

Application of Borrowing Translation Approach to English Idioms in View of Figurative Meanings

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Abstract: It is idioms in a language that always have rich cultural connotation and national flavor. Translating idioms is quite hard because only a few English idioms have equivalents in Chinese idioms due to linguistic, especially cultural differences. Research indicates that there are six translation tactics in translating English idioms into Chinese: borrowing, compensatory translation, literal translation, free translation, explanatory translation, integrated approach. This paper aims to propose the borrowing translation approach, one of indispensable and important tactics to Chinese translation of English idioms based on Nida's dynamic equivalence. It is known that a reasonable choice and the quality of translation are decided by the translator's cultural awareness and creativity. In this paper, borrowing translation approach to English idioms in the perspective of figurative meanings of idioms will be discussed, hoping to cast some enlightenment on further research in this field.

1. Introduction

It is a fact that there exist many cultural similarities between English and Chinese cultures, which can also be found in idioms. On the one hand, when idioms of the source language (SL) are similar to those of the target language (TL) in terms of choice of words, collocation and social meanings, according to Nida's dynamic equivalence theory, translation becomes easy because of the positive influence of cultural similarities. On the other hand, owing to unique expression habits, living customs, historical and literary allusions, the same view of nature, human being and interpersonal relationship can be expressed differently. In translating these idioms, borrowing is a better strategy.

2. Using Borrowing Approach to Convey Implicated Meanings

Borrowing refers to the practice of borrowing corresponding idiom in the target language. Nida once states that finding satisfactory equivalents for idioms is one of the most difficult aspects of translating^[1]. Because no two idioms in English and Chinese are completely identical and idioms are usually rather culture-specific, that is, they depend very much upon a specific social or ecological setting. However, since people of two cultures share the same social experiences, emotions and feelings about the things in the universe, some idioms in one language have equivalents in another language.

Some English idioms correspond to Chinese idioms both in form, image, figure of speech and meaning. On this occasion coincidence, the translator can resort to borrowing. For instance, “fish in troubled waters” can be translated into “hún shuǐ mō yú, chèn huǒ dǎ jié” and “The boy was between a rock and a hard place; he had to go home and be whipped, or stay in town all night and be picked up by the police.” is translated into “zhè hái zǐ jìn tuì liǎng nán, tā yào me huí jiā āi dǎ, yào me zài zhèn shàng guò yè bèi jǐng chá zhuā qù” in Chinese. During the translation, it is better to discover the idioms in the TL which contain the similar contents, forms, metaphors or other rhetoric devices with the SL. They usually have the same literal meaning or figurative meaning and convey the same implicated meaning. That is to say, when such idioms in two languages embedded

with the same cultural information, borrowing method of translation can be employed. It can be illustrated from two aspects.

3. Similar English and Chinese Idioms

3.1 Idioms with Similar Literal or Figurative Meanings

When literal or figurative meanings of English and Chinese idioms are similar, and their implicated meanings are the same, a translator can find equivalents in the TL in translating idioms of the SL, thus he can borrow synonymous idioms from another language.

For example, “easy come, easy go” can find its equivalent in Chinese: “lái dé róng yì, qù dé kuài”. “Strike while the iron is hot” has its equivalent in Chinese: “chèn rè dǎ tiě”. The equivalent of “cut the coat according to the cloth” in Chinese is “kàn bù cái yī”. “Practice makes perfect” is “shú néng shēng qiǎo” in Chinese. “Like father, like son” is “yǒu qí fù bì yǒu qí zǐ”. “Rack one’s brain” is “jiǎo jìn nǎo zhī, wā kōng xīn sī”. “A stitch in time saves nine” is “yī zhēn jí shí shěng jiǔ zhēn”. “A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush” is “shuāng niǎo zài lín bù rú yī niǎo zài shǒu”. “All is not gold that glitters” is “fā guāng de wèi bì dōu shì jīn zǐ”. “The best fish swim near the bottom” is “hǎo yú jū shuǐ dǐ” in Chinese. And “All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full” is translated into “bǎi chuān guī hǎi ér hǎi bú yíng” in Chinese.

We can find out the crossing-point between English and Chinese idioms in this way, which is the common sense shared by two countries’ peoples. This skill can adequately express the common crystallization of wisdom of the oriental and occidental people. Take the following idioms which borrow Chinese idioms to translate English idioms for instance:

“The news that the company was closing down came as a bolt from the blue to the staff.” is translated into “gōng sī yào dǎo bì de xiāo xī, duì gōng sī zhí yuán lái shuō shì gè qíng tiān pī lì”. The English idiom “a bolt from the blue” which means “a sudden, unexpected misfortune, ‘a bolt’ here is ‘a thunderbolt’; ‘the blue’ is ‘the cloudless sky’”; or “suddenly and unexpectedly (not necessarily with reference to a misfortune)”^[2], is translated into “qíng tiān pī lì”, the metaphors are similar, both mean unexpected vicissitudes, and the shared knowledge of the two languages here is happily coinciding and the cognitive environment between the two peoples has a happy resonance. So, borrowing is used in translating it.

“Be careful what you say in Mr. White’s office; walls have ears there and his clerks are apt to know too much of one’s business.” means “nǐ zài huái tè xiān shēng bàn gōng shì shuō huà yào xiǎo xīn, gé qiáng yǒu ēr, tā de bàn shì rén yuán huì bǎ bú gāi tīng de yě tīng le.” in Chinese. In this sentence, “Walls have ears” is similar to the Chinese idiom “gé qiáng yǒu ēr”, both in the metaphor and in the imagination. Things like this prove that language is “universal” in some degree. It is proper for the translators to translate by borrowing for this kind of idioms. The only rule or limitation is to try to preserve the national coloring and not to lose it in doing so. And the only foundation is to pay attention to the cognitive environment of the target language audience and do the work according to the relevance principle.

3.2 Idioms with Different Literal or Figurative Meanings

When literal meanings or figurative meanings of English and Chinese idioms are a bit different, but their implicated meanings are the same, a translator can also borrow idioms from Chinese in translating English idioms. Such idioms as “Among the blind the one-eyed man is king” is translated into “shān zhōng wú lǎo hǔ, hóu zǐ chēng bà wáng” in Chinese. “Put all one’s eggs in one basket” has its equivalent in Chinese: “gū zhù yī zhī”. “All is fish that comes to one’s net” is translated into “zhuā dào lán lǐ biàn shì cài”. “Neither fish nor fowl” is “fēi lú fēi mǎ”. “Make a mountain out of a molehill” is “xiǎo tí dà zuò”. “With one’s heart in one’s mouth” is “tí xīn diào dǎ

n, niē yī bă hàn” in Chinese. The equivalent of “no smoke without fire” in Chinese is “wú fēng bù qǐ làng”, “fire” becomes “wind”, and “smoke” is changed to “wave” when translating. “Kill the goose that lays the golden eggs” can find its equivalent in Chinese: “shā jī qǔ luǎn”, “goose” becomes “hen” when it is translated into Chinese. “Like a cat on hot bricks” is “rè guō shàng de mǎ yǐ” in Chinese, “cat” is changed to “ant” in translating.

Another example, “spend money like water” can be literally translated into “huī jīn rú tǔ” (to throw money about like dirt). “Water” is changed to “dirt” in translating. The Chinese idiom “huī jīn rú tǔ” expresses the same idea with “spend money like water” but employ different image, all this can be accounted for by the difference in geographical condition or living environment between U.K and China. Since English and Chinese are languages under two markedly different regional cultures, Chinese culture is typically a farming culture while England is an island surrounded by the ocean, which has a long history of navigation. Therefore, the idioms in both languages have regional features. In this idiom, “water” is translated into “tǔ” in Chinese but not “shuǐ”, because China has long been a large country chiefly based on agriculture, and an overwhelming majority of people lives in the rural areas, Chinese people regard “tǔ” as the most important thing in their life. So, “water” is replaced by its equivalent “tǔ” to convey the same cultural information in order to make a better understanding of “spend money like water”. Here are some more examples:

There was little or no surprise that a play of mine should be so appallingly bad, for, in their minds at least, I had never been anything but a flash in the pan, a playboy whose meteoric rise could only result in an equally meteoric fall into swift oblivion. (N. Coward, Present Indicative)

Wǒ de jù běn zāo dé bú néng zài zāo, zhè méi yǒu shí me qí guài de, yīn wéi wǒ zhī bù guò shì gè tán huā yī xiàn de rén wù, zhì shǎo zài tā men xīn mù zhōng shì rú cǐ, shì yī gè yī bù dēng tiān yòu tū rán yī luò qiān zhàng, hěn kuài biàn yān mò wú wén de huā huā gōng zǐ ér yǐ.

English idiom “a flash in the pan” means “a sudden, apparently brilliant effort that fails; sudden brilliant success that lasts only a short time and is not repeated” or “sudden display of what seems effective action, success, etc., which, however, is only transitory”, which expresses the same idea with Chinese idiom “tán huā yī xiàn” but employs different image, “a flash in the pan” comes from the old flint-lock gun. The “pan” was the place where a small quantity of gunpowder was exploded to ignite the charge in the barrel. If it failed to do this, there was only a “flash” in the “pan”^[2].

Although the literal or figurative meanings of English idioms are a bit different from their Chinese equivalents, their implicated meanings are the same, a translator can borrow idioms from Chinese in translating these kinds of English idioms. Take “cut the Gordian knot” as an example:

If agreement failed, as it often does in revolutionary times, then, however reluctantly, he would cut the Gordian knot, for the nation’s government must be carried on. (G. M. Trevelyan, History of England)

Rú gé mìng shí qī cháng fā shēng de nà yàng, xié yì yào shì pò huài le, nà me, bù guǎn zěn me bù yuàn yì, tā yě dé kuài dāo zhǎn luàn má, yīn wéi guó jiā xíng zhèng bù néng zhōng duàn.

“Cut the Gordian knot” means “end a difficulty by using a vigorous or violent method, esp. instead of the usual method, solve a problem by forcefully direct but unorthodox methods” or “solve a complicated difficulty by quick and drastic action”^[2], which is similar in its implicated meaning to that of Chinese idiom “kuài dāo zhǎn luàn má” or “dà dāo kuò fù”. Though the literal or rhetoric meanings of both English and Chinese idioms are a bit different, their implicated meanings are the same. Thus, borrowing can also be employed in translating these kinds of idioms.

4. About Figurative Meanings

If each term is assumed to have some primary or central meaning, then the term may also have other “literal” meanings which are relatively close to the central one through the sharing of important components. A word may have additional meanings assigned to it which are very different in every essential aspect from the primary one; and where the link is not through essential components, such meanings are called “figurative.” Though the distinction becomes blurred at the margins, it provides the basis for our intuition that some meanings are actually closer and some more remote. Because figurative extensions are based upon some supplementary component in the primary meaning which becomes essential in the extended meaning, and because they are often arbitrary and conventional, they are almost always specific to a particular culture and language.^[3]

The figurative sense of any term rests on the fact that it has an almost entirely distinct set of components, but that it also has a link to the primary sense through some one component, usually a supplementary one. This supplementary component can be actually relevant to the referent of the primary sense, or only conventionally assigned, but in either case it is not one of the essential, distinctive features by which the primary sense is distinguished from others^[4].

As in the case of idioms, there are three situations in which figurative expressions are involved in the transfer process: A. shifts from figurative to nonfigurative usage, e.g., “possess the gate” is changed to “possess the city”; “my flesh” is changed to “my race”; “taste death” becomes “die”; B. shifts from one type of figurative expression to another figurative expression, e.g., “heart” changed to “liver” (as in a number of African languages); “praise the Lord with the tongue” changed to “praise the Lord with the lips”; C. nonfigurative expressions changed to figurative ones, e.g., “to trust” rendered as “to lean on”^[4]. As it is shown in the above examples.

5. Conclusion

Nida points out: “Translating is essentially a process of communication and this means that a translator must go beyond the lexical structures to consider the manner in which an intended audience is likely to understand a text, because so much depends on the underlying presuppositions of the respective source and target cultures.”^[4] In his opinion, “in such a translation, one is not so concerned with matching the receptor-language message with the source-language message, but with the dynamic relationship, that the relationship between receptor and message should be substantially the same as that which existed between the original receptors and the message”^[5].

To some extent, there is always some loss or skewing of meaning in intercultural communication. However, by using borrowing, the literal meaning, figurative meaning and implicated meaning in the translated text remain the same with the original text without alterations. The translated text has the style of the original text and is very easy to understand. It helps to reach one of our purposes of translating: to keep such disparities at a minimum. This paper is only a preliminary research on borrowing translation approach to English idioms under the consideration of figurative meanings of idioms. It is believed that further research and more explorations in this field are worthy and have great significance.

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