

The Translatability and Untranslatability of Chinese Numeral Classifiers into English

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Abstract

The paper argues that there is no direct equivalence for Chinese numeral classifiers in English, and thus the translation of them is worth exploring. Actually there exist both translatability and untranslatability in this kind of translation, yet the border-line between them is not as clear as imagined, because both of them are only sensible when they are placed along the scale of equivalence. The task then is to achieve equivalence or rather maximum equivalence, which in this paper means that the translated version remains as close as possible to the source language in flavor by keeping close to the ideas, style and manner, and the ease of the original.

Keywords: translatability, untranslatability, Chinese numeral classifiers, equivalence

1. Introduction

One of the main characteristics of Chinese is its richness of numeral classifiers, which have been in use in the Chinese language since the ancient times. However, the translation of Chinese numeral classifiers has not been the focus of thorough study compared with that of skills and techniques in translating certain Chinese nouns, verbs and adjectives. In this article we will probe into the translation of Chinese numeral classifiers into English, so that we can see whether there exist skills or techniques in this kind of translation and whether all Chinese numeral classifiers can be translated literally, or there is something behind all this.

2. Literature Review

The study of Chinese numeral classifiers can be dated back to 1898 when Ma Jianzhong published his book on grammar, but the study of their translation into English does not begin until recently which either advocates absolute equivalence, or simply describes the uniqueness of Chinese numeral classifiers or elaborates on the meaning and usage of Chinese numeral classifiers. Hu (1987) listed the English versions of certain Chinese numeral classifiers such as “层”, “群”, “阵”, “块”, “套”, “批” and “口”. Guo (1987) published a handbook on Chinese numeral classifiers in the form of dictionary by explaining the meaning, usages and some related examples of Chinese numeral classifiers. Zhao (1999) discussed the differences between Chinese numeral classifiers and English partitive constructions, but failed to say why it was so.

Some people hold the opinion that Chinese numeral classifiers have their equivalents in English which can both be called in Chinese “量词”, yet this is not appropriate because in English we do not have the so-called numeral classifiers or something that serve the same functions. What must be pointed out is that the equivalents in these people’s minds actually are unit nouns, such as “a piece of paper” and “a loaf of bread”. All this can be attested by the classifications of word class respectively in Chinese and English. In his *New English Grammar Coursebook*, Zhang (1995, p. 8) classifies English words into two classes: closed and open classes. The former includes function words such as prepositions, pronouns, determiners, conjunctions, auxiliary verbs while the latter encompasses content words such as nouns, adjectives, adverbs, and main verbs; besides, there are also numerals and interjections in English, and thus all together there are eleven kinds of words. On the other hand, Chinese has twelve parts of speech: nouns, verbs, adjectives, numerals, numeral classifiers, adverbs, pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions, auxiliaries, interjections, and words indicating mood, as mentioned in *Modern Chinese* by Zhou (1985, p. 29). From the above classifications, we can see that the so-called Chinese numeral classifiers are totally absent in English, and what we have in English are unit nouns which does not belong to any part of speech, as they are combinations of words. Furthermore, the functions that they serve are different. In

English, unit nouns can also be called the measure partitives that “relate to precise quantities denoting length, area, volume, and weight.” (Zhao, 1999, p. 213). On the other hand, Chinese numeral classifiers serve as units of measuring quantity that are used to modify people, things, or action (Zhou, 1985, p. 45), according to which we have numeral classifiers that modify people and things (e.g., 寸、件、帮), those that modify action (e.g., 趟) and those called complex classifiers, usually the combinations of two to three numeral classifiers (e.g., 架次、吨公里). Generally speaking, the Chinese numeral classifiers should follow numerals but sometimes they can be used without numerals especially when the numeral indicates “oneness”; sometimes they can be repeated for rhetorical purposes; sometimes they carry cultural hues. Therefore, it is justified to say that numeral classifiers are unique to the Chinese language, and there are no equivalents for them in English. Yet this does not mean that Chinese numeral classifiers can find no ways to express themselves into English at all. The fact is that some of their meanings can be easily translated into English, but some cannot, especially those that carry cultural and rhetorical hues. Despite all this, we cannot tell for sure where it is translatable and where it is untranslatable, because both translatability and untranslatability are placed along the scale of equivalence, a somewhat fuzzy term, which will be the focus of this article.

3. The Translation of Chinese Numeral Classifiers into English

Most people take it for granted that Chinese numeral classifiers can be translated literally into English unit nouns, therefore we will perceive the translation of Chinese numeral classifiers by making distinctions between them. Differences between Chinese numeral classifiers and English partitive unit nouns abound not only in their structures but also in their usages: Chinese numeral classifiers usually take the form of individual words like “两”, “辆”, “群”, “块”, and “层”, while English partitive unit nouns are commonly known as “a+n₁+of+n₂” (singular) and “two/three (numerals indicating more than one)+n₁ (plural)+of+n₂” (plural/singular), for example, “a fit of anger”, “a litter of kittens”, “a pair of trousers” and “three pieces of news”; Chinese numeral classifiers have no morphological changes (singular or plural), while English unit nouns have; Chinese numeral classifiers sometimes can be repeated for rhetorical purposes and rhythmical beauty while English unit nouns cannot; Chinese numeral classifiers can be used to indicate the quantity not only of people and things which are usually nouns, but also of action which are most often in the form of verbs, while English unit nouns cannot modify verbs and if they have to, the verbs have to first of all be converted into nouns. Due to these differences, different Chinese numeral classifiers can sometimes be translated by resorting to the same pattern (many-one relationship); sometimes one Chinese numeral classifier can be translated differently into English, usually unit nouns (one-many relationship); sometimes one Chinese numeral classifier can be translated differently but there needs some modification (one-many, plus modification relationship); sometimes Chinese numeral classifiers fail to find any translated version in English (one-zero relationship). In the following part, we will discuss all these phenomena in the translation of Chinese numeral classifiers into English.

3.1 Many-One Relationship

Many-one relationship is most prominent when there is the least or even no emotional elements involved and the emphasis is on the numeral but not the classifier. Actually, if we want to stress the number, we usually choose “one” instead. Under this occasion, even though the Chinese numeral classifiers used are various, they can either be translated into numeral nouns (singular or plural) or indefinite determiner pronouns (e.g., “many”, “some” and “several”). For instance, “五床被”, “几所房屋”, and “两列货车” can be translated as “five quilts”, “several houses”, and “two freight trains”. Another magic word in English is “a”, because it can serve as the translated English version for dozens of combinations of Chinese numerals and numeral classifiers. For example, “一张椅子”, “一只鸟”, “一头牛”, “一个人”, “一块石头”, “一棵树”, “一本书”, “一座山”, and “一件衬衫” can all be translated into English by resorting to “a+noun (singular)”: “a chair”, “a bird”, “a cow”, “a man/person”, “a stone”, “a tree”, “a book”, and “a mountain”. Definitely, one requisite for this kind of translation is that the nouns must be countable, but this is not the golden rule all the time because “两杯咖啡” and “两条面包” can also be translated into “two coffees” and “two rolls” even though both “coffee” and “bread” are uncountable in English.

3.2 One-Many Relationship

The high frequency of one-many relationship in the translation of Chinese numeral classifiers into English can be attested by the attention it gets as in Hu (1987), Xu (1997), Huang (2002), and Wu (1999). This kind of Chinese numeral classifiers can be translated differently but usually in the form of “a+n₁+of+n₂”. To name just a few, both “片” and “层” fall into this category. We can use the same numeral classifier “片” in “一片火海”, “一片沃土”, “一片椰林”, “一片欢腾”, “一片旷野”, “一片雪花”, “一片黄瓜”, “一片辉煌的灯火” and “一片抗议声”, but in English we have to adopt various “n₁s” when using the English unit nouns. Actually the English

versions of the above can be “a sheet of flame”, “a tract of rich farmland”, “a grove of coconut”, “a scene of great rejoicing”, “a stretch of open country”, “a fleck of snow”, “a slice of cucumber”, “a blaze of lights”, and “a chorus of protest”. It is also the case with “层”, as we can use it in “一层砖”, “一层雾”, “一层光油”, “一层灰尘”, “一层锈”, “一层雪”, but their English counterparts are “a layer of bricks”, “a veil of mist”, “a coat of varnish”, “a film/coating of dust”, “a flake of rust”, and “a mantle/cloak of snow”. All this shows that one Chinese numeral classifier can modify a lot of things such as natural phenomena, plants. From the one-many relationship, we can sense the fuzziness of Chinese numeral classifiers or even the Chinese language. The underlying reason of this may be the lexical psychology of different nations: different social needs may decide the naming process of the world, namely, the more useful or important a thing is in their life, the more specific the names people will give to the world. However, it does not necessarily mean that certain countries should have countless names for everything, but they may be very specific in some aspects but remain vague in others. For instance, ancient China had more names for horses than now simply because horses were very important vehicles of transportation then; while Eskimos have the most names for snow mainly because snow is the most important thing in their life and they have to tell slight differences of in size or even shape. This lexical psychology also determines the vagueness of certain Chinese numeral classifiers, as in the Chinese’s eyes it is not necessary to differentiate those slight differences; besides, vagueness of these numeral classifiers does not hinder their communication or understanding.

3.3 One-Many Relationship plus Necessary Modification

Due to the vagueness of some Chinese numeral classifiers, the Chinese language has to be marked (compared with the English language) if it wants to be specific. The Chinese numeral classifier “群” is also vague, as it can be used to describe both people and animals, and both commendatorily and neutrally or even derogatorily. Even when describing people, it can refer to different kinds of people, thus in order to be more exact and specific it has to be marked, usually by adjectives. For instance, we can say “一群拥挤的人”, “一群散落的人”, “一群乌合之众”, “一群蜂拥的人”, “一大群人” and “一群饶舌妇” which are translated into English as “a crowd of people”, “a multitude of people”, “a gang of people”, “a throng of people”, “a host of people (or) a large crowd of people” and “a gaggle of women”. From all this, we can see that this kind of Chinese numeral classifiers are vague but they may be marked to express more specific meanings, yet when they are translated into English, usually into unit nouns, English unit nouns are unmarked and only adopt different N₁s, usually synonyms to convey different shades of meaning in English. Actually, markedness is one of the ways for vague Chinese numeral classifiers to make slight differences clear and prominent.

3.4 One-Zero Relationship

By one-zero relationship, we are saying that some Chinese numeral classifiers cannot be translated into English, or at least they can find no ways to fully translate themselves (because of the cultural hues, the rhetorical functions or rhythmic beauty they have). Besides those fixed or regular numeral classifiers, the Chinese language also abounds in temporary numeral classifiers, which are generally borrowed from nouns and verbs. Most probably, the Chinese are familiar with “一裙子水”, “一鞋子沙”, and “一脑子坏主意”, which cannot be translated even though in English we have “a mouthful of food” and “a handful of candies”. The above three examples are mostly informal and colloquial, but we also have more formal ones like “一纸诉状”, “一腔热血”, “一片痴情”. “纸”, “腔” and “片” cannot be translated literally into “paper”, “cavity” and “piece”, because these words are used here simply for emotional and rhetorical reasons. Chinese numeral classifiers like “剪” in “一剪梅” and “刀” in “一刀纸” often fail to be fully translated into English. “剪”, if used without suffixes like “子” often serves as a verb, while “刀” is usually a noun. With “剪”, “一剪梅” refers to a twig of blossom cut from the tree by scissors; while with “刀”, “一刀纸” refers to the amount of paper cut by a knife. All this makes “一剪梅” and “一刀纸” dynamic and lively. In literary writing, Chinese numeral classifiers sometimes can enhance the force of the writing and the power of attracting readers. Examples of this are “十丈红尘”, “一帘幽梦”, “半堤芳草”, “一帆冷雨” and “一掬” in “一掬吴山在眼中, 楼台累累间青红” which not only serve rhetorical functions but also carry literary images. Besides all this, Chinese numeral classifiers can be repeated to create rhythmic beauty, to convey strong feelings or to emphasize certain points. Actually, the Chinese may not be strange with things like “条条大路通罗马”, “天上白云朵朵, 岸边海风阵阵”, “阵阵掌声”, where “条”, “朵” and “阵” are repeated respectively for rhythmic beauty. On the contrary, this cannot be the case in English.

4. Analysis of Translatability and Untranslatability

In the above part, we have discussed that there are no equivalents in English for Chinese numeral classifiers and the problems encountered in the translation of Chinese numeral classifiers. And now we are going to explore what makes it so. Chinese and English belong to two different language families: Sino-Tibetan and

Indo-European, but undeniably there are things in them that can be inter-translated. Thus our focus will be untranslatability. As is known, the Chinese language is very different from the English language, which at the base is the difference between their smallest units—the Chinese character (字) and the English morpheme (Xu, 1997, p. 13). The Chinese character is the embodiment of sound, form and meaning; while the English morpheme sometimes has to be combined with other morphemes to form words. Undeniably, English morphemes have meanings (either grammatical or semantical) and sounds, but they cannot equal the Chinese characters that can be used separately and freely while in English we have a hierarchy of sounds, morphemes, words, phrases, sentences and then texts. It follows that Chinese numeral classifiers are also combinations of sound, form and meaning; while English unit nouns are combinations of several words with N_1 , the modifying word and N_2 , the modified word. As is known, Chinese has its origin in pictograms and ideograms, “the more ‘picture-like’ forms are pictograms, the more abstract, derived forms are ideograms” (Yule, 2000, p. 10). Undeniably, the Chinese language has developed and some of its characters have become logograms “as representative of the meanings of words” (Yule, 2000, p. 11); however, some Chinese characters are still characteristic of pictograms and ideograms. All this makes it possible to repeat Chinese numeral classifiers, impart literary images and rhetorical functions to them. In addition, some Chinese numeral classifiers are greatly influenced by the long Chinese history and its culture, and thus becoming culturally loaded. Therefore, there is untranslatability in the translation of Chinese numeral classifiers into English.

As is shown above, though there are many-one, one-many and one-many plus modification relationships, there is one-zero relationship in the translation of Chinese numeral classifiers as well; therefore, there exist both translatability and untranslatability in this translation process. However, there is no definite translatability and untranslatability in this kind of translation, as both of them are located at some point along the scale of equivalence, for the translator is specific and the text is uncertain. The task is then how to attain equivalence. By equivalence, we do not mean formal equivalence, word-by-word equivalence or even total equivalence. In fact, to achieve full equivalence is almost impossible, as a simple Chinese numeral classifier sometimes can be an embodiment of denotation, connotation and the cultural or emotional elements. Then the way out is that we should, by observing syntactic rules and idiomatic usages and considering the acceptability of readers of the target language, make certain adaptations to guarantee that the most important meaning is translated and as much information as possible is conveyed, so that the maximum equivalence between the source language and the target language is achieved. As for adaptation, Xujun once mentioned that we should be flexible at all language levels such as phonology, vocabulary, grammar, and rhetoric (Lin, 1997, p. 47). It must be admitted that after adaptation, the translated version may seem to deviate from the original, but this does not mean treason or unfaithful. After all, translation is never translating form, but content (Ma, 2000, p. 103). To put it another way, by equivalence or rather maximum equivalence, the attainment of the original flavor is preferred.

5. Conclusion

Due to differences between Chinese and English, there exist both translatability and untranslatability in the translation of Chinese numeral classifiers into English. As translatability and untranslatability are both located at some point along the scale of equivalence, the task then is the attainment of equivalence. However, total equivalence is impossible, and thus the way out is to attain maximum equivalence, or rather the original flavor which means to convey first of all the most important meaning and then as much information as possible.

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