Translation of Cultural Terms Under the Functional Equivalence Theory

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Different countries and different nationalities have different cultures. There are differences between them as each culture has its characteristics. Therefore, as their different value, aesthetic taste, region and custom, different cultures assign different meanings to words. According to Tytler, the translation of cultural terms should follow the three principles of translation and adopt reasonable translation methods: retention method, transference translation method, transliteration method, hybrid method, approximation method, interpretation method and implication presentation method, to overcome the translation barriers caused by cultural differences and achieve the translation effect of functional equivalence proposed by Nida.

Keywords: cultural differences, translation of cultural terms, three principles of translation, functional equivalence

Functional Equivalence Theory

According to Nida’s translation theory, the equivalence in translation includes the formal equivalence and the functional equivalence, also called dynamic equivalence. The principal contradiction in translation is usually between the formal equivalence and the functional equivalence.

Formal equivalence emphasizes that the formal structure of the target language should be as consistent as possible with that of the source language, and the structure of the text has a significant impact on accuracy and correctness (Tan, 1999). Functional equivalence is based on the principle of functional equivalence. That is, target language readers should be as receptive to information as possible as the source language readers, and the target and source language readers should receive the same influence from the target and source text. Nida (1984) said in On Translation,

The dynamic characteristics of this kind of translation depend on the comparison of two relations. That is, the target language receiver and the text have the relationship, so do the source language and the text. The relation between them should be the same. (p. 53)

Therefore, Nida’s functional equivalence means that the influence of source language on readers is equivalent to that of the target language and the communicative function of translation can be realized equally. Therefore, aiming to realize the reciprocal communicative function, translation should be centered on the target text and guided by the response of the target readers.

However, the apparent cultural characteristics of the cultural words cause it difficult to be translated. On “cultural equivalence”, according to Newmark’ opinion (1988), the cultural equivalence cannot be perfect

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equivalence but the approximate translation when an SL Cultural word is translated by a TL cultural word. When the source language is translated into the target language, cultural equivalence is an approximate translation. In other words, cultural equivalence can only be infinitely close, but it cannot achieve absolute equivalence. Essentially, it is the same as Nida’s functional equivalence.

Therefore, translators should adopt a target language reader-oriented translation strategy when translating cultural words. In functional equivalence, Nida not only provides a systematic theory but also provides a detailed translation method. This provides theoretical guidance and a great help for the translation practice of cultural words.

The Equivalent Form of Cultural Terms

The equivalence of cultural lexicon translation can be divided into semantic equivalence at the textual level and translation equivalence at the practical level.

Semantic Equivalence at the Text Level

Card, a Western language translation theorist, believes it is impossible to seek language translation with the same absolute structure in different cultural backgrounds. But semantic equivalent structures can be found in two different language environments (Zhu & Gu, 2015).

According to the degree of semantic equivalence, semantic equivalence at the textual level is ranked as four different types: First, there are two semantic relations are corresponding to each other in the cultural vocabulary of the source language and target language. Second, the cultural vocabulary of the source and target language is an arbitrary one-to-many equivalent relationship. And the different semantic relationships are determined according to different situational contexts. Third, there is no apparent equivalence between the source language and the target language. But their core meanings are found almost equivalent. For example, the Western word “Milk Way” is similar to the Chinese word “Yin He”. The fourth is zero equivalence. There is a semantic meaning deficiency between the source cultural vocabularies and the target cultural vocabularies. That is the corresponding relationship cannot be found between them and the semantics are not repeated at all.

Translation Equivalence at the Pragmatic Level

Eugene Nida believes that translation equivalence at the practical level must be based on information transmission, and it can be divided into formal equivalence and functional equivalence (Yuan & Xiao, 2011). Formal equivalence refers to the form and structure of language. In contrast, functional equivalence means that the function or the effect of the text on the target language readers and the source language readers is the same.

The Phenomenon and Causes of Cultural Asymmetry in Translation

There are many non-equivalence phenomena in the translation of cultural terms, and the reasons are as follows:

Differences in Value and Aesthetic Taste

Value and aesthetic taste are an essential part of the culture, and cultural differences also include differences in value and aesthetic taste. Chinese and Western nations have different cultural, historical, political, economic backgrounds, values and aesthetic tastes. These factors undoubtedly make translation difficult. Social collectives have different values and aesthetic tastes in a different cultural environment. Thus, the aesthetic taste of cultural vocabulary is also different. “龙”, for example, works well in the Asian cultural context. The
dragon is revered in Asia as an embodiment of majesty, power and good luck. There are also many cultural vocabularies related to the dragon that represent good meanings, such as “亚洲四小龙”, “人中之龙”, “龙马精神”, “飞龙在天”, “龙风呈祥”, and so on. In English, the “四小龙” is translated as “four Little Tigers”. “Dragon” is described in Western countries as a vast crocodile-like, scaly, winged, flying, swimming and breathing fierce fire monster. It is seen as the embodiment of “evil” and “terror”. In the Bible, the devil Satan is called a dragon. In Greek mythology, Apollo, the sun god, shot the dragon Patong with God arrow for people’s good. Medieval legend has it that the Christian George defeated the girl-eating dragon. There are many stories, such as Western legends and myths, in which the hero killed the dragon-the victim of the warrior’s fame. “Plant dragon teeth” means to start a war in English. Obviously, “龙” expresses entirely different meanings in Chinese and Western values. In the translation of the cultural term “龙”, it cannot be directly translated into “dragon” to avoid the excellent implication being translated into a bad one, which will bring misunderstanding to readers from different cultural backgrounds.

Regional Cultural Differences

Different countries are located in the different geographical and natural environments and have different regional culture. The implied meaning of cultural vocabulary which is derived from different natural environments and geographical environments is also different. For example, it is often used “scorching sun” and other expressions to express the hot summer located in the subtropical region of China. On the other hand, most of the Northern European countries are at the higher latitudes, where the temperature of summer is enjoyable. Shakespeare writes about the summer: “Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?” “Thou art more lovely and more temperate”. So, it is tough to understand the real meaning of cultural vocabulary if one lacks the understanding of the geographical location and climatic conditions of China and Northern Europe. That will result in the misunderstanding between the source language and target language.

Cultural Differences in Customs and Habits

With the social lifestyle accumulated, a nation will gradually form its custom and habit, which is also an expression of its culture. When the same thing, the same concept or the same thinking consciousness is connected with the same thing in the material world, it will be expressed in different cultural terms under different customs and cultures. In China, we use “小菜一碟”. While in English, we use “a piece of cake”. Different customs and habits also show that different nationalities have different understandings on the same cultural vocabulary. For example, dogs are the food of Chinese people and the things that uses the word “dog” to describe are generally derogatory: “Dogs look down on people”, “lackeys”, “cowardice”, etc. Dogs are regarded as loyal friends and even family members in Western countries, so Chinese people are often criticized for eating dog meat. In English idioms: “Love me Love my dog”. “Clever dog”—a clever person; “Top dog”—the person who wins or the leader; “Big dog”—a big person; “dog’s chance”; and “Better be the head of a dog than the tail of a lion”. Therefore, due to the differences between Chinese and Western customs, people’s understandings of the same animal and relevant cultural vocabulary are also different.

Differences in Religious Belief and Historical Allusions

Due to the differences of development history, cultural allusions and religious beliefs, Chinese and Western idioms are different. These idioms have profound cultural connotations and meaning and the related cultural words cannot be understood and translated literally. Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism all have a profound influence in China. “阿弥陀佛”, “立地成佛”, “佛眼相看”, and other cultural words are enough to
see the status of “佛” in the hearts of the people; In Europe and America, most people believe in Christianity, and “God” is regarded as their God. There are also words like “God Bless”, “God’s Gift”, and “God Willing”. Moreover, the cultural vocabularies corresponding to historical allusions in China and the West are different. In China, there are “大禹治水”, “银河”, “粽子”, and so on. In the West, many cultural vocabularies related to historical allusions come from ancient Greek mythology, Roman mythology and Bible stories: The Nativity Story, A Resurrection, and Ascension Day.

**Three Principles of Cultural Terms Translation**

The translation is not only the interlingual conversion of language signs but also the communication between two different cultures. Translation not only deals with the literal relationship between various languages but also deals with the coexistence of similarities and differences between two cultures. Therefore, understanding the two different languages and culture of the source language and target language simultaneously can better achieve bilingual conversion in translation, deliver accurate information and complete the translation task.

About how to translate the cultural terms, Tytler proposed three famous principles in his *Principles of Translation* (1790): (1) For the ideological content of the original text, the translation should completely reproduce; (2) For the style and tone of the original text, the translation should be the same as the source language; and (3) For the frequency of the original, the translation should be as smooth and natural as it (Lu, 2012).

According to Tytler, these three principles are ranked in order of their importance. If the three principles can't be balanced, then the choice can be made as follows. Fluency and style can be abandoned, but the ideological content ranked first should not be abandoned because it is the most critical part and the basic principle of translation. Though they are challenging to achieve equivalence in translation due to cultural differences, the three principles are also applied to the translating of cultural words between the source language and the target language: idioms, proverbs and slightly different words, etc.

**Cultural Terms Translation Strategies**

Here are seven ways to translate cultural terms:

**Retention**

Retention works well when the source language has a lot of cultural colors, which is very common in ancient Chinese poetry. For example, the old saying “沉鱼落雁, 闭月羞花” is used to describe a beauty’s appearance. It means that she is beautiful enough to make fish sink in shame, geese fall from the sky in shame, the moon afraid to show its full moon, and flowers afraid to bloom. There are many metaphors in the source language. The translation can also follow a variety of metaphors in the source language. “A beautiful face which causes the fish to sink, the goose to drop down, the moon to hide and the flowers to shame”. The translation retains the cultural connotation of the source language, arouses the resonance of the target language readers to the text, and achieves functional equivalence in translation.

**Transference Translation Method**

Transference is the direct transfer of some or all elements of the source language into the target language, for example, 楚辞—“Chu Ci”, TikTok, IBM, AMD, AT & T, Joy, NBC, CBS, CNN, Nextel, etc. To achieve
functional equivalence, these words are directly transferred into the target language. That makes readers more intuitive to understand these words and the content they represent.

**Transliteration Method**

Transliteration is a translation method in which the source language borrows the pronunciation of the target language. The transliteration method is easy to memorize and read, which is often used in the translation of advertisements, for example, KFC, McDonald’s, Coca Cola and so on. English and Chinese belong to the different language family. The former is the Indo-European category, while the latter belongs to Sino-Tibetan category. The pronunciation and structure of the two languages are different. Still, the transliteration method finds the connection point of the two languages skillfully, and uses the phonetic similarity to deal with the translation between languages. That makes readers achieve the effect of functional equivalence.

**Hybrid Method**

The hybrid method here refers to the transliteration method mixed with the functional classification method. When look at the words translated by the hybrid method, readers may be confused because they do not understand the meaning of the transliteration words. Therefore, the translator will add the functional or categorical words after the transliterated words to explain it, for example, “Cambridge University”, “Oxford University”, “Longman Dictionary”, and so on. By this way, readers can know what the target language is and its functions at a glance, so that readers can achieve functional equivalence in their understanding of the target language.

**Approximation Method**

Approximation means the target language tries to find the same or similar cultural connotation in the source language. This method is usually used in the translation of idioms and colloquial expressions. “一石二鸟”—“Kill two birds with one stone”, “爱屋及乌”—“Love me, Love my dog”. This translation method translates sounds-like the original language. Readers of the target language can easily combine their cultural background knowledge to understand the relevant cultural vocabulary and achieve the functional equivalence in translation.

**Interpretation Method**

When there is no equivalent culture-loaded word expression in the target language, the translator adds explanatory notes when we translate the source language. “粽子”—“zongzi” is a kind of traditional Chinese food stuffed with glutinous rice, meat and many other fillings and eaten at Chinese dragon boat festival. Because there is no “zongzi” in foreign countries, they do not understand what it is. While there is “cake” in Western culture, the explanation of “zongzi” can make them associate with the corresponding food name and the process of making food. That makes them better understand the meaning of “zongzi” and achieve the functional equivalent translation effect.

**Implication Presentation Method**

Because different countries, different nationalities have different ways of thinking, language expression habits are also different. Some languages express more than their superficial meanings, and their connotative meanings must be revealed in translation. Such as:

I am going to take that good job.

—I'll take that good job.
I am going straight.
— I’m going straight to the point. (Meaning: I’m ready to quit.)

If it is only a word-for-word translation, the implicit meaning of the source language will be ignored, which is difficult for the reader to understand. By this way, it is beneficial for readers to understand the implicit meaning of the source language and achieve functional equivalence.

Conclusion

To sum up, countries and nations with cultural differences use different languages. Language is the carrier of culture, whereas cultural differences also affect the use of language. Therefore, cultural differences should be taken into account in language translation and conversion. According to Tytler, the translation of cultural terms should follow the three principles of translation, adopt reasonable translation strategies and try to achieve Nida’s “functional equivalence” effect. The seven translation methods summarized in this paper are only a superficial discussion of the translation of cultural terms. There are many shortcomings, so more in-depth analysis is waiting for discussion.

References


