said, "Culture can not be separated from language in all respects" (Barthes, 1984). Due to the differences in historical backgrounds, cultural traditions and customs, coupled with the fuzzy nature of the human brain's classifications of things, two kinds of stimulus can not produce the exact same response.

Idiomatic expressions, as cultural products, contain specific cultural meanings both in English and Chinese. There are certain differences in the way of expressions of idiomatic expressions. It is easy to cause translation mistakes in the same phenomenon with differences among languages, which requires that translators must grasp the cultural connotation in each translation. It is for this reason that we should understand the meaning of culture and the whole meaning of idiomatic expressions when translating. With the proper translation method, the source language and target language are approached to achieve the equivalent effect. Idiomatic expressions have structural solidification and sense of integrity, contain rich connotation of national culture and show prominent personality characteristics of the language. Due to the lack of universal common basis between different languages in their internal structure and mode of representation, it is much more difficult to translate idiomatic expressions. As mentioned above, idiomatic expressions are a whole, and the whole meaning cannot be directly inferred through the individual lexical meaning. The essential attribute is the whole meaning is more significant than the individual lexical meaning.

There has long been a debate for atomism and holism in linguistic. Atomic theory holds that there are language units of different sizes, and large language units are composed of small units until the smallest atoms are

undivided. In the atomic theory, large language units are the sum of small individual units. As opposes to atomism, holism states that the whole shape is not a simple combination of partial shapes because of the new relationships generated in the whole process. In other words, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. From the various combinations of language, atomism and holism are the fundamental attributes of language. The general free combination reflects the atomic properties of language, while idiomatic expressions reflect the overall properties of language. Since the whole meaning is the fundamental attribute of idiomatic expressions, their conversions are more applicable to the overall processing in translation. Therefore, idiomatic expressions can not be completely equivalent in form. If idiomatic expressions are translated according to the literal meaning, it will not only fail to show their characteristics, but also destroy the true meaning they want to express. For example, , if “*feng liang hua*” is translated into “*cold words*” without commenting, and also “*chao leng fan*” as “*fry the cold rice*”, “*xun duan jian*” as “*look for a short view*”, “*pei le fu ren you zhe bing*” as “*give one’s enemy a wife and lose one’s soldiers as well*” etc, it will lead to communication failure. According to the holistic theory, the whole meaning should be reflected in the process of idiomatic expressions translation, which can be functionally considered and functionally equivalent or close to each other. So “*feng liang hua*” can be translated into “*irresponsible and sarcastic remark*”, and “*chao leng fan*” as “*dish up the same old stuff/rehash last night’s dinner*”, “*xun duan jian*” as “*commit suicide*” and “*pei le fu ren you zhe bing*” as “*suffer a double loss instead of making a gain*” (Feng, 2001).

From the above translation, it can be interpreted as interpretive analysis of the translation, that is, the meaning of idiomatic expressions of the translation is accurate, but it may lose their identity in form. When it is impossible to be equal in form and the true meaning of idiomatic expressions is to be expressed, it can only achieve the consistency of meaning, which can only achieve the approaching effect. Because no two languages are exactly the same, there are differences in the meaning of the signifier or the arrangement of linguistic signs (Nida, 1964). Due to various factors such as history and culture, social establishment and so on, there are differences between the forms and the meanings of the idiomatic expressions in different languages. Since the personality exists in specific idiomatic expression, the translation of each idiomatic expression can only be consistent with the source language in the whole. In order to achieve equivalence of meaning, we must make some choices in terms of form. We propose that the translation of idiomatic expressions can follow the principle of “approximation” (Wang, 2011).

Conclusion

Language is an integral part of culture, at the same time, it is also a carrier of culture. The transmission of culture inevitably achieves with the benefit of language. Language is influenced by culture, which in turn exerts influence on culture (Wang, 2007). Language reflects the characteristics of a nation, which not only contains the cultural history and cultural background of a nation, but also contains the thoughts, lifestyle and the mode of thinking of the people in life (Deng & Liu, 1989). Idiomatic expressions have deep cultural connotations. They have historical origins, map out the psychology of different nationalities and imply certain customs of life. Their formations are arbitrary and rational. However, not all of the idiomatic expressions can be found in their origins, some have failed to be verified, and some can be very difficult to understand in terms of their origins due to cultural differences and language differences. However, idiomatic expressions reflect the rich and colorful

cultural patterns, and their formation and development reflect the characteristics and connotations of Chinese and western culture. Further understanding of traditional culture contained in idiomatic expressions will enable us to have deeper comprehension and realizing of their cultural connotations so as to catch on to the close relationship between language and culture. Of course, translation is a complex cross-cultural communication activity. In addition to conveying information, there are also cultural tasks for transmitting the source language. How to keep the national culture in the source language in translation and how to handle the relationship between cultural differences and communicative effects are very important in translation studies (Venuti, 1995).

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