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Cultural Gaps & Untranslatability

Introduction

Culture means the total way of life of a people. According to the anthropologist, Sir Edward Tylor, culture is "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, arts, laws, morals, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Sir Edward Tylor, 1979: 13-14). Language is a carrier of culture, and culture is the soil that nourishes language, "the impact of culture upon a given language is something intrinsic and indispensable" (Hu Zhuanglin, 2001: 223). Translation plays as a bridge in inter-cultural communication. The modern functional translation theory defines translation as an act of communication, the main aim of which is to establish communication between members of different culture in accordance with a previously determined communicative target purpose. (Vermeer, 1983, also Christine Nord, 1997) Vemeer views translation as primarily a cross-cultural communication transfer and cross-culture event. (1986) This view on translation actually requires translators to be both bilingual and pluricultural. Wang Zuoliang points out "translation involves language as well as culture. A translator should know foreign culture as well as the culture of his own people" (Wang, 1984: 1). The study of translation is based on the research of culture and language. Overlapping cultural elements constitutes a basis for inter-lingual translation; however, "the concepts… of one language may differ radically from those of another" (Culler, 1976: 21-2), so the elements that are specific to a particular culture, namely, cultural gaps, sometimes make inter-lingual translation impossible. The paradox of translatability and untranslatability has been existing since the first translated works appeared, and the debate on it has continued on and on.

Unfortunately, the study on translatability and untranslatabilty, especially those in the context of culture studies did not receive desirable attention until the latter part of the 20th century. J. C. Catford, a well-known linguist and translator raised the issue of untranslatability in 1965. He argued that linguistic untranslatability was due to the difference in the source language (SL) and the target language (TL), whereas cultural untranslatability is due to the absence in the TL of relevant situational features. Eugene A. Nida, a well-known American linguist, translator, and theorist of translation, presents a rich source of information in his works about the problems of loss in translation, in particular about difficulties encountered by the translators when facing with the problem that culture specific expressions do not exist in the TL, and concludes that perfect translation is impossible. William Reyburn rightly points out, " In fact, difficulties arising out of the difference of culture constitute the most serious problems for translators

and have produced the most far-reaching misunderstandings among readers." (Reyburu, 1981: 2) In China today, culture studies have become a fashion. Wangbin in his article named On translatability: Theoretical Reflections and a Case study differentiates two approaches to translation studies, the empirical and transcendental, and argues the latter as the way to theorize translation. In the article, he focuses on the theoretical analysis on the untranslatability through the study of a poem of Tang Dynasty, "Jing Ye Si" (静夜思) written by the great poet Li Bai. Another scholar in China, Wang Yahou who favors the idea that the introduction of Chinese poetry to foreign countries through translation is an indispensable part of inter-cultural exchanges insists that poems are untranslatable theoretically: the original flavor cannot be conveyed in another language.

However, their discussion and research are either unsystematic or just focus on one specific area, such as poetry translation. This paper is attempting to explore untranslatability in the perspective of cultural comparison, to be specific, non-equivalence in the TL, semantic association, and other culture-related factors. In this paper, some strategies dealing with untranslatability are proposed and the fact is discussed that untranslatability is becoming more and more relevant to the increasing inter-cultural contact.

Non-equivalence in the Target Language

Culture is universal. In the evolutionary history of human race, people in every culture confront the same basic life situation and challenges. They must all find ways to feed, clothe, and shelter themselves, to deal with illness and death, to find relationships that sustain and protect them, and to find ways of expressing themselves as individual. There are acts that threaten and hurt people in all cultures—thus all cultures have strong sanctions against such acts as murder, robbery, rape, and incest. In addition, all cultures have deeply held values and norms about the distribution of power, individual freedom, and loyalty to the social group, how to deal with novel and ambiguous situations, and the way in which roles in the culture should be divided up. So it is natural that all cultures share some overriding similarities.

Once we accept that culture is universal, differences start to surface from the confrontation of cultural deposit in the process of translation from one language to another, making it impossible to recapture the relationship of the source text of the source culture. This chapter aims to approach culturally loaded expressions in two levels, namely, zero of equivalent word and conflict of word meaning.

1.1 Zero of Equivalent Word

Zero of equivalent word means in the target language, there is no direct equivalent of an expression existing in the source language because of different life experience, custom and tradition, religion and philosophy. Millions of examples of lack of vocabulary equivalence can be found in the course of translation between two languages. Some of the problems caused by the lack of vocabulary equivalence were much more serious than the frequently quoted example of the Japanese "mokusatsu" (to ignore or to withhold comment) in the World War Ⅱ.

Those who live in the same community may encounter the problem that one's idea means nothing to another, let alone the people who belong to two vastly different cultures. The problem poses a great difficulty to inter-language translating. For example, it may never snow in a tropical country, so it is natural that there is no such a concept of "snow'' in the local people's language as well as in their

experiences. How can the word be translated into their language? Somebody may argue that we can define the term "snow" (for example, "when the temperature drops below zero degree, the vapor in the air will congeal and form a kind of white crystalline solid in the hexagon, which will fall on the ground") with the local language, however, the scene, feelings, association, symbolic meaning aroused by snow can never come into their mind. In contrast, the Eskimo, who live in the polar region, have numerous words to describe snow. Similarly, we cannot translate all these words into Chinese or English directly.

Analogous problems are also caused by different custom and tradition. For instance, the Spring Festival, Chinese lunar New Year, is the most important traditional festival for Chinese people. Customarily, through China, "年糕" (Nian Gao), a traditional food is made in a great variety of shapes and favors, the foreigners may realize that it is a kind of food with the explanation "a thick steamed pudding of glutinous rice", but they seldom come aware of the best wishes that underlies the term "年糕", which suggests "growing up and prospering in the new year". Indeed, some words and expressions profoundly imbued with unique cultural elements do cause translating problems. As a country of ceremonies, the Chinese language possesses a great number of self-depreciating expressions, such as 鄙人 (Bi Ren), 寒舍 (Han She), 拙文 (Zhuo Wen), 贱内 (Jian Nei), 老朽 (Lao Xiu), etc. These terms come from a long tradition of keeping a low profile and refraining from showiness. Contrary to this understatement of one's own value, the Chinese people show profuse respect, perhaps too bombastic to the western mind, for others: 拜读 (Bai Du), 大作 (Da Zou), 大札 (Da Zha), etc. Liu Yingkai argues this is due to the Chinese tendency to obey Politeness Principle of Cooperation. (Liu, 1991) In such cases, translators can hardly expect English readers to respond with ease and comfort to a word-for-word translation of the Chinese terms.

A third kind of culture-specific expression derives from philosophical and religious tradition. Traditional culture throughout Asian countries such as India, Tibet, Japan, China, Korea, and Southeast Asia has been profoundly influenced by such religious and philosophical system as Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism and Taoism. On the other hand, the Western nations have historically followed the Greek and the Judaeo-Christian traditions. As a result, it is inevitable to encounter the problem of untranslatability when such expressions appear as 阴阳 (Yin Yang), 八卦 (Ba Gua), 五行 (Wu Xing), etc. These terms are so deeply rooted in Chinese culture that they are meaningless out of the cultural setting. There are no—never were—any equivalence in English: target readers have to accept the transliterated terms in order to gain insight into Chinese culture. Similarly, some terms in the Bible always become barriers when an attempt is made to translate them into Chinese. For example, the terms Samaritan, Moses, Messiah may even be meaningless to many of our Chinese.

1.2 Conflict of Word Meaning

"Word meaning is made up of various components which are interrelated and interdependent. These components are commonly described as types of meaning. Two main types of word meaning are grammatical and lexical." (Zhuang Yunyin, 1987: 147) Generally speaking, lexical meaning may be subdivided into conceptual meaning, connotative meaning, social or stylistic meaning and effective meaning. Then there comes the question that we can find a direct equivalent word, which shares literal meaning with the word in the TL, but the connotative meanings of the two words may be in conflict. The best example of illustrating this point is "自由主义" and its seeming counterpart "liberalism". The

Chinese term "自由主义" first appeared in the famous essay entitled反对自由主义, written by the late Chairman Mao Zedong. In the essay, Mao listed 11 types of Chinese brand "自由主义", and pointed out their harm to the revolution and the Communist Party of China. Since then the words has been always regarded as having a derogatory meaning, and is criticized at various occasions. As a political tradition the term liberalism/liberal has varied in different countries. In England—in some senses the birthplace of liberalism/liberal—the liberal tradition in politics has centered on religious toleration, government by consent personal and especially, economic freedom. In France, liberalism/liberal has been more closely associated with secularism and democracy. In the United States, liberalism/liberal often combine a devotion to personal liberty with an antipathy to capitalism, while the liberalism/liberal of Australia tends to be much more sympathetic to capitalism but less enthusiastic about civil liberties. (http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/liberalism/#phil) Such cases are also true to the terms as "隐私" and "privacy", "资产阶级自由化" and "bourgeois liberalism", "个人主义" and "individualism", etc.

From the above analysis, "the acceptance of culture is possible, because human beings all live on the same planet, the Earth, and they share more or less similar aspects of culture; yet the acceptance of culture is usually incomplete, because it is limited by the diversity in three categories of culture and particularly by the diversity in language-culture and mental culture" (Chen Hongwei, 1993: 257). So it is natural that an absolute equivalence cannot always be found between the SL and the TL in the process of translating.

Semantic Association

Semantic association is an emotional reaction arising in a reader's mind and consciousness when he encounters a concrete word. It is formed in a particular cultural environment, so it is impossible to get rid of its national brand. "No man ever looks at the world with pristine eyes. He sees it edited by a definite set of customs and institutions and ways of thinking." (Ruth Benedice, 1952: 141) In Chinese, for instance, the term "vinegar" is often another name for jealousy, e.g. 吃醋. In English, however, the word is connotative of ill-tempered speech, character, etc. One may say that someone's remarks are "made with a strong note of vinegar". "Sour" or "vinegar" means in English "bad-tempered", "peevish", "ill disposed or bitter", but in Chinese "sourness" or "being sour" is connected with pedantry, so a pedantic scholar is often said to be a "sour" one. Д.Н.Шмелёв, a Russian linguist points out that the concrete and tangible association which has a regular connection with the concepts of some phenomenon in the world, is always reflected in the vocabulary with a certain method. (1977) As a result, due to different modes of thinking, aesthetic preference, and natural environment, the problem of untranslatability is unavoidable. Mr. Zhu Guangqian in his article entitled On Translation points out that "the most difficult to understand and translate is the association meanings in the foreign literature…" "It has a special emotional atmosphere, which is very deep, broad and delicate. And it can't be found in the dictionary, but is extremely important to literature." (Zhu, 1985) In this chapter, an attempt is made to exemplify the above problem by analyzing the translation of plant words, animal words, and color words.

2.1 Semantic Associations of Plant Words

Green plants on the earth are the symbol of life. The human race is closely linked with plants, and they

coexist inter-dependently. The human race relies on the plant to last and develop; some species of plant have been improved through artificial cultivation. Accordingly, the human being entrusts varied symbolic meanings to plant according to their shapes, colors, and characteristics. For instance, the term "松", an ever green tree, makes people associate pine needle, pinecone, pine nut, the soughing of the wind in the pines…even squirrel, grouse. However, the plant will arouse different semantic association to people in a particular culture. In Chinese culture, the word has a special meaning, as early as two thousand and five hundred years ago, Confucius, a great philosopher in ancient China highly praised the spirit of pine as "岁寒，然后知松柏之后凋也。" (When it becomes cold, we know pine and the cypress are the last to lose their leaves). Many poets in Chinese history praised pine in their poems, such as:

奇言谢霜雪，真心自不移。(People all say thanks to frost and snow with wonderful words, for they make them see the noble characters of pines, and their love for pines is eternal. Li Delin, a famous scholar in Sui Dynasty)

百尺无寸枝，一身自孤直。(The body of pine is so straight that there are no surplus twigs on it. Chen Ziang, a well-known poet in Tang Dynasty)

Gradually, the upright and unyielding image of pine tree was formed in Chinese people's mind. Besides it is regarded as a symbol of longevity because it is lastingly green. In the revolutionary times of China, it became the symbol of the revolutionaries' noble character and sterling integrity: For instance, Chen Yi, a late great Chinese general, wrote a poem: "大雪压青松，青松挺且直；欲知松高洁，待到雪化时。" (Heavy snow lay its weight on pines, the pines still keep straight. If you want to know the noble and unsullied character of the pines, wait the time when the snow melts) to commend the revolutionists.

2.2 Semantic Associations of Animal Words

Animals are friends of human beings. Languages of all nations contain a lot of words denoting animals, so do Chinese and English. Along with the development and progress of human society, many animals were tamed to become people's pet animals. So animals have become part of people's life. As science develops, people learned more and more about animals. Zoological gardens are now necessary scenes in many major cities all over the world. Hundreds of thousands of books on animals have been published, including many fairy tales in which animals are personified. Every TV station broadcasts special programs about animals in certain channels. In all this process animal words gradually got their established connotation in all languages. People associate their feelings and emotions even happenings and natural phenomena with various animals, which are thought to represent people's different characters, or serve as omens. Many animals have symbolic meaning in people's thinking, and this symbolism is reflected in the language. Sayings like "as cunning as fox" appear in many languages. However, because of different history and culture, the connotation of animal words in one language does not necessarily coincide with that of in another, which poses difficulty to translating. The typical example to illustrate this point may be "cricket". In Chinese, the animal makes us feel bleak, chilly, lonely and sad. In Shi Jing, the earliest poetry in Chinese literature, crickets were described as the setting of the hard life of the poor peasants. Afterwards, the animal appeared as a dreary and sad image in Chinese literature without exception. For instance,

独身旦而不寐兮，哀蟋蟀之宵征。(I cannot get sleep all the night, the chirping of crickets makes

me feel more sorrow. Su Yu, Chu kingdom)

蛩 (cricket) 唱如烟波，更深似水寒。(The chirping of crickets is like mist-covered water, and it is deeper and chiller than cold water. Du Mu, Tang Dynasty)

但闻四壁虫声唧唧，如助余之叹息。(I can only hear the chirping of the crickets, which is a companion for my sigh. Ouyang Xiu, Song Dynasty)

Gradually, the stereotyped image was formed in Chinese people's mind and deepened with time. Yuan Haogu, a poet of Jin Dynasty made a summary of the image of cricket as "切切秋虫万古情" in his works entitled On Poetry. On the contrary, in western countries, cricket has no such sentimental colors. It is regarded as the symbol of a merry image. It usually brings the feelings of quietness, comfort and happiness. There is a saying, which comes from Shakespeare that goes like "as merry as a cricket". Now I would like to quote some examples in Anglo-American literature to explain this point.

I have not had all the luck I expected; but … am as merry as a cricket. (C. Kingsley, Two Years Ago)

Where by the evening hearth contentment sits

And hears the crickets chirp" (R. Southey, Hymn to Penates)

And I shall have some pace there, for peace comes dropping slow,

Dropping from the veils of morning to where the crickets sing, … (W. Yeats, The Lakes Isle of Innisfree)

From the above, it can be concluded that crickets have different, but fixed image in Chinese and English.

2.3 Semantic Associations of Color Words

The world is colorful, and color makes the world lovely. Scientific research shows that there are 7,000,000 colors that can be identified in the world. However, there are only less than one hundred color words. The Chinese and English people share the same opinion on the classification of the seven basic colors, namely, red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet. Because of the universality of culture, and the tendency of cultural convergence, people from different nationalities may entrust similar or even the same meaning to color words. For instance, red symbolizes joyness, enthusiasm and happiness in English speaking countries as well as in China. When the Spring Festival falls, the Chinese people always decorate their house with red lanterns, wearing red dress. And in western countries, the Christmas Day and other holidays are called red-letter days. Besides, in many countries, a red carpet is always used to welcome the most distinguished guest. When red is applied to describe feelings, in Chinese, we say "脸红" to express "shyness", correspondingly, in English, there is "become red-faced" and "he turned red". Nevertheless, the case is not always the same when the cultural gaps are involved. An interesting phenomenon may be noticed that during the APEC summit in Shanghai, most of the Asian leaders chose red traditional Chinese costume, which they thought symbolized "luck" and "fortune", while those western leaders chose the blue ones, because they thought that red means blood and excitement and was not suitable for this occasion. Such cultural gaps are also reflected in translation. For instance, the cultural connotation underling "红包"，"红娘" can never be translated unless the target readers are familiar with the cultural background.

Semantic association, as a psychological phenomenon, is "a kind of connection between concepts determined by cultural presuppositions, that is to say, another similar, relevant or opposite concept will appear in one's mind because of the emergence of one concept" (Москва, 1964: 303). There is usually much relevant information concerning one concept stored in one's mind, and it may appear in people's mind through association when it is necessary. Due to different cultural presupposition of varied nationalities, the corresponding words, which are used to express the same concept in different languages usually do not share the same background knowledge, and reflect cultural gaps. As a result, some words with specific connotation are untranslatable, at least they cannot be translated completely, for it may arouse different association, or lose its original flavor.

Other Culture-related Factors

Besides the situations discussed in the first two chapters, there are some other culture-related factors, or linguistic factors that make translation impossible, such as mode of thinking, rhetorical devices, etc.

3.1 Mode of Thinking

Mode of thinking means the way that a thinking subject obtains, processes, and exchanges information. Translation is not only a kind of language activity, but also a kind of thinking activity. Therefore, the process of translating is the process of thinking. On the other hand, the mode of thinking is both universal and individual. Thus it can provide the foundation of translating and reflect individual character. The outstanding reflection of this kind is the expressive form of human language, and the form may become the barrier of inter-cultural communication. Due to the difference of history, ecology, customs and tradition, people coming from different nations may apply different forms of expression. For instance, if we want to express the meaning "一举两得" or "一箭双雕", the English goes as "to kill two bird with one stone", the German, "beide Fliegen mit einer Klappe zu schlagen" (to kill two flies with one pat), the french, "faire d'une pierre deux coups" (to hit two place with one stone), the Russian, "одним вьгстрелом убить двух зайцев" (to kill two rabbits with one shot). It is obvious that the form of expression in different languages of the same idea differs vastly, which may cause the problem of untranslatability. L.Samovar, a famous linguist, has ever given an example as following: a twig breaks because the snow on it is too heavy. An American will say "the twig is weak" while a Chinese says "the twig is strong". The difference derives from their different modes of thinking. Americans think that the branch is broken because it lacks the rigidity and intensity that can supports the snow, it sounds like common sense. However, the Chinese think that strength and weakness are reversible. The twig is so strong that it lacks plasticity and flexibility. As the snow accumulates more and more, the twig breaks finally. If the twig is crooked under the heavy pressure of the snow, the snow is unlikely to pile up to the degree that it can't be beard by the branch, and this is what we call "以柔克刚" (defeats a force with a tenderness).

3.2 Rhetorical Devices

Rhetorical device is another culture-related factor hindering inter-lingual translating. It has been an important subject to use the tactics of the rhetoric appropriately in translating. If the translated text cannot

dispose of the rhetoric tactics that applied in the ST correctly, it will fail to convey the original content, thought, and style, at least it will weaken the appeal of the original text. Both Chinese and English are mature language, which have abundant expressive methods. So there is no doubt that many rhetorical devices are perfectly in harmony or agreement in the two languages. This makes the reproduction and duplication of the rhetorical devices between the SL and the TL possible.

On the other hand, due to the different aesthetic values of the two cultures, people belonging to different cultures have different perception about what is beautiful. As far as literary effect is concerned, what is regarded beautiful in one cultural community maybe just the opposite in another. "The aesthetic preference interferes with the reading and interpretation process." (Korzeniowska & Kuhiwczak, 1995) Therefore, the meaning that translators intend to convey will be constructed differently according to different aesthetic preferences. When this kind of difference reflects in the application of rhetorical devices, the problem of untranslatability will appear. For instance, an aesthetic feature of Chinese, especially in classical Chinese is the steady rhythms of parallel construction. "This feature has been cited by many recent critics as a central principle of composition, and has been put forward as a key to reading and interpretation" (Andrew Plaks, 1990). Though this stylistics is not a tradition unique to Chinese literature, in other languages parallelism is never used as frequently as in Chinese. This is partially because of the traditional Chinese "Yin" (阴) and "Yang" (阳) culture that values the beauty of symmetry. If there is a "Yin", then there must be a "Yang" to balance it. The very typical example of this culture is that the buildings and furniture are either square or rectangular in China. This culture is also reflected in the language. In Chinese vocabulary, there are a very large number of idioms, the-four-character-phrases. If there is no balance in the text, it cannot be regarded as beautiful.

Pun is another rhetorical device that poses difficulty to translating. It is a rhetorical phenomenon existing in many languages; it is witty, humorous and, sometimes bitter. Appropriate application of it can make readers have the associations full of far-reaching meaning. However, pun is very difficult to translate satisfactorily. For instance, in Thomas Hood's poem:

Ben Battle was warrior bold,

And used to war's alarm:

But a cannon ball took off his legs,

So he laid down his arms

"Arm" here is a pun, it means the limb "arm", at the same time, "weapons". Nevertheless, we cannot have the cake and eat it when we translate it. Nowadays, in China many people use the term "歌德派" to refer to the eulogists. However, "歌德" is a translated Chinese name of the German poet, Goethe. If we translate the term into "those given to singing the praise of a person for his or her achievement and virtue", the meaning is clear, but it will lose the wonder of the pun. On the contrary, if we translate it into "school of Goethe", then it will be confusing to foreigners.

To sum up, it is obvious that linguistic untranslatability is actually caused by cultural factors, and it is eventually determined by culture.

Conclusion

The above analysis shows that "translating is a kind of activity which inevitably involves at least two

languages and two cultural traditions" (Toury, 1978: 200). As this statement implies, translators are permanently faced with the problems of how to treat the cultural aspects in a source text (ST) and of finding the most appropriate technique to successfully convey these aspects in the target language. These problems may vary to different degree depending on the cultural and linguistic gaps between the two languages concerned. (Nida, 1964: 130) There is no doubt that great effort should be made to improve the quality of translation work, but there has not been an ideal translated work, and there will not be in the future. What we need is not the fantasy like Utopia, but correct theory that can guide translating practice. To acknowledge the problem of untranslatability does not mean to deny the great achievement that has been made in the field of translating, or to plead for giving up the effort to translate. On the contrary it intends to arouse translators' sense of responsibility and sense of calling. We should press forward in the face of difficulties, and give full play to the subjective initiative and creativity, with better completion of this task. In practice, the study of translating in the context of culture studies is of great importance, whether it is in the fields of foreign language acquisition and teaching or the fields of commerce and politics.

Culture is both static and dynamic. On the one hand, specific cultural references and elements can create problems and challenges for the translators. When two cultures differ vastly, it is very likely that many concepts and words occur only in one culture and thus in one language but not in the other. This will cause the problem of untranslatability between the source and the target texts. On the other hand, culture is dynamic; it is an open system that always interacts with other cultures. With the increasing inter-cultural contact, culture gaps become narrower and narrower, which is very beneficial for inter-lingual translating. Today, nobody holds that the term "sofa" is untranslatable, although it had been untranslatable before the Chinese term "沙发" came into being. Besides, numerous western holidays now are celebrated in many large cities in China. Many foreign countries have accepted Dragon boat race, a traditional Chinese activity. Therefore, translatability and untranslatability are related to each other.

After all, the blending and integration of culture is a process that entails a long time. It cannot be accomplished in one move. And translating work is a matter of practice, while translatability/untranslatability is a matter of theory. So it is necessary to put forward some strategies to deal with the problem of untranslatability. First, translators can keep the word /term or translate the concept literally and add a footnote or explanation within the text. Secondly, they can leave it out but to the detriment of the text and the message, unless s/he uses a substitute concept or word that will evoke a vaguely similar response. Thirdly, leave it to time, waiting for the time when the "cultural obstacles" are removed.

Finally, it should be pointed out that endless debates on transalatability/untranslatability are insignificant unless we spare no effort to explore the cultural and culture-related factors hindering inter-lingual translating, and take initiative actions to promote inter-cultural communication.

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