

A Study of Concrete Cultural Approaches in Translation Teaching

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Abstract

Cultural introduction has become one of the focuses in translation teaching. Translation teachers' inadequate comprehension, however, usually contributes to one-sidedness of the content and dullness of the approaches. Based upon constructionism and teaching experience, this research probes into several concrete approaches to cultural introduction.

Key words: Cultural introduction; Translation teaching; Mode of thinking

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INTRODUCTION

The comparison and contrast between source language and target language are inevitable in translation teaching. Early in the 1920s, American linguist Edward Sapir (1921) notes in his work *Language*, "Language has a setting. The people that speak it belong to a race (or a number of races), that is, to a group which is set off by physical characteristics from other groups. Again, language does not exist apart from culture, that is, from the socially inherited assemblage of practices and beliefs that determines the texture of our lives." Chinese scholar Lian Shuneng (1993, p.2) holds, "The experience of translation teaching and research shows that the comparison and contrast between different culture and languages must

serve as a basis for translation theories and techniques." That means language and cultural comparison and contrast cannot be detached from cultural introduction.

The term cultural introduction was first introduced to the academia in the 1980s. Since then, this theory has had impact upon Chinese language teaching and many relevant researches and studies have been conducted. There exist massive differences between Chinese and Western modes of thinking as well as the differences between two languages and cultures. Additionally, there is mutual interdependency between language and culture. These facts imply that teachers should place great emphasis on cultural introduction and the appertaining strategies and methods so that the efficiency of cultural introduction can be improved.

1. THE CONTENT OF CULTURAL INTRODUCTION

There are varieties of the definition of culture. According to one of the most important Chinese dictionaries *Modern Chinese*, among other things, the definition of culture is as follows:

Culture is the combination of material treasure and spiritual treasure created by the human beings during the social and historical development, which specially refers to spiritual treasure including literature, art, education, and science. In a broad sense, not only are literature, art, education and science included, but also people's mode of thinking, life and behaviors are included.

The complexity of the definition of culture itself means that the content of cultural introduction is all-inclusive and complicated. According to Rong Kaiming, "Mode of thinking is the synthesis and unity of molded way of thinking, approaches of thinking and procedure of thinking in the process of the subject's trying to reflect the object." (Rong, 1989, p.30.) Chen Hongwei once noted:

As the subject of thinking, the mode of thinking of a human being will be influenced and restricted by the development of society. Also, the mode of thinking of every individual person differs from one person to another because of different profession, gender, education, knowledge structure and individual quality. People of the same nationality, however, share the same mode of thinking as a result of living in the same society, and exposing themselves to the same culture. By contrast, the mode of thinking of people of different nationalities has both similarities and differences. The comparative study of the similarities and differences of different nationalities' modes of thinking, especially the research into distinctions of different nationalities' modes of thinking, is the key to reducing and getting rid of cross-cultural communication barriers. (Chen, 2010, p.18.)

Through cultural introduction, students can realize the distinctions of mode of thinking between Chinese and Westerners. For instance, Chinese people attach great importance to ethics, whereas Western people emphasize cognition; Chinese people concentrate upon integration and comprehensive thinking, Westerners, individual and analytical thinking; Chinese people emphasize intuition, Westerners evidence; Chinese people focus upon imaginative thinking, Westerners, logical thinking. The comparison and contrast between English and Chinese is the main content of cultural introduction. Cultural introduction can be conducted not only from the perspective of vocabulary, pronunciation, syntax and text, but also from other quite different angles: from indirect to direct, from static to dynamic, from substitution to repetition, from hypotactic to paratactic, from abstract to concrete.

In terms of cultural introduction, there exists an obvious fallacious tendency whereby Western culture is treated as the central focus of the cultural introduction, and cultural introduction teaching is mistakenly understood as Western cultural introduction teaching. According to a Chinese scholar Han Qian, Western holidays such as Christmas day, Halloween, Thanksgiving Day and Valentine's Day, as well as certain American TV series, have more impact upon Chinese youth than their traditional national holidays and TV series do, which is a reflection of not only inclusiveness of Chinese people but also the gradual loss of the traditional culture (Han, 2011, p.152). Basically, there are two reasons contributing to Western culture's overwhelming position. For one thing, the more powerful cultural influence of Western culture. Cutting-edge ideas, new technology, and ample soft power tend to contribute to the dominant position of the English language over others. Meanwhile, there is a persistent mindset among learners, according to which English commands an advantageous position over their own languages. Furthermore, both English teachers and English learners have a universal misunderstanding about cultural introduction, that is, the introduction of Western culture is seen as the de facto form of cultural introduction, to the detriment of Chinese cultural introduction. The fact is that cultural study is supplemental to language study, and

cultural introduction in foreign language teaching is not supposed to overemphasize Western culture. Instead, the comparison and contrast between two cultures should be the focus.

2. SPECIFIC METHODS OF CULTURAL INTRODUCTION

According to constructivism, people's recognition of the world is not contributed to directly by the stimulus of the outer world, but by the interaction of the stimulus of the outer world and the psychological processes of the thinking subject. The amount of knowledge acquired depends upon the learner's ability to construct the meaning of the knowledge based upon his personal experience. That is to say, the teacher is the assistant and prompter of meaning construction instead of the knowledge imparter and instiller. Meanwhile, the students are the subject of the information processing and the active constructors of the information. Students are expected to take advantage of the approaches of probe and observation to construct the meaning of knowledge. Based upon the above theory, translation teachers should not simply instill knowledge about the comparison and contrast between Chinese culture and Western culture. Instead, they would be well advised to take active and effective measures to inspire students to choose and process information about Western and Chinese culture. It is certain that translation teachers can take advantage of translation to serve cultural introduction. The means of translation, however, cannot be treated as the only approach of cultural introduction. The present author comes up with the following concrete approaches of cultural introduction based upon his personal teaching experience.

2.1 Translation Exercises for Students' Identification of Imaginativeness and Abstractness

The mode of thinking of the Chinese people tends to be imaginative thinking, which is largely due to the influence of the hieroglyphs. After all, hieroglyphs are the demonstration of the imaginative thinking of Chinese people. By contrast, the mode of thinking of Western people tends to be abstract thinking, a mode of thinking focusing upon abstract generalization, which stems from the influence of the Phoenician alphabets. In order to enable the students to apprehend the differences of the two mode of thinking, it is possible for translation teachers to try their hands at putting the following Chinese sentences into English.

a) 他对此事已经胸有成竹。

Translation: He has had a well-thought-out plan about this.

b) 战争中的人民生活在水深火热之中。

Translation: People in the war led a life of extreme hardship.

c) 我军势如破竹, 打的敌军落花流水.

Translation: Our army won a smooth and overwhelming victory.

d) 三个人品字形坐下, 开始攀谈起来.

Translation: The three men sat down facing each other and began to have a chat.

Through the above translation practice, students will find it fairly easy to understand the differences between the Chinese mode of thinking focusing upon imaginative thinking and the Western mode of thinking focusing upon abstract generalization.

2.2 Letter-Writing for Students to Experience Linear and Circular Modes of Thinking

Different cultures contribute to different mode of thinking, and different modes of thinking contribute to different language forms. To enable students to apprehend the linear mode of thinking and circular mode of thinking, translation teachers can ask students to try writing an English letter. For instance, the teacher can ask students to write an email to an American teacher Tom inquiring for information about John, hoping that Tom can share the email address with them. Checking students' writing in the given time, the teacher will find it commonplace for the students to write a letter as follows:

Dear Tom,

I'm your student Li Hua. Long time no see! How have you been? I still remember the time we spent together and I miss you very much. Hope that we can meet in China again. By the way, I have a good friend called John, who you know well and I'd like to know his email address.

Thank you and I'm looking forward to hearing from you.

Yours,
Li Hua

After the interaction between the students and the teacher, the teacher can demonstrate a native speaker's writing based upon the same assignment.

Dear Tom,

How have you been? I have a good friend called John, who you know well and I'd like to know his email address. Thank you and I'm looking forward to hearing from you.

Yours,
Li Hua

The comparison and contrast of the above sample letters are sure to make students profoundly understand the difference between the circular mode of thinking and the linear mode of thinking.

2.3 Blank-Filling Exercises for Students to Experience a Different Cultural Background

To some extent, vocabulary belongs to cultural symbol. As Chinese scholar Lü Bisong noted, most of the

cultural elements influencing language comprehension and application are implied in the language system of vocabulary, grammar and application. (Lü, 1992, p.64.) To some extent, vocabulary can be categorized as a cultural symbol. Generally, part of the vocabulary in both English and Chinese shares the same cultural connotation. However, such elements as different religious beliefs, traditional customs, geographic surroundings, and kinships contribute to vocabulary distinction. To strengthen students' awareness of cultural background, translation teachers can design blank-filling translation exercises intentionally, which contains language points with cultural elements. These exercises are intended for students to fill in the blanks, through which students can be nurtured concerning cultural contrast. Taking the following exercises as an example:

- 挥金如土 spend money like ()
- 一路顺风 have a plain ()
- 错失良机 miss the ()
- 望子成龙 hope that one's son will become ()
- 东风报春 () promises spring
- (赵辛楣)一肚皮的酒, 几乎全部化成酸醋.....

The wine in Hsin-mei's stomach turned to sour vinegar ().

Through similar exercises, the translation teacher can guide students in contemplating the very core of Chinese culture and Western culture. Such seemingly simple blank filling exercises by nature are concerned with the very core of translation, and hence these exercises will trigger students to contemplate distinct cultural background.

2.4 Oral Pair Work Intended for Students to Gain Insights Into Different Ethics Conception

The Chinese culture highlights ethics and its focus upon relationships of clans is one of the most significant embodiments. By contrast, western culture pays less attention upon clan relationship. The following sentence can be treated as an oral practice task for students to gain insights into the cultural distinction.

张明和李红是表兄妹, 张明的母亲是李红的舅妈, 李红的母亲是张明的姑妈.

In most cases, people from western countries tend to be confused by the complexity of the clan relationship in China. That is because in western culture varieties of clan relationships are not so clearly clarified. According to their custom, the single word "aunt" can be employed to address both the wife of one's mother's brother and one's father's sister. The employment of such an oral translation practice can certainly offer students an opportunity to learn and reflect upon such a cultural phenomenon. In western culture, by contrast, westerners are characterized by egotism and individualism, whose origins can be sought in the classical philosophical tradition and western religious tradition as well.

2.5 Comparative Translation Exercises Guiding Students to Probe Into Personal and Impersonal Reference

Geoffrey Leech and Jan Svartvik point out in their work entitled *A Communicative Grammar of English*, "Formal written language often goes with an impersonal style, i.e. one in which the speaker avoids personal references to speaker and/or hearers, such as *I, you, and we*. Some of the common features of impersonal language are passives, sentences beginning with introductory *it*, and abstract nouns (Leech & Svartvik, 1974, p.33.) Lian Shuneng also notes,

Comparatively, English is characterized by impersonal reference, meaning that things acting as subjects express ideas objectively instead of personal references. By contrast, the Chinese language concentrates upon the thinking of subjects. This mode of thinking is dominated by the thought "All things under heaven are being prepared for me." Accordingly, the narration of objective matters usually centers upon oneself, or tend to describe people and their actions or status. In this sense, personal references are often employed. (Lian, 1993, p.77)

Through comparison of different translation versions, this feature can be fully demonstrated. For example:

a) My good fortune has sent you to me, and we will never part.

Version 1: 好运把你送给了我, 让我们永不分离。

Version 2: 我很想幸运, 能够的得到你, 让我们永不分离吧。

b) The thick carpet killed the sound of my footsteps.

Version 1: 厚厚的地毯让我的脚步声一点也听不出来。

Version 2: 我走在厚厚的地板上, 一点脚步声也没有。

In cultural introduction, it is common to fall back upon such visual media as movies, TV programs, slides and multimedia to enrich students' knowledge about Western culture. In addition, translation teachers are supposed to read as many English literary works, journals, newspapers, and magazines, through which students can not only accumulate knowledge concerning cultural background, social customs, but also broaden their horizons. Only in this way, can students have a mature and comprehensive understanding about culture.

CONCLUSION

Translation teaching is a cultural activity to transform the implication of one culture into another. Accordingly, it has the most direct practical significance to introduce culture in translation teaching (Tao, 2005, p.124). Nowadays, the Chinese translation teaching community has placed great emphasis on comparison and contrast between Chinese culture and Western culture, and conducted a meaningful inquiry into the approaches and techniques of cultural introduction. As has been noted, translation teachers should attach great importance to Chinese culture and

Western culture pragmatically. Meanwhile, it is fitting and proper that they should discard the traditional way of teaching, in which teachers are the main speakers, and explore the teaching methods and ways of cultural introduction. All these call for translation teachers' self-improvement. First of all, the translation teacher should devote him or herself to the study of both English and Chinese. Also, he or she should carry out research into Chinese culture and Western culture in a strategic manner. Accordingly, he or she can be equipped with language proficiency and cultural apprehension so that he or she can handle cultural introduction skillfully. Moreover, not only should a translation teacher accumulate culture knowledge steadily, but also scrutinize teaching methodology and students' psychology. Under this circumstance, the teacher can create his or her own way of teaching and make the cultural introduction fruitful and improve the quality of translation lectures in the long run.

On the other hand, cultural introduction in translation teaching is a systematic construction. Knowledge concerning cultural comparison and contrast scheduled to be introduced in translation teaching must be systematically and elaborately selected. The systematically well scheduled cultural introduction can help translation learners to acquire linguistic knowledge. Additionally, it is rewarding in fostering their cross-cultural communicative competence. Among other things, cross-cultural communicative competence is one of the paramount and ultimate goals of the foreign language teaching. The knowledge of the culture of both the source language and target language is sure to facilitate the cross-cultural communication between people from different cultures and hence boost the development of the whole world.

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