

Deculturation in the Translation of Chinese Idioms: Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory in Practice

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Keywords: Nida's F-E Theory, Translation, Chinese Idioms, Deculturation

Abstract: The paper analyzed the common phenomenon of deculturation existing in the translation of Chinese idioms into English with the guidance of Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory. It firstly pointed the tendency of deculturation in the theory. Then it mainly focused on showing examples of deculturation happened in different stages of the whole translation process of Chinese idioms: pre-understanding, understanding and expressing. The deculturation is mostly affected by the adoption of Nida's theory in the translation practice. Finally, the paper stressed the negative effects of the deculturation, and appealed to have better theories adopted in the practice of translating Chinese idioms into English.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, as the international communication becoming more and more popular, people pay more and more attention to intercultural communication. Translation is believed to be a medium of cultural exchange. Cultural connotation in one language should be translated into another cultural form. Chinese language learners or researchers even more deeply have such feelings when compare Chinese with other languages. Chinese idioms, which are considered as the essence of Chinese language, are believed to contain more culture factors than other language styles. Most Chinese set phrases were from old works like *The Four Books* and *The Five Classics*, while most proverbs were created by common people and often passed down orally, etc. They concentrate Chinese culture and reflect it at the same time. They express broad culture with concise words. For instance, most set phrases connected with allusions, and the allusions have their intertextuality. Without the unique culture background of these allusions, idioms will lose their function of transmit complicate information by simple word signals. The following examples show it vividly: “*shi yan*≠eat one's words; *tong zhou gong ji*≠in the same boat; *gu geng zai hou*≠have a bone in one's throat; *zhi zi mo ruo fu*≠It is a wise father that knows his child.” [1]

However, numbers of Chinese-English translations often left readers the impression that the English versions are not as sophisticated as the original Chinese ones. Those English versions have correct semantic meanings but lost the culture hidden behind the Chinese characters. The translations of Chinese idioms often give the readers stronger impression of such kind as idioms condense the most culture. For example, “*da yi qiang huan yi ge di fang*—change one's way every time (he/she does it)”. For this Chinese idiom, its source immediately appears in Chinese reader's mind: Chairman Mao Zedong's experience during Chinese Civil War, and then the reset of the war conditions followed by the understanding of the original meaning, at last the connotation of the words (change one's way every time he/she does it). The process finishes in a very short time. Before the connotation coming into the reader's mind, many things are remembered. These things are the unique culture contained in the Chinese idiom. As for the translated version, nothing can be remembered except its semantic meaning.

2. Functional equivalence theory and deculturation

2.1 Nida's F-E theory

Eugene A. Nida has been a famous translation theorist in the western countries in recent years. His translation theories are widely accepted and used by Chinese translators and scholars abroad. His greatest contribution is the functional equivalence (F-E) theory, which concentrates Nida's experience of Bible translation. In the theory, Nida emphasizes the importance of reader's acceptance in judging the validity of a translation. He primarily states the functional equivalence "in terms of a comparison of the way in which the original receptors understood and appreciated the text and the way in which receptors of the translated text understand and appreciate the translated text" [2]. He points out that "equivalence" cannot be understood in its mathematical meaning of "identity" (exact likeness or sameness) but in terms of "proximity" (nearness, closeness) [2]. Nida's F-E theory offers translators a somewhat standard which may be used to decide whether a translation is good or not. Every translator wants the translation understood by the readers just as the original works.

2.2 The problem of deculturation in the F-E theory

Though Nida's definition of functional equivalence seems clear and in logic at the first sight, problems can be found by careful consideration. In the minimal definition he said the readers of a translation should understand it "to the point that they can conceive of how the original readers of the text must have understood and appreciated it." [2] How can the translation readers reach "the point"? Judging from common reading experience, a person should firstly understand a translation in the way that the original readers understand the text; and then he can "conceive of" it. The core of the issue is that whether the translation readers are willing to understand in that way. If they are willing to do so, then the minimal definition is unnecessary or superfluous; if they are unwilling to do so then the maximal and minimal definition should exchange their places. Therefore, a conclusion can be drawn as: The F-E put target-language readers' willingness at the first place, and to make the readers be willing to accept the translation, so, it requires familiar expression used in a translation (in terms of psychology, people are happy to accept things they are familiar with) and the definite sacrifice is the original culture in the source language.

While offering a standard of judging a translation, Nida also gives the method to reach it--Functional isomorphs. He takes a very commonly used example to explain his way and had shown it vividly. He says "to grow like mushrooms" in English and "growing like bamboo shoots" in Chinese are functional isomorphs [2]. Accordingly, when a translator translates *yu hou chun sun* into English, "to grow like mushrooms" is the best choice. Though English readers and Chinese readers all know that the idioms mean something increases rapidly, in Englishmen's mind "mushrooms" come first while in Chinese's mind are "bamboo shoots". The Chinese people choose "bamboo shoots" instead of "mushrooms" because they grow higher and higher with increasing joints, which indicates a kind of growing prosperity. English readers know nothing about that. So, deculturation will be inevitable.

3. Deculturation in different stages of translating process

Under the guidance of Nida's F-E theory deculturation may happens in whole process of translating: pre-understanding, understanding and expressing of the original text.

3.1 The pre-understanding of the translator may cause deculturation

The translator is the first reader of a text and before reading he has his pre-understanding towards the text. This pre-understanding is from the background culture of the translator which includes his collective knowledge and experience of religion, philosophy and societal structure, etc. This is also known as his "perceptual sets". Perceptual sets provide him with an unconscious mind-set towards the meaning of a text in reading. Idioms are considered has concentrated the most

culture in all language styles. The influence of pre-understanding on the idioms is more obvious than on other styles. Thus pre-understanding is very important in idiom translation. Foreign Chinese researchers are not born in China, and grow up in very different circumstances. They speak in English and think in the western ways, so they have very different perceptual sets from the Chinese translators. Although they have acquired knowledge about China, Chinese and Chinese people by learning, it is not easy for them to acquire the Chinese way of thinking. Some culture can only be understood by Chinese, especially idioms that contains a lot of culture factors, and demand profound command of Chinese culture. Some are naturally and easily understood by Chinese, but can't be accepted or expressed in English or by the western ways of thinking.

In Nida's opinion, naturalism is the result of F-E and natural translation is the best translation. Then, trying to make the translation text read natural to English readers and easily accepted by them, a foreign Chinese researcher will deliberately pay more attention to their pre-understanding. Foreign Chinese researchers are very familiar with the perceptual sets of English readers and they will unconsciously take it into account in their translating process. As a result, the translation is given in the familiar thinking way of those English readers. The thinking way is based on the western culture the English readers believe in. At last, their right to percept the source culture is taken away. For example: "*lai ha ma xiang chi tian e rou*--A toad hankering for a taste of swan. (Yang Xianyi); A case of 'the toad on the ground wanting to eat the goose in the sky'. (Hawkes)" [3] When reading the idiom, Chinese readers will naturally remind of ugly toad and beautiful swan. But in Englishmen's mind the connotations of goose and swan have different associations. Then it seems very natural that Yang Xianyi's uses "swan" while Hawkes' (an American Chinese researcher) translation is "the goose in the sky". The latter one is well done judging from the foreigners' perceptual sets. However, it loses the actual impact of the original words to the readers. That is the appeal of Chinese culture.

3.2 Deculturation in the understanding of denotations and connotations

As most Chinese idioms are from allusions or people's daily life, they have denotation which reflects all the levels of culture. Some relates to an old story like *si mian chu ge*, some is about a very important person in the history like *ban men nong fu*, some are from people's living experience like *yi ru fan zhang*, some are quoted from old works in ancient time like *xuan liang ci gu*, etc. [4] So, a translator needs to have a profound command of Chinese culture to get the denotation of these idioms or he can't understand them thoroughly. Chinese readers will think of these "culture characters" at the first sight of these idioms. But for some foreign Chinese researchers, they acquired these Chinese idioms only by their interpreted connotation. The connotation will be their only understanding. According to Nida's opinion, the reader's response should be paid more attention than other factors. The connotation of Chinese idioms, which believed to have the same function as the original expression, is given by the foreign Chinese researchers. The culture mostly carried by the denotation is neglected with the effect of Nida's equivalence theory.

If the deculturation in the understanding of denotation is omission and deletion; the deculturation in the understanding of connotation will be misunderstanding. The problem most likely happens to the idioms with several connotations, or idioms with commendatory or derogatory sense. The correct understanding to these idioms demands the translator's well command of Chinese language and culture. Language belongs to culture, so culture is the very thing a translator should be familiar with, or deculturation may happen to both Chinese translators and foreign Chinese researchers in the process of understanding. For example, there have been numerous explanations for *the Four Books* and *the Five Classics* since Han dynasty. That means Chinese scholars have different understanding toward the same works. So these works can arouse different readers' associations, and in this situation which meaning to choose will depends on individual translators. According to Nida, a translator should make his translation read naturally to the readers and the readers nearly have the same response to the translated text as the original readers. Therefore, a Chinese translator may choose the most common meaning accepted by general people, while a foreign Chinese researcher probably choose the meaning he understands easily. So, both understandings are neither

as deep as the original text, nor as complete as it is.

3.3 Deculturation in the process of expressing

Just as understanding is to choose meaning from the original language, expressing is to choose words from the target language. Translators use different translation strategies while choosing the target words. Foreignizing as a translation strategy designates the type of translation in which a target text deliberately breaks target conventions by retaining something of the foreignness of the original. People who support foreignizing insist that translation should avoid culture barriers and culture clash, translators should try their best to make the source language (SL) message near to the target language (TL) readers as the TL readers always understand the translation according to their own culture concepts. The strategy has the same direction as Nida's F-E theory. To be clearer, Nida's F-E theory is the theoretical foundation of foreignizing. Under the guidance of foreignizing, translators use free translation in the translating of idioms may the problem of deculturation. The comparison of Cyril Birch's and Zhang Guangqian's translation of *The Peony Pavilion* clearly shows it clearly. For example: [5]

*Qian shan di hou shan dui, tuo bei; qian gong she nu zuo rener, bas hi;
Yi lian shi lai ge nuo lai hui, lou di; you shi die zuo xiu qiuer, gun qi.*

Birch's translation:

*Hillocks rising bump on bump, back a hump;
surely an archer drew his bow to make me so;
take ten steps to walk along, nine go wrong;
stumble, tumble, roll and fall in a ball.*

Zhang's translation:

*A stomach caved, a bent back raised—a humpback.
Like a bow drawn to its full extent, I pose.
Walking back and forth a dozen times, I stagger.
Sometimes I trip and spiral down the street—a ball.*

The original text is consisted of four two-part allegorical sayings. Birch translates it into an English amusing poem, which may make the English readers feel humorous and amusing. In fact, it is the impression that the actor wants to leave in Chinese people's mind. Birch's translation can be called "functional isomorphs" as these expressions have the same function as the original Chinese text. So, it is clear that he does free translation with the foreignizing strategy which actually is under the guidance of Nida's F-E theory. But two-part allegorical sayings are a unique style of Chinese language. They contain a lot of figurative imagination besides humor. The sentence structure is very stable for the latter part is the stated meaning of the former metaphor. The metaphors reflect the rich living experience of Chinese people. Most of them can't find their equivalences in English. Consequently, deculturation in Birch's translation is an actual fact. Compared with Birch's translation, Zhang's expression has paid more attention to retain the form of the idioms, and as a result express them with exact and complete meanings. But two-part allegorical sayings are a unique style of Chinese language. They contain a lot of figurative imagination besides humor. The sentence structure is very stable for the latter part is the stated meaning of the former metaphor. The metaphors reflect the rich living experience of Chinese people. Most of them can't find their equivalences in English. Consequently, deculturation in Birch's translation is an actual fact. Compared with Birch's translation, Zhang's expression has paid more attention to retain the form of the idioms, and as a result express them with exact and complete meanings.

4. Conclusions

Above all, deculturation is a very common phenomenon in the translation of Chinese idioms. The deculturation does not only weaken the aesthetic appeal of Chinese language, but also have negative effect on Chinese and western culture. On one hand, the diluted Chinese culture can't be accepted or even understood by foreigners, so it won't be spread and developed properly. At last, as time goes by, it will face the danger of disappearing. The Chinese idioms will face the same destiny

as the Chinese culture. On the other hand, the western readers have no way to understand Chinese culture in the idioms. It is impossible for them to accept the culture. Then the western culture has lost a chance to be enriched. As such, it will be difficult for the western culture to join the merging of the world's culture. Nowadays more and more scholars and translators have paid attention to the issue. Some solutions have been offered. As for translating practices, some scholars emphasize the method of using literal translation with added explanation. For theory, there is no suitable one till now. Nida's functional equivalence theory, as the paper pointed above, can't avoid deculturation and sometimes even make the situation worse. So, the translators really need a suitable translation theory, which may lead translation to its best in the inter-cultural communication.

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