The Influence of Differences between Chinese and English Thinking Patterns on Chinese-English Translation

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Abstract

Translation is not only a type of linguistic activity, but also a kind of thinking activity. Many difficulties people encounter in the process of translation are often caused by the influence of different thinking patterns. Due to the influence of geographical environment, religious beliefs and historical customs, the East and the West have formed different thinking patterns, which are reflected in the process of Chinese-English translation: analysis and synthesis, euphemism and directness, concreteness and abstraction, subject and object. Only by fully understanding the differences between the two thinking patterns can we better reduce improper expressions in the translation process and then realize the communication between the two languages.

Keywords

Thinking patterns; Differences; Chinese-English translation.

1. Introduction

Language is one of the most important tools of human communication. It is the sum of vocabulary and grammatical rules. Thinking is a cognitive process that reflects the laws of objective things, and is a unique function of human brain. Thinking pattern and language are interdependent. First of all, thinking activities need to be realized with the help of language. Language is a tool for everyone's thinking activities, and the results of thinking activities also need to be recorded and consolidated through language. Thinking can be reflected indirectly and generally through language. Language can help develop thinking patterns ceaselessly, and people can use language to exchange ideas. Secondly, the formation and development of language is inseparable from thinking activities. The vocabulary and grammar rules which constitute the basic framework of language are the fruit of people's thinking activities, and the significance of language is constantly enriched and deepened in the process of people's thinking activities.

2. Reasons for Differences between Chinese and English Thinking Patterns

Language is not only a kind of linguistic symbols, but it also carries the national history and culture. Language and culture depend on and influence each other. Language is a part of culture and an important carrier of cultural wealth. It is fundamental for cultural development. It can reflect the specific characteristics of every national culture and the differences between different national cultures. As the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis puts it, in different cultures, the differences in the structure, meaning and use of different languages have a great impact on the thinking patterns of language users (Liang 2005). In order to analyze the differences between Chinese and English thinking patterns, we should first trace back to and then analyze the language and culture. The different cultures of the two nations endow the nations with different ways of expression and also affect their thinking patterns.

2.1.   Geographical Environment

The generation and development of every culture cannot get rid of the influence of its geographical environment. The difference of geographical environment between Chinese and British nationalities leads to their different national characteristics. Due to the different hemispheres and climates of the East and the West, people's understanding of certain natural phenomena is also inconsistent. For example, the word "dongfeng"(east wind) in Chinese often refers to "spring breeze" (Wei 2004), which symbolizes spring and warmth. Therefore, since ancient times, Chinese literati have had a special liking for dongfeng, creating such verses as "Waiting to learn about the east wind, the colorful flowers always show the beauty of spring", "On February 2nd, I crossed the river. The east wind is warm and I heard someone blowing the sheng", "It is difficult to meet each other, and the parting is also painful, the east wind is powerless and the flowers wither and fall". In Chinese, wester wind symbolizes winter and coldness, and is often used in negative and derogatory contexts, such as "the harp sound echoes in the night and the cold west wind blows the green grass" and "the west wind passed through the garden last night, blowing flowers all over the ground." and so on. However, people in Western culture hold diametrically opposite emotional attitudes towards east wind and west wind. This is due to the difference in geographical environment between the East and the West. Britain is bordered by the Atlantic Ocean to the west and the European continent to the east. Therefore, the warm wind blows from the west, while the cold wind blows from the east. Hence, the images of the east and west wind are used in contexts completely different from Chinese ones in western works. For example, the famous British poet Shelley exclaimed in *"Ode to the West Wind"*: " Oh Wind, if Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?" Charles Dickens also had the verse: " How many winter days have I seen him, standing blue-nosed in the snow and east wind! " Therefore, when engaging in English-Chinese translation, we should pay attention to the different expressions of geographical nouns in the two cultures and adjust the use of vocabulary.

2.2.   Religious Beliefs

Religion is a special cultural phenomenon in the development of human society. It is an important part of traditional culture. It has influenced people's lives, customs, ideology and other aspects, and has played a very important role in the progress and development of society and culture. Among all kinds of religion, the East is mainly affected by Buddhism. Countless poems have witnessed the prevalence of Buddhism in ancient China, such as " There were 480 temples in the Southern Dynasty, and how many of them have disappeared in history". The most representative one is "Journey to the West", which is one of China's four great masterpieces. In addition to literary works, religion has also had a profound impact on people's thoughts and values, such as "compassion", "causal reincarnation", "less desire and more contentment" and so on. When it comes to religious beliefs, Chinese native Confucianism and Taoism must not be ignored. Confucianism's "benevolence, justice, etiquette, wisdom and faith", Taoism's "govern by doing nothing" and other ideas have had an indelible influence on Chinese history for thousands of years. In Western countries, Christianity occupies a very important status, and even possessed the power of ruling the country in the Middle Ages. Christianity uses "Bible" as the source of rights and beliefs, and leads the development of western civilization, especially the development of western political culture. Christianity has also had a huge impact on social life in the West, such as architectural styles, art forms, festival customs and so on. The "humanism" and "salvation culture" of Christianity have also had a profound impact on western thinking patterns. Therefore, when translating, we must pay close attention to the word choice pertaining to religion and culture in the work, correctly understand the religious beliefs of other nations, and then express them appropriately in a way acceptable to the target language readers.

2.3. Historical Customs

The history of national development has great influence on the formation and development of national characteristics. China has been a country of etiquette since ancient times, advocating governing the country by virtue, while western countries such as the United Kingdom have looted and expanded overseas in history. The ways of historical development have a profound impact on the formation of national language and personality characteristics. In China, people advocate modesty and moderation, while in the West, people are mostly more open. For example, when responding to people's appreciation, Chinese tend to say: "No, no, you are flattering me." , while westerners are more inclined to accept the others' praise and express their appreciation for the others' praise with "thank you". In addition, in the process of national historical development, each nation has accumulated countless precious wealth of knowledge. Taking idioms as an example, the symbolic meaning of the same image in different cultures can sometimes vary greatly. In order to avoid misunderstanding or even offense, translators also need to pay particular attention to this point. For example, in Chinese, "long" (means dragon in English) in "wang zi cheng long" and "ren zhong long feng" is used as a commendation, while in western countries, "dragon" is a symbol of evil. Another example is that in Chinese, "dog" is often used in a derogatory context, such as "dog relies on human power" and "chickens and dogs are always restless". In Western countries, "dog" is a representative of loyalty, so it is often used in commendatory contexts, such as "lucky dog", "every dog has its day" and so on.

3. Reflection of the Differences between Chinese and English Thinking Patterns in Translation

3.1. Analysis and Synthesis

The so-called analytical language means that the syntax of this language is not mainly reflected by word formations, but is presented through such means as functional words and word order. The so-called synthetical language means that this language mainly expresses grammatical meaning through its morphological changes. English morphological changes can mainly be divided into two types: word formation and configuration changes. Word formation changes are mainly achieved through affix changes, while configuration changes include changes in number, case, voice, person and so on. There is almost no morphological change in Chinese. Therefore, Chinese is an analytic language and English is a synthetical language.

Example 1: fu mu dui ta de hu shi ling ta geng wei bu shi.

Translation: Her being neglected by parents added to her uneasiness.

Example 2: di yi pi dian zi ji suan ji yu 1945 nian tou ru shi yong.

Translation: The first electronic computers went into operation in 1945.

When translating from Chinese to English, we should first analyze the Chinese sentence and then express the tense, voice, modality and mood hidden in Chinese sentence with the help of English morphological changes

3.2. Euphemism and Directness

This can be explained by "curved thinking pattern" and "linear thinking pattern": when expressing ideas, Chinese are accustomed to firstly explaining and interpreting the peripheral messages(Xu 2017), and then point out the central topic of the discourse. While the western people, on the other hand, tend to be more straightforward, putting forward the main points first and then adding other information. Therefore, the key information of Chinese sentences is generally presented at the end of the sentence, while the key information of English sentences is generally put at the front.

Example 3: ta wu sui shi gan ran le shang han, bian cheng le long zi.

Translation: He became deaf at five after an attack of typhoid fever.

Chinese emphasizes parataxis. According to the laws of nature, Chinese organizes discourse in the order in which objective matters happen, discussing what happens first, and then talking about what happens later. In English, the discourse organization does not follow the order of time and the sentence arrangement is more flexible.

Example 4: ta zuo de jie mu zhi shi feng fu, yu yan jing lian, tong su yi dong, shou dao le guang da guan Zhong de xi ai.

Translation: Her programs gained great popularity with a wealth of information presented in concise and readily intelligible language.

Chinese expressions generally follow the logical sequence of effect following cause, possibility following hypothesis, transition following concession, result following comparison, action following purpose. While English tends to work in reverse, for example, effect occurs before cause.

3.3.   Concreteness and Abstraction

The differences of thinking patterns between Chinese and English lead to the differences of concrete and abstract expressions. Chinese classical philosophy emphasizes the extraction of symbolic images from the observations. Influenced by this concept, Chinese thinking pattern is a kind of concrete thinking pattern, which means the Chinese expression is more specific. Chinese like to express virtual concepts in the form of reality and describe abstract contents in the form of concrete images. In contrast, the West emphasizes rationality and abstract thinking, so western people are accustomed to using abstract nouns or generalized words to express complex thoughts or subtle emotions.

Example 5: wo xian shi cha yi, jie zhe shi hen bu an, si hu zhe hu ayu wo you gua xi.

Translation: My initial astonishment gave way to a deep uneasiness. I felt that this had something to do with me.

In the translation sentence, the translator translates "cha yi" and "bu an" into "astonishment" and "uneasiness" respectively, which has realized the process of turning concreteness into abstractness.

Example 6: bu zhi huang lian ku, zen zhi feng mi tian.

Translation: Who has never tasted bitterness knows not what is sweetness.

In Chinese, the two concrete images "huang lian" and "feng mi" symbolize "bitterness" and "sweetness" respectively. Therefore, when translating, we just choose the two abstract nouns "bitterness" and "sweetness". And there is no need to explain exactly what "huang lian" and "feng mi" mean.

3.4.   Subject and Object

Subject means the actor of the action, and object indicates the bearer of the action. In the process of translation, the translator needs to identify the subject and the object of the sentence. Chinese learners are influenced by Chinese classical philosophy, so they often take human as the subject of discourse. According to Chinese classical philosophy, especially Taoism, the ideas of " harmony between man and nature " and "man can conquer nature" advocate that man should be the object to be observed and analyzed. Influenced by ontology, Chinese learners are used to taking a living person or thing as the subject of a sentence. However, in western countries, English learners tend to take the objective nature as their research object. This is also evident from the emphasis on science and technology in the West. Western people mostly analyze things rationally and lay stress on consciousness of object.

Example 7: wo xing fen de shuo bu chu hua lai.

Translation: Excitement deprived me of all power of utterance.

In accordance with example 7, we can clearly find that the Chinese sentence uses "wo" (means "I") as the subject of the sentence. But when it is translated into English, we should notice the different choice of subject and object in Chinese and English. Therefore, the translation sentence chooses an inanimate word "excitement" as the subject of the entire sentence. Such a translation is more in line with the expression habits of English learners and users, namely is more "authentic".

Example 8: ting jun yi xi hua, sheng du shi nian shu.

Translation: What you told me just now is more and better than what I have learnt from books for ten years.

One of the major characteristics of Chinese is omission. Both the subject and the object can be omitted as long as it does not affect the sentence meaning. However, this is not the case in English. In English, each sentence component performs its own duties and must not be omitted. Therefore, when translating a sentence like example 8, we need to add a proper subject to the original sentence firstly. Afterwards, we can recognize clearly that the sentence "(wo) ting ju yi xi hua, (wo) sheng du shi nian shu" uses "wo" as the subject. Therefore, the subject needs to be replaced with an inanimate thing when translating the original sentence into English.

4. How to Reduce the Impact of Chinese and English Thinking Differences on Translation

4.1. Change Part of Speech

Many scholars believe that English is a kind of static language, which tends to use few verbs in its expressions and instead it mainly uses nouns and prepositions to describe abstract concepts. In addition, English-speaking countries pay more attention to the objective nature and emphasize rationality, while Chinese people pay more attention to human's behavior and emotions. Hence, it is obvious that verbs are widely used in Chinese expressions. Therefore, when translating from Chinese to English, translators need to keep in mind the different lexical preferences of the two languages and convert verbs into abstract nouns. For example: "ta tong xiao duo zhong yu yan, zhe shi wo men da jia gan dao jing ya." can be translated into "Her familiarity with many languages surprised us all."

4.2. Adjust Word Order

There is a close connection between morphological change and word order. In English, the word order is very flexible, while the Chinese word order is relatively fixed. In the process of Chinese-English translation, part of the word order can be completely same. However, due to the Chinese expression habit, it is often necessary to adjust the word order of sentences. The main components of English and Chinese sentences, such as subject, predicate, and object, whose positions in the sentence are basically same. But sometimes, the English word order need to change due to grammatical or rhetoric requirements. For example: ni shen me yi si? (What do you mean?) Secondly, in Chinese, attributives generally appear in front of nouns, while in English, attributives can be placed before or after the noun or even far away from the noun. The position is very flexible. For example: yi ge shi fen zhong yao de wen ti (a very important problem/a problem of great importance/ a problem which is very important). When expressing complex logical thinking, in Chinese, the word order is generally presented as: from narrative to attitude, from strength to weakness, from bigness to smallness, and the logical order goes from cause to effect, from hypothesis to inference, from fact to conclusion. However, in English, the case is just the opposite. Therefore, when engaging in Chinese-English translation, translators need to always pay attention to the differences in word order between Chinese and English, and adjust the expression ways according to the expression habits of the target language.

5. Conclusion

Due to differences in geographical environment, religious beliefs and historical development, there have been great differences in the production and use of the two languages, namely Chinese and English. With the increasingly frequent cultural exchanges between the East and the West, more and more attention has been paid to the difficulties caused by the cultural differences between the East and the West. Translators who want to do a good job in translation should not only know about the two languages, but also fully recognize and understand the two cultures. We are supposed to respect the history, culture, beliefs of other civilizations, have a profound and comprehensive understanding of thinking differences of different nations and master various translation theories and skills. Only by doing these, can the translation matches the expression habits of the target language and can we realize the conversion between different languages and promote the interaction and exchange between different cultures.

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