Linguistic and Cultural Barriers in Translation

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This paper deals with the linguistic and cultural barrier between Chinese and English in translation. Aiming at making translation accurate, fluent, and appropriate, the paper argues that great attention should be paid on the differences of language and culture between Chinese and English. These differences restrict the understanding and expressing in translation. As Chinese and English are two different languages and the people live in different cultural societies, the people have different habits and customs, different religious belief, different senses of aesthetic, and different view of history, so in order to make Chinese and English understand each other, when we are doing translating, we should observe the translation criterion so that translation can be accurate, fluent and appropriate, and make it easy for people to understand each other. It accentuates in conclusion that only by breaking down the linguistic and cultural barrier between Chinese and English can translation be accurate, fluent, and appropriate.

Keywords: language barrier, cultural barrier, translation

The Relationship among Language, Culture and Translation

Since culture is defined as “the totality of beliefs and practices of a society”, nothing is greater strategic importance than the language through which its beliefs are expressed and transmitted, and by which most interaction of its members takes place. Different societies have different cultures. Different cultures cause the differences in language understanding and expressing. Nida (1980) once said: “We think the way we think because we talk the way we talk” (p. 10). It is true that the particular structures of a language (sounds, lexemes, syntax, and discourse patterns) reflect to a certain degree the way people think. The way of people’s thinking is determined by their culture. Language and culture influence each other. While for translation, as we all know the meaning of translation is that translating consists in the receptor language the closest natural equivalence of the source language message. It means that when we do translating, we should use the receptor language to express the message of the source language in order to make people who speak different languages understand each other. Translation is influenced by language and culture. As we do translating between Chinese and English, we should consider every difference between these two languages, and we should also take the differences between Chinese and English culture into serious consideration. The differences of language and culture between Chinese and English restrict the quality of translating.

Translation Criteria

According to the explanation of many translators, we can sum up the translation criterion as “accurate, fluent,
and appropriate”.

As Chinese and English are two different languages and the people live in different cultural societies, the people have different habits and customs, different religious belief, different senses of aesthetic, and different view of history, so in order to make Chinese and English understand each other, when we are doing translating, we should observe the translation criterion so that translation can be accurate, fluent, and appropriate, and make it easy for people to understand each other.

Cultural Barriers

Habits and Customs

Britain is an island country, while China is a continental country. Let us take idiom as an example. The idioms in English are often related with water and boat. While in Chinese, the idioms are often related with land. For instance, when we talk about someone who spends money wastefully, in English we can use the idiom “spend money like water” (ӔORIZONTAL), while in Chinese the idiom of the same meaning is “ࣁܦுீੋே”. When we talk about someone who is very powerful, in English we use the idiom “turn the tide” ( *)( ), while in Chinese the idiom of the same meaning is “୆ୌେ”. It is also related with land. Greeting is another clear example. No matter where English people meet with each other, they like talking about weather. Because Britain is an island country, the weather there is very changeable. “Lovely weather isn’t it.” Such kinds of words are very common. While in Chinese, people are used to say “୆ମூେ” which means “How are you” or something about food when they meet. Because in China, there is an idiom “୆୆ே” which means that food is the most important thing for people’s daily life, so talking about eating or drinking something is also a kind of greeting. People like to say “୆ୌେ” or “୆ୌେ”. Even in some provinces, when people meet for the first time, they like to say “୆ୌେ”, “୆ୌେ”, and “୆ୌେ” or something like these. But in fact, people do not really care about whether others have had their meal or not. It is just a kind of greeting. In reply, people often say “୆ୌେ”, “୆ୌେ”. They just thank for the care from other people. In English, the greeting words which have the same meaning as “୆ୌେ” or “୆ୌେ” are just as simple as “How do you do” or “Hi”. If people use some words which are related with food as greeting in English, it will be very strange. If person A asks person B “Have you had your meal”, person B will commonly think that “Do you mean to invite me to have a meal”. If B is a Chinese, it is sure that he will not misunderstand the meaning.

There are lots of other differences of habits and customs between Chinese and English. The difference of the attitudes to dog is a most typical one. In Chinese, dog has a low position. Most Chinese idioms which are related with dog all have derogatory senses, such as “୆ୌେ”, “୆ୌେ”, “୆ୌେ”, “୆ୌେ”, “୆ୌେ”, and “୆ୌେ”, etc.. While in English countries, dog is considered as the most loyal friend to humans. Most English idioms which are related with dog all have commendatory senses. For example, “you are a lucky dog” means “୆ୌେ”, “every dog has his day” means “୆ୌେ”.

Religious Beliefs

Chinese people believe in Buddha and Bodhisattva. The most popular religion in China is Buddhism. Most English people believe in God. In English speaking countries, Christianity is a very popular religion. Differences of culture and language between Chinese and English bring about different religious belief. Let us take a look at
the differences between Buddhism and Christianity. Christianity believes that God dominates the whole universe and God creates all things. In Buddhism, people believe in Buddhist, Bodhisattva, and other gods. But these gods do not dominate universe or create world. In Christianity, God is almighty. God can live forever. God will never disappear. God is always right. God creates truth. God can save all people. While in Buddhism, Buddhist, Bodhisattva, and other gods will die. They make mistakes just like common people. They have no magic power so they just can lead people to find the way how people can save themselves. God is born as a god, and then he becomes human. While in Buddhism, it is just contrary. Buddhist and Bodhisattva are born as common people. When they grow up, they want to change their life and they want to practice themselves, and then they become gods step by step.

Being compared with Buddhism, Christianity is more fair and simple. Everyone who believes in Christianity can be saved. There is no limitation of the jobs that the believers of Christianity do. A Christianity believer can be a business man, a politician, or any other else. They do not need to pay attention on their belief. In Buddhism, there are two types of believers. One type is just common believers. They can have their own jobs. But they still live their own life. Another type is that the believers are monks or nuns. They just eat vegetables. Everyday they pray to Buddha. They practice themselves both mentally and physically. These two types of believers are considered to be two levels in belief. Those common believers can only have good luck in their common life. It is believed that only monks and nuns will get out of abyss of misery in common life, because they devote most energies of their life to practice themselves in mental and physical.

Different religious belief causes lots of differences in culture between Chinese and English. For example, Chinese people say "山川”, while English people say “God bless” (God bless). Chinese people say “佛”, while English people say “God knows” (God knows). In Chinese idioms, there are a lot that are related with Buddhism such as “诸恶莫作，诸善奉行.” In English, there are also such kinds of idioms, for example “God helps those who help themselves” (God helps those who help themselves).

Views of History

There are lots of historical allusions in both Chinese and English. Some Chinese and English words though they have the same literal meaning, according to some historical factors, when we are doing translating, we can not use them directly. For example, Chinese poet LIU Chang-qin (781) wrote the poem “鹧鸪”，and in this poem there is a sentence “鹧鸪飞绝，山影横” (p. 20). The word “鹧鸪” here can not be translated into “white house”, because it will cause people to understand it as the White House in Washington. Then another Chinese poet DU Mu (AD836) wrote the poem “鹧鸪”. In it there is a sentence “鹧鸪飞绝，山影横” (p. 25). The word “鹧鸪” here can not be translated as “green house”. As we know that “green house” means “building with sides and roof of glass, used for growing plants that need protection from the weather” (Greenhouse, greenhouse). While in China, in ancient times “鹧鸪” means “house where men pay to have sex with prostitutes”.

Language Barriers

Lack of Word Meanings

In Chinese, there are a lot of words which is related with the meaning of eating, such as “饭”, “菜”,

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While in English, the phrases which have the same meaning of the above mentioned Chinese words have nothing related with eating. In English, “good for nothing”, “be popular”, “land oneself in serious trouble”, “be unable to stand”, “be unable to bear or support”, “live off one’s past gains”, “be open to persuasion, but not to coercion”, “lead an idle life”, and “be very popular”. There are also some English idioms which are related with eating food. For example, “He has taken the bread out of my mouth”. It is better to translate it into Chinese as “portun” rather than “portun”. In Chinese, the meaning of the English idiom is “portun” or “portun”.

Misunderstanding of Word Meanings

Let us take the translating of business field as an example. Several years ago, there was a lipstick brand called “”. In Chinese, “” is a very beautiful word. When we see the word, we will have the image of a beautiful girl in our mind. But if we transliterate the word “” into the Chinese Phonetic Alphabet as “Fang fang”, when English people see it, it will feel terrible. Because “fang” is an English word which means: (1) along, sharp tooth of a dog; and (2) a snake’s poison tooth. So when English people see the word “fang fang”, they will have the image of ugly, wild dog or poison snake. So, because of the brand name, the lipstick could not sell well.

There is a well-known brand of dry cell called “”. It is all right to translate “” into “white elephant”. But “white elephant” is an English phrase which means “a burdensome possession” or “a useless thing”. So it is also not a good translation.

The soap brand “” seems not strange to Chinese customs. But when it is translated into its English brand name “Bees”, it is not welcomed by most English customs. Because when they are using the soap, they will imagine about the downy thorn of the bee and it will make them feel uncomfortable. Such kind of matter also happened to the poker brand “”. As it is translated into the Chinese Phonetic Alphabet as “Mixupuke”, it is also an improper translation. Because “maxi” and “puke” are two English words. “Maxi” means “very large or particularly big” and “puke” means “vomit”.

The alarm clock brand “” is well-known not only in China but also in other countries. But its translation is still a very serious problem—“golden cock”. As we know that the word “cock” has several meanings and here we should pay attention to two of its meanings: (1) adult male bird of the domestic fowl; and (2) organ with which a male animal copulates and urinates. At first, when “golden cock” was used, the alarm clock could not sell well. Then in order to make the brand name better, the translation has been changed into “golden rooster”. As a result, the alarm clock brand became much more popular than before.

Linguistic and Cultural Barriers in Translation

Translation can be understood as a kind of writing that is restricted by certain rules. Translation is using a language to express the message that is expressed in another language. We should not only focus on the meaning, when we are doing translating, we should pay attention to all things such as the structure of sentence, the style of the passage and something like these. So in order to make translation accurate, fluent and appropriate, we should break down the language and cultural barrier between Chinese and English.
**Accuracy**

Accuracy means that when doing translation, we should accurately understand and analyze the central idea, key point, structure, style, and means of rhetoric of the passage in target language. And we should accurately translate the passage into the receptor language, and make the translation accord with the rule of the receptor language. So if a lot of translators all translate a same passage, everyone has his own expressing way. But first of all, the translation should be accurate. Translators should choose the accurate words in translation. For example, there is a word “࿰ᇝඹཬ੃”, though we can translate it as “the Asian four dragons”, English people would rather use “the Asian four tigers” or “four tigers in Asia”. Because in their mind dragon is something similar to crocodile or snake. It has wings and can pour out fire. It always guards money and valuables. Idioms are also the same. For example, “don’t teach your grandmother to suck eggs”. If we just understand the literal meaning of it and translate it into “҂ေ࢝୆ଯଯ֑॑࠙”, it will surely make readers confused. Then if we translate it into “҂ေϫ૊୫ڦ”, it both expresses the meaning clearly and makes Chinese readers understand easily. There are lots of other idioms such as, “like talking to a brick wall” (ؓ୤֐ౖ ༦ሰϢٮচ) which means to waste one’s breath trying to persuade someone who is so obstinate to listen to reason. For instance, “He is so dogmatic. It’s like talking to a brick wall arguing with him.” “To make bricks without straw” (ె珣଴ູ໭૜ᆭԹ) which means to try to achieve some result with inadequate means. For example, “We were unable to give you an opinion because you didn’t give us the information we needed. We can’t make bricks without straws.” “The rotten apple”(ݝﮐᆭઔ) which means the one bad person among a number of good ones. For example, “His youngest son was the rotten apple.”

Form the translating of these idioms we can see that it is hard to make the English expression and the Chinese expression literally equivalent. So we can say that using accurate words to express the meaning clearly is the first step of doing good translating. For instance, the Chinese character “๨” has several usages: (1) ᆃཬݙ—The baby has got a big head; (2) ���𝛼ᄝ௸๨—She is combing her hair; and (3) ධ൞໡ૌቆ֥๨—He is the head of our group. Only in the first sentence that the English translating has the same usage as the Chinese one. The other two do not translate literally. They just express the meaning clearly.

**Fluency**

Fluency means that translation should not only be accurate but also be fluent and accord with the rule and habit of the receptor language, every part in the article should coordinate well with each other and the expression should be logical. Fluency should be achieved in both structure and logic. For example, in a Chinese sentence “舾.ColumnName”, here “ColumnName” is subject, “.ColumnName” is verb and “columnName” is complement. As we translate the sentence into English: “He walks very fast.” Though the word order is same, “very fast” here is adverbial but not complement. There is another sentence “舾.ColumnName”. In it the adverbial “ColumnName” is before the verb “ColumnName”, while we translate it into English: “I work in the bank of China”, the word order is changed. If we translate it back into Chinese according to the same English word order, the sentence will be “舾.ColumnName”. Chinese and English are different in sentence structure. We should change the word order in order to make translation fluent. For example, “Formerly a worker himself, he is now an engineer”, if we translate it into Chinese according to the English word order, it will be “舾.ColumnName,舾.ColumnName,舾.ColumnName”, and it does not accord with the rule of Chinese. It will be better to translate it as “舾.ColumnName,舾.ColumnName,舾.ColumnName”. Another sentence as
this: “Never before has our country been as united as it is today.” It is better to translate it as “吾国之今，空前之团结也。” There are also some particular sentence patterns we should pay attention to. For example, “All the answers are not right”. It is wrong to translate it as “所有答案均不正确”。 The right translation should be “没有一个答案是对的”。 Then let us look at this sentence “Every of us don’t like him”. The right translation is “我们每一个人都不喜欢他” while it may easily cause us to misunderstand it as “我们一个人都不喜欢他”。 In fact, the expressing way of Chinese and English people is different. As we say “过去” while English people usually say “After you”. It seems just contrary. The view of time of English people is also different from ours. CHEN Zi-ang (696), a poet of Tang Dynasty wrote a poem “《》” (p. 30). Here “过去” means the past time and “未来” means the future. While in English, “back” means the past time and “forward” means future.

So we can see that fluency is also necessary in translation and it should not be separated from accuracy.

**Appropriateness**

Accuracy, fluency, and appropriateness are three necessities that can not separate from each other. Among them appropriateness is the most difficult one to achieve. Appropriateness means that we should show out the manner of speaking even the style of the passage in the target language.

In the American magazine *Business Week* (January 27, 1992) there was an article “A Death Knell at Macy’s”. In it, there was a sentence explaining an elusion picture of it: “CEO Finklestein: He needs to pull a rabbit out of his hat”. The Chinese edition of the magazine translated the sentence as: “CEO Finklestein: 他需要从帽子里掏出一只兔子”。 At that time, Finklestein was the new manager of the company and the company was in a big trouble. He really needed to take something out to save the company. In such a circumstance, the translation expressed the worry of the manager clearly and attracted the attention of readers at the same time.

“The Westminster Abbey” is an essay written by Washington Irving (1840). Here is one paragraph from it:

> On one of those sober and rather melancholy days in the latter part of autumn, when the shadows of morning and evening almost mingle together, and throw a gloom over the decline of the year, I passed several hours in rambling about Westminster Abbey. There was something congenial to the season in mournful magnificence of the old pile, and as I passed its threshold, it seemed like stepping back into the religious of antiquity, and losing me among the shades of former ages. (as cited in ZHAO, 1999, p. 50)

Let us compare two paragraphs of translation: (1) 从未有过的团结。它比“吾国之今，空前之团结也”更好。也有特定的句子模式需要我们注意。例如，“所有的答案都对吗”。它不适合翻译成“所有答案均不正确”。正确的翻译应该是“没有一个答案是对的”。然后让我们来看这个句子“我们每一个人都不喜欢他”。正确的翻译是“我们每一个人都不喜欢他”而它会导致我们误解为“我们一个人都不喜欢他”。事实上，中国人和英国人的表达方式是不同的。我们说“过去”而英国人通常说“After you”。这看似矛盾。英国人的时间观念也与我们不同。CHEN Zi-ang（696），唐代诗人写了诗“《》”（p. 30）。在这里“过去”意味着过去的时间而“未来”意味着未来。而在英语中，“back”意味着过去的时间而“forward”意味着未来。

所以我们可以看到流利也是翻译中必要的，它不应该与准确性分开。

**Appropriateness**

准确性、流畅性和适宜性是不能分离的三种必要性。其中适宜性是最难实现的。适宜性意味着我们应该展示出说话的方式甚至段落的风格在目标语言中。

在《纽约时报》（1992年1月27日）上有一篇文章“Macy’s的死亡钟声”。里面有一句解释这个语境的句子：“CEO Finklestein：他需要从帽子里掏出一只兔子”。《纽约时报》的中文版翻译了这句话：“CEO Finklestein：他需要从帽子里掏出一只兔子”。当时，Finklestein是该公司的新经理，公司正处于大麻烦中。他确实需要拿出一些东西来拯救公司。在这样的情况下，翻译清楚地表达了经理的忧虑并吸引了读者的注意力。

“The Westminster Abbey”是华盛顿·欧文（1840）写的一篇文章。以下是其中一段：

> 一个安静而略带忧郁的日子在秋天的后半部分，当早晨和傍晚的阴影几乎混在一起，把阴霾投在一年的下降上，我度过了几个小时的漫步。这座老古物的阴郁壮丽符合了这个季节，当我跨过门槛时，仿佛回到了古代的宗教，迷失在过去的阴影中。 (摘自ZHAO, 1999, p. 50)

让我们比较两个翻译段落：（1）有着令人意想不到的团结。它比“吾国之今，空前之团结也”更好。也有一些特定的句子模式需要我们注意。例如，“所有的答案都对吗”。它不适合翻译成“所有答案均不正确”。正确的翻译应该是“没有一个答案是对的”。然后让我们来看这个句子“我们每一个人都不喜欢他”。正确的翻译是“我们每一个人都不喜欢他”而它会导致我们误解为“我们一个人都不喜欢他”。事实上，中国人和英国人的表达方式是不同的。我们说“过去”而英国人通常说“After you”。这看似矛盾。英国人的时间观念也与我们不同。CHEN Zi-ang（696），唐代诗人写了诗“《》”（p. 30）。在这里“过去”意味着过去的时间而“未来”意味着未来。而在英语中，“back”意味着过去的时间而“forward”意味着未来。

所以我们可以看到流利也是翻译中必要的，它不应该与准确性分开。
Conclusions

Language and cultural barrier brings lots of difficulties to translation. Translation can be understood as a kind of writing that is restricted by certain rules. Translation is using a language to express the message that is expressed in another language. We should not only focus on the meaning, when we are doing translating, we should pay attention to all things such as the structure of sentence, the style of the passage and something like these. So in order to make translation accurate, fluent, and appropriate, we should break down the language and cultural barrier between Chinese and English.

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