



On Translatability of English Idioms

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Abstract

Is Chinese translation of English Idioms possible? This has been a topic of debate for a very long period of time. Many linguists and translators have dwelt on this problem in their books or articles. Some of the popular ideas about the problems of translatability of English Idioms will be introduced in this paper which aims at helping people know more about the translatability of English Idioms.

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Idioms, widely recognized as the essence or the crystallization of language, play a very important role in writing, speech and even in our oral communication. They form an important part of the general vocabulary of every language. Lots of cultural information is embedded in idioms. A good knowledge of their translatability may help us overcome the difficulties in translating idioms. The following are some of the popular ideas about the problems of translatability of English Idioms.

1. Translation of English idioms is linguistically possible

“Because of the many discrepancies between meanings and structures of different languages, some persons have insisted that translating is impossible, and yet more and more translating is done and done well.” (Nida, E.A., 2001: 3) It’s a fact that some forms of expression are peculiar to idioms, which are extremely difficult to be rendered into another language, especially when the two languages, such as Chinese and English, belong to different families.

However, all human beings live in a shared material world and all human languages reflect their common characters. Although the languages of different peoples vary from one another, they could still conceive the same concepts. For example, the English idiom “to burn one’s boats” and the Chinese one “Po4 Fu3 Chen2 Zhou1” possess a nearly-identical similarity in both figurative feature, form, meaning and they are much alike in their origins. The former is related to the Ancient Roman Emperor Caesar: it was recorded that 49 B.C when Emperor Caesar led his men to cross Rubicon River, he ordered his army to break the cauldrons and sank the boats after crossing and showed his determination that he would rather die if he couldn’t succeed; whereas the latter is related to an historical event in Han Dynasty of ancient China: it is said that when General Xiang Yu led his army to cross the river, he commanded his men to break their cooking pots and sank their boats to express their determination to win the battle against his opponent Liu Bang. From the two historical events we can see that the two idioms have similar origins. And the metaphors used in the two idioms are very similar, both symbolizing “to sink the boats and cut off all means of retreat”. They are similar in the implication, which means “to be determined to do something or to make up one’s mind, not to give up till coming to a dead end”, thus demonstrates a perfect equivalence of each other. It shows that though English and Chinese vary from one another, they could still conceive the same concepts. (Bao Huinan, 2001: 243)

As Nida said, “Some people have thought each language is so distinct that there is no valid way in which the discourses of one language can be translated into another. But at least ninety percent of the fundamental structures of language are quite similar, and language universals far outweigh the divergences.”(Nida, E.A., 2001: 78). These statements show that translation is linguistically possible in most cases. It can be seen in the following examples, “to laugh off one’s head” refers to “to laugh in an extreme that one may, or beyond reasonable limits”, which can be translated into “Xiao Diao Da Ya” and can be easily understood, though, to some extent, the source language seems very confusing to Chinese people. And “to kill the goose that lays golden eggs” is translated into “Sha Ji Qu Luan”, both have the implicated meaning “to sacrifice future gains to satisfy present needs”, which show the similarity of English and Chinese and prove that translation is linguistically possible.

2. Translation of English idioms is culturally possible

Nida says "...people of any language-culture have sufficient imagination and experience to understand how the people of another language-culture may rightly differ in their behavior and values." (Nida, E.A., 2001, 79) And these confirm the cultural possibility of translation. For instance, English idiom "to sing a different tune" means "to say or do something that signals a change in opinion because it contradicts what one has said or done before". In Chinese, "Chang Dui Tai Xi" (to sing different tunes) also normally refers to contradictory points of views, but has quite a different usage. It has a strong political connotation and can, in certain contexts, be interpreted as expressing complementary rather than contradictory points of view. It shows that an idiom may have a similar counterpart in the target language, though the contexts in which they are used may be different, their cultural concepts can be conveyed. All these show that translation is linguistically and culturally possible in most cases.

Idioms are usually culture-loaded expressions. In some sense, idioms are the reflection of the cultural concepts of certain social community and they embody the cultural properties of languages in the most concentrated and profound manner. Thus idioms can be regarded as linguistic products of cultures, and they are either restricted by or unique to a particular culture.

People who insist on untranslatability usually stress absolute equivalence in translation, with no loss of information. In fact, this is the controversy about the nature of translation. Catford once said, "The central problem of translation practice is that finding TL translation equivalents." (Catford, 1965: 21). This equivalence is not complete or absolute, but dynamic or functional — just the closest natural equivalent of the original. For instance, when describing an obstinate person, the English people use the idiom, "as stubborn as a mule" while the Chinese liken him to a bull in "Jiang Dei Xiang Tou Niu", meaning "bull-headed"; If a person or a book is very boring or uninteresting, the English consider him or it "as dry as sawdust", while the Chinese would think "he/it is as dull as chewing wax." (Wei Tong Jiao La); When an English is "at the end of his rope", he just reaches a place "where the mountains and the rivers end", that is "Shan1 Qiong2 Shui3 Jin4" in Chinese. Obviously, it is impossible, to some extent, to avoid the loss of information.

3. Conclusion

It has already been proved that translation is linguistically and culturally possible in most cases. If we regard absolute conveyance of all information as the nature of translation, all communication, whether intralingual, interlingual, or intersemiotic, would be deemed impossible, for modern linguistic theorists have proved that no communication can occur without any loss of information. So it is commonly agreed that culture is translatable, and loss of information to a certain extent cannot be completely avoided. Difficult as it may be, translating idioms is mostly possible. They are equally translatable as other linguistic forms.

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