On Translation of Polysemic Words in News English

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Polysemic words appear in news English with high-frequency. So, how to determine the exact meaning of a polysemic word in the news and put it into proper Chinese causes much trouble and frustration to readers. This paper summarizes some effective translating strategies of polysemic words from English to Chinese. They include: translating based on collocation, translating based on grammar, translating based on background knowledge, translating based on logical relation, and translating based on register.

Keywords: polysemic word, news English, translating strategy

Introduction

Polysemy is an extremely important and common phenomenon in language, and it is also an important part of lexicology, semantics and lexicography. In English, except for technical terms, the vast majority of vocabulary are polysemic words which express different concepts and have different meanings in different contexts, registers and texts, so how to correctly understand the English source text and choose an appropriate Chinese translation brings great difficulties and challenges to the translator in the process of English-Chinese translation. This paper makes a preliminary discussion on the Chinese translation strategies of polysemic words in news English and puts forward several effective solutions.

Literature Review

Many scholars have discussed the translation of polysemic words in news texts. Professor Lu Siyuan (2018), a translator and theorist, discussed the translation strategies of polysemic words from the perspective of functional equivalence. Cai Lijian (2014), a former senior United Nations translator, used United Nations documents as an example to explore the skills and methods of translating polysemic words into Chinese. Chen Shupei (2007) and Li Zongkai (2013), two senior English-Chinese translators of Xinhua News Agency, discussed the translation of polysemic words into Chinese in their monographs based on their decades of experience in news translation. Professor Zhou Xueyi (2006), a professor at Peking University, believed that the translation of polysemic words into Chinese is a major difficulty in news translation, and put forward his own unique views on the translation of polysemic words in news English. Professor Fan Jiacai (1992) discussed the methods of translating polysemic words into Chinese from the perspective of rhetoric. Professor Liu Miqing (1980) made an in-depth study on the translation of English polysemic words into Chinese by analyzing the differences in lexical meaning between English and Chinese. The research results of scholars have played a great role in promoting the Chinese translation of English polysemic words, but they are slightly inadequate in

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terms of theory and systematicness. Therefore, this paper makes a further study on the translation of polysemic words in news English in the light of context theory, in order to help readers improve their reading level and enhance the accuracy of news English translation.

Translation Strategies

Any text is the product of a specific context, so in order to correctly understand the meaning of polysemic words in news discourse, we must first understand its context. As a major means of conveying meanings between two languages, translation is also highly dependent on context. Context has a great restriction on the understanding and expression of language, and a specific context gives the word a specific meaning. Polysemy is a very important and common phenomenon in news English, but only one meaning is used in a specific context. In other words, no matter how many meanings a word has, each of its meanings is determined in a sentence because of the restrictions of its context, i.e., the meaning of a polysemic word in a specific context is single and will never cause confusion and affect the reader's understanding. Peter Newmark (2001), a British translation theorist, believed that vocabulary is the basic unit of translation. Because "the original text is made up of words, the translator's first task is to present the meaning of the words in the original text with the translation" (p. 193). Of course, vocabulary translation is not the translation of a word in isolation, but combined with the linguistic context, thematic context, cultural context and individual context of the vocabulary. The meaning of all words depends on the context in which they are located (Newmark, 2001).

Of course, different scholars have different definitions of context, but to sum up, context includes textual context (words, collocations, and sentences before and after the word in the text), cultural context (cultural, social, political and other factors that affect the text), and historical context (the specific historical environment in which the text is produced). These three aspects of context are usually reflected in five aspects: word collocation, grammar, background knowledge, logical relation and register. Therefore, when translating polysemic words in news English, we should also start from the above five aspects.

Translating Based on Collocation

Collocation refers to the combination of words in a language that makes spoken and written language seem natural and smooth. As we mentioned above, most words in English (especially commonly used words) have many meanings, and these different meanings can only be determined in different collocations. The word "application", for example, has a completely different meaning in "*a formal application*" and "*a wide application*". The former means "申请", while the latter means "应用". Therefore, in the process of English-Chinese translation, we can determine the Chinese meaning of a polysemic word according to the different collocations in which it is used. Please take a look at the following two examples:

Example 1: The war in Yemen takes place over a fractured political **landscape** marked by long-standing turf wars, tribal enmities and opportunistic factions seeking to expand their fiefdoms.

According to *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, the word "landscape" means "an area of countryside or land of a particular type" (陆地上的 "风景，景色"), e.g., *a beautiful rural landscape* (美丽的乡村景色), but it is obviously inappropriate for us to translate "*political landscape*" in this sentence as "政治景色" because it is an incorrect expression in Chinese. After consulting the dictionary, we found that when "landscape" collocates with such words as "political" or "social", it usually means "background" or "situation" (背景，形势). So, the proper Chinese translation of this sentence should be: "也门的内战是在政局动荡的**背**

景下发生的。其特点是对立的部落、不同的派别为了扩大自己的势力范围长期争抢地盘。"

Example 2: And yet, my friends, the Christmas hope for peace and goodwill toward all men can no longer be dismissed as a kind of **pious** dream of some utopian.

The word "pious" in this sentence is a common word familiar to average college students. The interpretation of it in *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* is "having strong religious beliefs (虔诚的, 敬神的)". Some book translates the above sentence as: "各位教友，即便如此，我们不能把祈求和平、善待众人的基督圣训视作不切实际的虔诚梦想。" (Li, 2012, p. 126)

The Chinese translation of "*pious dream*" into "虔诚梦想" literally corresponds to the original text, but the meaning is completely mistranslated. Because when "pious" collocates with the noun "wish/hope", it means "unlikely (渺茫的)" rather than "having strong religious belief (虔诚的)". So, the correct translation of this sentence should be: "各位教友，即便如此，我们不能把祈求和平、善待众人的基督圣训视作**难以实现的梦想**。"

Translating Based on Grammar

Grammar is the rules by which words change their forms and are combined into larger semantic units, such as phrases or sentences. Therefore, in order to understand the exact meaning of a word in a sentence, we must analyze its syntactic, tense, voice and other grammatical meanings. We can resort to grammar analysis to determine the contextual meaning of a polysemic word in translation process. Examples 3 and 4 sufficiently demonstrate this point.

Example 3: As the global recovery took hold this year, German Chancellor Angela Merkel introduced €80 billion in budget cuts and urged other major **economies** to undertake their own fiscal consolidation.

As we know, "*economy*" is usually an uncountable noun, which means "the wealth and resources of a country (经济)", e.g. *stimulate economy* (刺激经济). Another meaning of "*economy*" is "careful use of money (节约)", e.g. *an economy drive* (一项节约措施). But in Example 3, the plural form of the word "*economies*" is used which must have another meaning other than "经济" in Chinese. After analyzing the grammatical structure, we find that there is a logical predicate "undertake their own fiscal consolidation" after "*economies*", which indicates that "*economies*" here is the agent of actions. So, in light of the context, we can translate "*economies*" into correct Chinese "经济体". Therefore, the whole sentence can be translated into: "随着今年全球经济的复苏，德国总理安吉拉·默克尔提出了800亿欧元的财政消减计划，并要求其它主要**经济体**也进行财政整顿。"

Example 4: But with the end of the Cold War, the rise of global economy and changing demographics in both our countries, new opportunities have arisen for a partnership between our two great **democracies**.

Professor Cao Minglun (2013), a famous translation theorist in China, points out that the new generation of translators all have a large English vocabulary, but they all have a common problem, that is, in their minds, the Chinese word corresponding to an English word is often the one they first come into contact with when they begin to learn English. For example, they too often translate "*fact*" into "事实", "*democracy*" into "民主" and "*perfect*" into "完美" when at first sight of it. Few of them think that "the choice of word meaning should obey such a general rule: every word is a new word in a new context". Grammatical knowledge tells us that "*democracy* (民主)" is an abstract noun. But the plural form "*democracies*" is used here, and there is also a number "two" modifying "*democracies*" which indicates that "*democracies*" here bears another meaning. After grammatical analysis, we find that there is "both our countries" in the previous clause, so we can conclude that

the "*democracies*" here refers to two "*democratic countries*". The appropriate Chinese translation of the whole sentence is: "随着冷战的结束、全球经济的复苏以及两个国家人口数量的变化，我们两个**民主化国家**建立伙伴关系的新机遇到来了。"

Translating Based on Background Knowledge

To judge the meaning of a word in a specific context, we should not only analyze its grammatical structure and collocation, but also understand the elements other than the text: the social environment, cultural environment and historical environment of the text. The sum of these different environments is called "background knowledge". The more familiar the background knowledge of the original English text is, the more accurate the understanding of the contextual meaning of the word will be. The Chinese translation of the following two sample sentences fully illustrates the importance of background knowledge in determining the specific meaning of polysemic words in news English.

Example 5: Many former donor countries are facing increasing pressures at home to keep personnel **commitments** small, as operatives become risky, not just in monetary values.

The word "*commitment*" in this sentence is a commonly used polysemic word about which, *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* lists five meanings: "承诺，忠诚，花费，义务，投入", but which meaning fits the specific context of this sentence? When collocation and grammar fail us in determining its meaning, we can turn to background knowledge. After looking up the relevant information, we found that this sentence comes from a report by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon calling on developed countries to help poor countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan, so we can confirm that "*commitment*" means "投入" in this sentence, while "personnel commitment" means "人员投入". Thus, the whole sentence can be suitably translated as: "许多前援助国家面临越来越大的国内压力，要求它们减少出国**援助人员**的数量，因为援助人员花费巨大，风险很高。"

Example 6: Indonesians opposed the UN **presence** in East Timor protesting Friday outside UN offices in Jakarta. The UN said 20 more people died at the hands of militias in West Timor, but Indonesia denied the claim.

The word "*presence*" is a polysemic abstract noun with the meanings of "存在，出席，当面，风度，鬼怪", and so on. What exactly does "*UN presence*" mean here? If we know the fact that Indonesia had occupied East Timor for a long time which became an independent country in 2001 after the United Nations sent a peacekeeping force to East Timor in 1999 and organized a free election in favor of independence, we immediately understand that the "*UN presence*" here refers to the "联合国派往东帝汶的维和部队". So, the whole sentence can correctly be translated as: "星期五印度尼西亚人在联合国驻雅加达办事处外面举行抗议活动，反对联合国在东帝汶**驻军**。联合国说，在西帝汶有20多人死于武装民兵之手，但印度尼西亚予以否认。"

The Chinese translation of "*commitment*" and "*presence*" in Examples 5 and 6 fully shows that background knowledge plays a critical role in the Chinese translation of English polysemic words. When we translate polysemic words in news English, we should not only choose the correct meaning, but also construct its Chinese meaning with background knowledge.

Translating Based on Logical Relation

Normal people abide by logics when thinking about problems, putting forward opinions and expressing ideas. Normal sentences and texts are also logical. Therefore, logical analysis can be of great help in

understanding the contextual meaning of a polysemic word in a news report, which is well illustrated in the following two examples.

Example 7: Those were the tragic sights, the personal **effects** of the passengers. I hoped each time I saw a shoe or a hat half-buried in sand, that it was the lost luggage of some survivor.

As soon as they see the word "effect", English learners think of the Chinese words, such as "效果, 结果, 影响". Exactly, in many cases, the word "effect" conveys those meanings. However, if the "*personal effects*" is rendered into Chinese as "个人影响" in Example 7, the rendition of course is inappropriate and incorrect, in that it does not conform to the logical relationship in this sentence, because "*personal effects*" and "*the tragic sight* (悲惨场面)" are grammatically in apposition. How can "tragic sight" become "*personal effects*"? Obviously, this is against the logic. After consulting the dictionary again, we find that "*effect*" has a rare meaning of "possessions". This meaning is in line with the logical relationship in the sentence. So, the whole sentence can be translated as: "那些就是当时悲惨的场面，泰坦尼克号上乘客遗留下来的**个人物品**。我希望，每次看到一只半埋在沙子里的鞋子或帽子，它的主人仍然活在世上。"

Example 8: Afterward, a Joint Monitoring **Machinery**, including American, French, Syrian and Lebanese representatives, was created to prohibit unprovoked attacks on civilian populations and the use of civilians as shields for terrorist activities.

Although this sentence is a bit long, it has no complex grammatical structure or abstruse words to understand. Among them, "machinery" is a CET-4 word, whose Chinese equivalent is "机器, 机械 (总称)", for example, "*industrial machinery* (工业机械), *heavy machinery* (重型机械)", but this explanation does not fit this sentence, because the literal Chinese translation of "*Machinery, including American, French, Syrian and Lebanese representatives*" is "由美国、法国、叙利亚和黎巴嫩四国代表组成的机器", which is both ill collocated and illogical in Chinese language. We must choose another Chinese translation for "*machinery*" according to the context of the source language and the logic of the target language. Grammatical analysis tells us that the main structure of this sentence is "*machinery was created to prohibit unprovoked attacks*", so the "*machinery*" here can be translated as "机构、组织" instead of "机器". The Chinese translation of the whole sentence is: "随后成立了一个包括美国、法国、叙利亚和黎巴嫩四国代表在内的监督**机构**，其目的是阻止对平民无缘无故的袭击，禁止让平民担当恐怖主义活动的盾牌。"

Translating Based on Register

According to systemic functional linguistics, language is a potential system of meaning, and discourse is the result of language users' choices from this system according to different fields in order to achieve a certain function (Halliday, 2014). This combination of language functions in different fields is a functional variety of language called "register", for example: literary English, scientific and technological English, legal English, news English, advertising English, and so on. The linguistic distinctions between different registers are reflected by lexical features, syntactic features, text structures, and so on. In many cases, the polysemy of English words is reflected in different registers. News English is a register completely different from English for General purpose (EGP), so many words commonly used in News English bear completely different meanings in EGP. Therefore, we can determine the specific meaning of polysemic words according to the characteristics of news English. Please take a look at the following two example sentences.

Example 9: Thousands gathered Tuesday in New York, suburban Washington and rural Pennsylvania to **mark** the 11th anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks, but at the somber day's biggest venue, Ground Zero in

Lower Manhattan, this year's observance was missing a key feature from years past: politicians' voices.

The word "*mark*" in Example 9 is a commonly used word and is used as a verb. It means "标出，弄脏" in English for General Purpose, such as "*mark the room on the map* (在地图上标出房屋)" and "*his finger marked the painting* (他手指弄脏了油画)". "*Mark*", however, has a totally different meaning in news English, which means "*celebrate* (纪念)". Therefore, Example 9 can be translated as: "星期二，数千人聚集在纽约市、华盛顿市郊和宾夕法尼亚乡村**纪念**9.11事件11周年。在今天这个忧伤的日子里，曼哈顿下城区遭受恐怖袭击的中心区的纪念活动和往年有所不同：缺少了政治家的演讲。"

Example 10: Without the cap, executives would have to **weigh** the possible revenue from a well against the cost of drilling there and the risk of damage.

We know that "*weight*" is a common verb, meaning (1) "to have a particular weight... (重达…); (2) to measure how heavy sb. ... (称…的重量)", for example: "*This elephant weighs three kilos* (这头大象重量达三吨)" and "*The girl weighs herself every day* (这个女孩每天都称自己的重量)". But in news English, the verb "*weigh*" usually expresses another meaning "*consider* (考量)". Therefore, the Chinese translation of Example 10 is as follows: "如果不设立赔偿上线，石油公司的经理们就会参照开采成本和损失风险**慎重考虑**一口油井的收益。"

The Chinese translation of "*mark*" in Example 9 and "*weigh*" in Example 10 fully demonstrates that integrating "register" factor into translation is one of the effective methods to accurately understand and translate polysemic words in news English.

Conclusion

Most English words are polysemous, especially those commonly-used ones with high-frequency. These commonly-used polysemic words make it difficult to translate news English into Chinese. In order to solve this problem, we must possess a profound knowledge of Chinese and English languages as well as extensive bilingual culture. Furthermore, we can draw on grammatical analysis, background knowledge, register knowledge, logical relations and theme of the text to correctly translate polysemic words in English news. Only in this way can we translate the specific contextual meaning of polysemic words in news English accurately, make the content of Chinese translation consistent with the original English, and achieve the purpose of helping Chinese readers understand English news clearly and accurately.

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