

Translation Strategies Applied in English and Chinese Idioms

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Abstract. In recent years, much attention has been paid to how translation can benefit English idiom learning for English language learners. However, there is only scant research regarding the teaching of English idioms among Chinese students and translation strategies between English and Chinese idioms. More research is greatly needed in terms of the interplay between idiom translation and English idioms learning for Chinese students. This paper addresses this gap and brings insights into the positive influence of translation strategies upon English idioms learning.

Keywords: translation strategies, Chinese idiom, English idiom.

1. Introduction

An idiom in the English language, as defined by Liontas (2009), is “a form of expression, grammatical construction, phrase, etc., peculiar to a language; a peculiarity of phraseology approved by the usage of the language, and often having a significance other than its grammatical or logical one”. The Chinese idioms discussed in this paper, literally known as set phrase, refer to traditional Chinese idiomatic expressions. It is called Chengyu in the Chinese language, most of which are consist of four characters and descended from ancient classics. It is notable that not all four-character phrases are Chengyu, as the former could be a free combination of four characters that are separable into various sentences, whereas Chengyu tends to be a stringent set embodying specific idea or/and connotative meaning. In the ESL/EFL context, the importance of idiom learning has been paid little attention to by both English learners and English teachers due to ineffective teaching approaches a lack of developed materials. However, it will be effective to incorporate idiom learning into the English learning curriculum as English learners need to walk out of the marginalized zone. Moreover, since idioms tend to involve cultural and historical background of languages, language learners may need to develop their bi-cultural awareness and linguistic competence. Furthermore, discussion of translation strategies applied in English and Chinese idioms could be an advanced approach to promote language learners’ meta-cognitive ability. This paper aims to investigate how translation methods can promote idiom learning among English language learners whose L1 is Chinese. It is thus of great importance to study the interplay between cultural context and translation methods in the process of English idiom acquisition. It is hoped the results may better inform ESL/EFL practitioners to promote their idiom teaching for Chinese students.

2. Theoretical Foundation

The English language is particularly noted for its wealth of idioms—also known as slangs, proverbs, allusions, simile, dead metaphor, social formula, and habitual collocation (Liontas, 2009), Aside from the syntactic structure of idioms, English learners may find it necessary to learn the cultural and historical background behind idioms so they can become active participants in both academic and social environment. Similarly, the Chinese idioms, or Chengyu, abound in daily and social use among Chinese speakers. Chinese English learners are obliged to transfer the semantic and symbolic meanings from Chinese to English in a correct and elegant way, as the nature of Chengyu exposes. It is believed that idiomatic acquisition can help language learners adapt to the academic and social environment successfully. From a cognitive perspective, in the process of idiom learning, the language learners will be able to strengthen their conversational and translational skills through dialogue practice and translation practice, which, in turn, may have a positive impact upon their self-confidence, linguistic competence, and bi-cultural awareness.

3. Analysis of Translation Strategies

Wang and Wang (2013) analyze the characteristics and patterns of the idiom, and argue that idioms can be considered as a quintessence and treasury of a language. The argument is that idioms are highly tied to the human culture, so idioms carry the cultural information and historic foot prints of a country. In order to accurately translate English idioms to the Chinese versions, students are suggested to be aware of the cultural differences between China and English-speaking countries as well as follow the translation methods listed as literal translation, free translation, abridged translation, and borrowed translation. The nature of idioms is their unique characteristics tied with culture and history and their fixed patterns and structure. Thus, for the English language learners whose L1 is Chinese, it is essential to be aware of cultural and historic differences when learning English idioms; then, by knowing some effective translation methods and principles, English learners will be able to translate the idioms from English to Chinese accordingly, which will greatly help them comprehend and memorize those acquired idioms. A good way for Chinese students to learn English idioms is through translating food names. Tang (2007) narrows the range of idioms to the food names and presents an investigation of some English idioms with food names and the Chinese correspondents by translation to uncover whether habitual collocations are semantically abstract and to see how the metaphorical expressions are connected with culture and history. Tang (2007) brings the notion of metaphorical mapping, from Lakoff and Johnson (2003), believing that a “metaphor is not merely a matter of language. It is a matter of conceptual structure” (p. 235). For this reason, it is worth investigating how metaphorical mapping influences the translation and cross-cultural interactions, especially in the names of the foods from English transferred into Chinese. To present the analysis, Tang uses ten pairs of idioms that are semantically figurative in English and the equivalent Chinese correspondents, which may not be consistent in the figurative expressions. Some examples are listed, such as the apple of one’s eye (掌上明珠-pearl in one’s palm), to cry over spilled milk (覆水难收-spilled water is hard to be gathered up), as easy as pie or piece of cake (易如反掌-as easy as turning one's hand over), and etc. From the comparison of the ten pairs of English-Chinese idioms, it is easy to understand that the names of the foods in English do not always share the same metaphorical meaning with Chinese due to the cultural and historical differences between Chinese and English. Tang believes that “the figurative sources for the same target in the two languages are in the hyponymy relationship”. I believe it is a good method to encourage the English language learners whose L1 is Chinese to learn English idioms through the investigation of conceptual structures and metaphorical interpretations within a specific category, such as food, color, and animal between English idioms and their corresponding Chinese idioms.

Zhao (2008) focuses on the cultural differences between Chinese and English idioms and introduces some effective approaches in translation of Chinese and English idioms. Zhao (2008) believes that cultural diversities and traditional philosophical values are also important factors that we need to consider when translating idioms between Chinese and English. From a micro-view, Zhao (2008) analyzes the cultural constituents, such as living environment, geography, values, customs, religious beliefs, historical differences, and associated meaning, and explains how people can translate the idioms more effectively between English and Chinese by considering those cultural constituents. In addition, Zhao (2008) chooses to comply with the translation principles from several scholars in the translation field, like Yan Fu’s advocating “faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance” and Eugene Nida’s “functional equivalence” or “dynamic equivalence”. Obviously, Zhao (2008) tends to believe that the study of the cultural background will aid language learners to acquire idioms more effectively and it also guides the English learners to translate the idioms between Chinese and English more accurately and faithfully.

Mei (2012) elaborates that it is pivotal to know the cultural similarities and differences in custom-loaded idioms between Chinese and English because custom-loaded idioms will allow people to understand, translate and apply Chinese and English idioms more correctly. Mei (2012) believes that the custom of a country is reflected by its language, especially from idioms containing historic and cultural information. Thus, the inability of understanding the idioms will lead to a failure of cross-

cultural communication and moments of misunderstanding. As Mei puts it, “culture includes and affects language; language is the mirror of the culture and can reflect the culture”. Therefore, to study the differences and similarities in the Chinese and English custom-loaded idioms will smooth the process of translation and promote the development and dissemination of Western and Chinese culture. Through the study of custom-loaded idioms, involving the information, such as natural environment, geographical conditions, historical background, customs and religious beliefs, English learners will be able to interpret the English idioms more effectively and implement them into appropriate contexts instead of memorizing them word by word mechanically.

Zhang and Chen (2013) advocate Nida’s equivalent translation theory and consider it as the guidance for Chinese-English idiom translation. With the expansion of the connections between China and the western world, idiom translation plays an important role in international communications. From a syntactic perspective, Chinese language tends to use the four-character (Chengyu) idioms linked with myth, ancient stories or historical fact compared with English idioms. To better translate the idioms between Chinese and English, the authors believe that “the so-called translation is from semantics to style in the target language the closest natural equivalent of the reproduction of the original information” (Nida, 1964). Thus, the equivalent theory, with its focus on the original works upon receptor influence and implications for receptor, should be the major principle in the process of translation, aiming to “elicit from the TL (target language) reader the same response as that of the source language reader to the original message”. As Chinese language is heavily idiomatic, it is important to seek a dynamic equivalence when translating the four-character idioms to English idioms. To attain this goal, the authors recommend several effective translation methods like literal translation, free translation, borrowing translation, combination of literal and liberal translation, rhetorical translation, and literal translation with annotation. In a word, a good translator of Chinese-English idioms, besides the linguistic precision, should also be aware of the cultural and historical differences between the two languages and follow Nida’s equivalence theory.

Zhang and Chen’s (2013) ideas definitely shed light upon the dynamic equivalence between Chinese four-character idioms and English idioms and provide several important translation techniques for language learners. However, since Chinese four-character idioms are fairly complex and rhetorical, translating them requires the language learners to achieve a high linguistic level in both Chinese and English so they can translate the idioms from one language to the other appropriately and accurately. In addition, because of the deep meaning and association of every idiom, language teachers are expected to spend more time in studying the cultural background and historical information behind the idioms so they can lead the students to comprehend the idioms more effectively.

Ren and Yu (2013) focus on the translation of English idioms from the lens of cultural context and present some insights for the English-Chinese idiom translation especially when there is no corresponding text from the Chinese language. They believe that idioms reflect culture, and culture defines idioms. Thus, translation of idioms between languages may involve many distinctive aspects of different cultures. Moreover, English idioms are classified into three main groups by the authors: phrase idioms, clause idioms, and sentence idioms. Another determined factor of idiom translation is the cultural context, as cultural context deals with not only the outputs of the individual personal, but correlates societal factors like politics, economy, literacy, and religion. Ren and Yu (2013) also believe that “the context of culture is the most vital and intricate parts of context as a whole” and context of culture contains specific classes like material context of culture, mental context of culture, and political context of culture. In the process of idiom translation, Ren and Yu (2013) recommend to refer to Nida’s “functional equivalence theory” as it leads the translators to express the meaning of original text faithfully and accurately. When it comes to the translation methods, Ren and Yu advocate several effective methods like literal translation, adapted translation, free translation, and notation translation.

4. Conclusion

As both Chinese language and English language are heavily idiomatic, language learners are expected to embrace idiom learning positively and strive to find the cultural and historical differences of idioms between Chinese and English. The Chinese English learners should first be able to comprehend the English idioms literally, so it is essential to learn how to analyze the syntactic structure of some common and easy English idioms.

Secondly, to deal with the idioms that are either semantically opaque or metaphorical, the ESOL teacher can encourage the students to look for clues through the cultural context as the context should have a facilitative effect upon the comprehension of the idioms. If the idiom learning materials are available, the ESOL teacher can also let students use dialogues to practice the presented idioms, as dialogues can provide real-life situations for students and guide them to use the idioms in appropriate contexts.

Thirdly, in a lot of cases, while learning English idioms, language learners may find the equivalent version from their primary language. Thus, for the Chinese English learners, it is important to find similar expressions in Chinese when learning the English idioms, which will aid the students to better comprehend the English idioms. However, some English idioms may be quite different from Chinese idioms, so there is no corresponding text. For sure, in this case, it is hard to see some positive transfers from students' L1 to L2. To this end, the ESOL teacher is expected to lead students to translate English idioms to Chinese idioms by following several major principles and methods. As discussed above, several authors tend to advocate Nida's "functional equivalence" when tackling translation between languages, stating that from a semantic equivalence perspective, target language readers can achieve the same feeling with the source language readers. Nida's equivalence theory resonates with Yan Fu's (an ancient Chinese scholar in translation field) Fidelity Theory, emphasizing "faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance". Under the equivalence theory, many authors tend to have a unanimous agreement upon the following translation strategies: literal translation, free translation, borrowing translation, and integrated approach.

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