

## Translation of Idioms from the Perspective of Culture

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**Abstract:** This paper starts the analysis from the culture perspective, analyzing the close relation between idioms and culture, and offers the phenomenon of “culture default”. According to the relation between idioms and culture default, and the features of idioms, the paper proposes three methods for the translation of idioms---semantic translation, equivalent translation and communicative translation.

### 1. Introduction

Research on English idioms began in 1925, which was marked by *Words and Idioms*, written by L.P. Smith. Traditionally, there are many ways to translate idioms, and each idiom can be translated in one way.[1-5] But in most cases, it does not tell clearly which idioms should be translated in which ways. Referring to the essays talking about the translation of idioms, we found that these essays are nearly of the same form, first different kinds of culture, which have influence on the translation of idioms, is presented; then different translation methods are proposed.[6-10] The translation methods mainly include literal translation and free translation. But it does not tell which method should be used in which case. This is a common research phenomenon of the translation of idioms both at home and abroad.

This paper aims to emphasize the close relationship between culture and idioms. According to the classification of idioms and the phenomenon culture default in idioms, the paper puts forward three ways on how to translate idioms.

### 2. Culture and Idioms

#### 2.1 Classification of Idioms

In order to reveal the formations of idioms, which would be easier for the translation of them, idioms should be classified into three kinds according to the relations between different components in them---combination idioms, phraseological idioms and fusion idioms.

Combination idioms refer to the idioms where each word keeps independent meanings, and such idioms can be understood by the literal meaning of each word. Such as “break the record”, means “da po ji lu”, both “break”(da po) and “record” (ji lu) keep their original meanings.

Phraseological idioms mean those idioms which can not be understood by the literal meaning of each word, but to understand such idioms is still on the basis of original meanings of each word. Such as “skate on thin ice”(mao xian), we do not understand the idiom from “skate”(hua bing), and “on thin ice”(zai bo bing shang), but it is understood on the basis of the connotation of “zai bo bing shang hua bing”, which means great danger.

Fusion idioms mean those idioms whose meanings have nothing to do with the meaning of each word. For instance, “apple of somebody’s eye” (zhang shang ming zhu), “skeleton in the cupboard”(jia chou), they can be understood neither by the literal meaning of the word nor according to the original meaning of each word. Instead, they have to be understood by certain stories or historical events connoting in them.

#### 2.2 The Relationship between Culture and Idioms

Culture and idioms are closely related to each other. Culture is the origin of idioms, while idioms

are the best way to show one nation's culture. Culture and idioms are interdependent to each other.

Culture is the origin of idioms. Culture, includes material culture, spiritual culture, plays an enormous role in each aspect of the society, including idioms. For instance, the idiom "Pandora's box" is known to many people. Which originates from a Greek mythology.

Idioms are the best way to show one nation's culture. Again, I would like to take the idiom "Pandora's box" as an example. Perhaps the first sight you might not know what "Pandora's box" stands for. But in order to understand the idioms, you have to make clear the mythology connoted in it. After you have known the mythology, you are sure to understand the Greek culture furthermore.

### **2.3 Cultural Default in the Understanding of Idioms**

Cultural default means some background acknowledge or prior knowledge is omitted when authors communicate with readers. This is an especially common phenomenon in idioms. In this case, idioms are rather difficult for readers of target language to understand.

Idioms are very brief, but they connote rich culture contents, which are not told clearly to readers. For example, "meet one's Waterloo" is very hard for most target readers to understand the first time they see "meet one's Waterloo", because the idiom originated from a historical event. Therefore, in order to learn this idiom, we have to know the story connoted in it. Without knowing about the story, many target readers feel confused about the idioms, and do not know its connotation. Besides, cultural differences exist in different nations, and the difference means the difference of cultural details, which tells that some concepts exist in one culture but not in another culture. For example, "God" is quite familiar to the westerners, but few Chinese believe in "God".

## **3. Translation of Idioms**

### **3.1 Semantic Translation**

Semantic translation can be also called literal translation or word-for-word translation. It aims to express the meaning of the source language exactly according to the structures and semantics of source language. Semantic translation attaches importance to the form and meaning of source language.

For combination idioms, this is a very useful translation method. Though there are many differences between Chinese and English culture, they still have something in common. So people of the two nations might have the same recognitions and feelings when getting to know the same thing in the world. Because of this, semantic translation is appropriate for the translation of combination idioms.

For example:

"to sit on the mountain and watch the tiger fight"

It can be seen that the "to sit on the mountain and watch the tiger fight" is translated literally according to the structure and semantic of the source idiom. It makes no difference with literal translation. Because target readers have the same cognition as English-speakers of the idiom---being a bystander while others are fighting, but after the fight, he would try to seek benefit from the fighters' loss.

"as busy as a bee"

This is also an example of semantic translation, which is translated word for word. Such translation can be conducted, because in both English culture and Chinese culture, bees symbolize being busy. In this case, semantic translation is enough.

Apart from the two examples, there are still many idioms which can be translated in this way:

"like a bull in a china shop"

"to pour oil on the flame"

"to strike while the iron is hot"

"as merry as a cricket"

"walls have ears"

"to sit on pins and needles"

All such idioms are translated by the method of semantic translation, because in both Chinese and English culture, the concepts referred to in those idioms symbolize the same thing, and there is no culture gap for readers of target language to understand.

The translation process of these idioms is on the premise of comprehension, and expression is the key process in translating. On the condition of good comprehension, the expression process will ensure the quality of a translation. Such expression must preserve the original message, the original style and linguistic fluency.

### **3.2 Equivalent Translation**

According to Saussure, language is arbitrary. So for the same thing or the same meaning, different languages have different expressions. Though expressions are various, they signify the same ideations. For example, the English word “tree” signifies the same thing as the Chinese expression “树木”. Idiom is one of the language forms, so some idioms of certain culture can be expressed by their equivalent expressions or idioms of another culture.

For example,

“New brooms sweep clean”

To translate the idiom “New brooms sweep clean”, using the method of semantic translation is impossible, because semantic translation can not tell the connotation of it. However, after the connotation of the idiom is made clear, it would be rather easy for us to think of the Chinese idiom “New brooms sweep clean”, which has the same meanings as it. In this way, Chinese readers are able to understand the English idiom by the Chinese equivalent, which is quite familiar to them. From this example, we can know that to translate the idioms, which have Chinese equivalents, in this way is an extraordinarily good method. It is also an excellent way to solve the problem of culture default.

To conduct idiom translation in this way is not an easy task. Because translators not only have to have a good understanding of the connotations of the source idioms, but also they have to have a good knowledge about the idioms or set expressions of the target language. Only in this way can they connect the equivalents of the two languages together.

### **3.3 Communicative Translation**

Communicative translation can also be called free translation. There are two significant understandings for it. First, communicative translation is regarded as “a translation method for communication taking place in certain social situation”(Hatim&Mason,1990:3). It entirely serves readers or receptors. Second, communicative translation aims to produce the same effect on readers of both the source text and target text(Newmark,1988a:22). That is to say that it delivers information according to the language, pragmatic usage and culture of the target language.

Therefore, for idioms, which do not have equivalents of target culture, communicative translation is a good translation strategy. In this way, readers of target text are enabled to understand the connotations of those foreign idioms by means of their own culture. In this case, cultural default is handled properly.

For example,

“meet one’s Waterloo”

With regard to “meet one’s Waterloo”, there is a history story about it, which tells that Napoleon was defeated thoroughly by Wellington in Waterloo in 1815. However, we did not tell the story to readers, nor do we translate it into “meet one’s Waterloo”, which might rather difficult for readers to comprehend because of culture differences. Instead, translation of “zao dao can bai,yi bai tu di” is not only in accordance with the meaning of the idiom, but also conforming to target readers’ culture and taste.

The idiom originated in England, where ocean industry is highly developed. It originally meant the seamen could steer the ship well in the sea only when they knew how to manipulate the ropes which controlled the sails. If the idiom is translated literally, it would be fairly hard for readers to know its connotations. But if it is translated into “zhi dao di xi”, it is catering to the likes of target

readers.

The translation process is based on the understanding of source culture connoted in source idioms, including historical events, geographical environment, religions, traditions and so on. On this premise, target reader and target culture have to be taken into account. In this way, cultural default does not exist at all for target readers, and it is much simple for them to understand such idioms.

#### 4. Conclusion

As is known, people of different culture have the same recognition of some concepts in the world. This is also reflected in idiom recognition, especially for the recognition of combination idioms. Combination idioms mean the idioms where each word keeps independent meaning, and those idioms can be understood by the literal meaning of each word. Therefore, semantic translation is an excellent strategy to translate such idioms.

To translate phraseological idioms and fusion idioms, different ways have to be chosen according to the features of idioms. For idioms who have equivalents of target culture, the method of equivalent translation is applied. While for those idioms which connote rich culture contents, such as stories and historical events, but the stories and historical events are not told clearly to readers, and the rest idioms, in most cases the method of communicative translation is used.

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