

# Journalistic English Translation from the Cultural Perspective

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## Abstract

With the deepening of reform and opening-up in China, the past decades have witnessed dramatic development in science and technology and the international communication has become increasingly important. Our world cannot take on such a new look without the transmission of information. Journalistic language, an effective way of transmitting information, is exerting great influence on people's everyday life and attracts constant attention. And its great importance is self-evident. Based on a comprehensive study on the previous researches made by many experts in this field, this paper shoots for a fresh aspect which has been all the time neglected and is mainly devoted to the research and exploration of cultural discrepancies in the translation of journalistic English.

The paper introduces the classification of news and then outlines the news value determiner and dwells on the cultural discrepancies in the translation of journalistic English. Strategies for translation of cultural factors in journalistic English are elaborated on with examples.

**Keywords:** journalistic English, translation, culture perspective

## 1. Introduction

Every minute, every second witnesses a lot of events taking place across the globe—accidents, natural calamities, fights, strikes, discoveries, meetings, sports contests, and so on. Though, only a tiny proportion of these are considered by journalists to be news and only a tiny proportion of the news gathered by any newspaper or broadcast station actually gets into print or on the air, there is news everywhere and every minute. Thanks to news transmission, people get to know what is happening right now both at home and abroad. Nobody will deny the fact that news has become an indispensable part in their daily life. More importantly, international news has become an ideal way for common people to observe the external world.

It is news translation that bridges the gap between people of different cultural background. Therefore, news translation plays an extremely important role in promoting international communication and understanding. Since in today's China a great majority of international news is originally written in English, the current study will focus on the translation of news English, or rather, journalistic English.

## 2. Culture and Translation

What is the most difficult problem in translation? As Wang Zuoliang says in "Translation and Cultural Boom", "The difference of two cultures. What goes without saying in one culture has to be explained with great effort in another culture; what you do not have to explain to native readers has to be explained to foreign readers." (Note 1)

Culture and translation are being increasingly linked. Communication between different cultures can only be achieved through translation. And the ultimate goal of translation is to facilitate a better communication between people from different cultures. Translation means not only transferring the denotative meaning of a word or a phrase from one language into another, but also conveying cultural information from one language into another. From the perspective of intercultural communication, translation is in fact a cultural product of the original work produced by the translator. In other words, Translation is, in every sense, a cultural activity.

## 3. Cultural Analysis of Journalistic English

Language is the carrier of culture, and culture is deeply rooted in language. One cannot exist without the other. Translation is not merely the transformation from source language into target language but the transplantation of two different cultures. As a result, translation should be studied under specific cultural background. At least two

types of cultures are involved in the journalistic translation. Consequently, cultural elements can not be avoided in the process of journalistic English rendition. And those cultural elements can be categorized into several groups, namely, words and phrases born with the cultural meanings, the cultural background, and the ideological discrepancies.

### 3.1 Culture-Specific Words

Culture-specific words are one of the features of journalistic English writing, which represent rich cultural connotations and at the same time cause a cultural gap between the source language and the target language. Therefore, great emphasis should be laid on the intercultural translation during the course of rendering journalistic English.

Actually a certain language, especially its words and phrases, embodies the spiritual and material accumulation of a nation in which that language is used. And that very spiritual and material accumulation the words and phrases embody is the so called cultural meaning.

As is known to all, our contemporary world has become “a global village”. The worldwide interdependence requires a continuous exchange of information. Journalism is considered as the best expressing media of the ever-changing world of politics, economy, technology, social life, etc.. It includes almost every aspect of our social and cultural life. Therefore, the journalistic text is one of the most authentic, precise and direct resources and carriers of the cultural words, from which people can learn about the other culture and cultural phenomena.

Professor Duanmu Yiwan once cited a paragraph from Times:

These are the humble makings of a new American revolution in progress: Macaroni and cheese. Timex watches, Volunteer work, Savings accounts, Domestic beer, Local activism, Sleds, Pajamas, Sentimental movies, Mixed-breed dogs, Bicycles, Cloth diapers, Small-town ways, Iceberg lettuce, Family reunions, Board game, Hang-it-yourself wall paper, Push-it-yourself lawn mowers, Silly Putty. (*Times*, April 8, 1991)

This short paragraph contains neither complex sentence patterns nor strange words or phrases. But it is no easy for most Chinese readers to understand thoroughly. The reason, as Pro. Duanmu Yiwan presumed, is that many words and phrases in this passage are loaded with cultural meanings which tend to hinder us from appreciating it thoroughly. He then supplied us with the Chinese version of the paragraph.

美国人又回到了传统的生活方式：他们吃的是便宜的通心面、奶酪和生菜，喝的是国产啤酒，而不是法国葡萄酒、俄罗斯伏特加；穿的是传统睡衣，而不是法国式薄如蝉翼、妖冶撩人的女睡衣；戴的是国产普通手表，而不是劳力士名表；养的宠物是廉价的杂种狗，而不是纯种狗；健身方式经济简单：汽车、滑雪，而不是花高价去健身房；他们更关心家庭，喜欢阖家欢聚，亲朋好友室内下棋、享受天伦之乐；他们也关心社会，自愿为社区服务；他们在经济上能省则省，自己装修，自己修剪草坪；小孩尿布不再是一次性的而是可以多次使用的布的；儿童玩具不是电动玩具而是弹性橡皮泥；人们不再留恋大城市大公司的高薪工作，而是回到乡镇，这里彼此熟悉，环境清静，既有安全感，又有人间温情。(Note 2)

After comparing the original English news story with the Chinese version provided by Pro. Duanmu, we can easily find that the original news story consists of 51 English words while the translated version has 331 Chinese characters. The obvious reason for this is the cultural discrepancies carried by the words and phrases. It is just the culture-specific words that lead to the lengthy explanations of the original.

### 3.2 Cultural Background in Journalistic Texts

Cultural background is a striking feature of journalistic English. It is widely acknowledged that in journalistic translation lacking of cultural knowledge always leads to mistranslation. “Different cultural backgrounds give rise to different norms and values. Some norms are called ‘folkways’....Others with relatively stronger binding force are called standards.” (Note 3)

In news translation, cultural differences are the most difficult problem to deal with. The message encoded in one cultural background may be decoded quite differently in another. Sometimes, if readers do not know the background of the news, they could not even understand it, let alone translate it into the target language.

Each country has its own culture. As is known to all, China is a nation with a history of as long as 5000 years, and there is no denying the fact that western countries have undergone long histories, too. In historical process, there must be something gifted with special meanings resulting from the social heritage. So naturally, languages have their own Features. When translating the news, the journalists should be alert on some idioms or jargons so as to ensure whether their translated version can be understood by the target readers or not.

In Chinese, “dog” bears derogatory sense while Westerners always praise one another with this word. For

example, “old dog” in English has the rhetoric meaning of “old and experienced person”. Therefore, the rendition of “old dog” is not “老狗” in Chinese. So if you attempt to translate one sentence “if the dog barks, he gives council”, you should translate in this way: “不听老人言, 吃亏在眼前”. One more example to illustrate the point, in English cultural background, the dragon is often associated with cruelty and evil people. However, in the dynastic times in China, “龙” has a cultural implication different from that of the English word “dragon”. It is viewed as a symbol of royalty. As an auspicious creature that supposedly brings good luck, the dragon gave rise to the saying that parents “望子成龙”—longing to see one’s son become a dragon, that is, be successful.

Therefore, during the process of translation, culture background must be seriously taken into account. Only in this way can journalistic English be translated perfectly into other languages.

### 3.3 Ideological Discrepancies in Journalistic English

Emphasis on the ideological dimension of translation is a conquest of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ideological discrepancies are often found in journalistic texts. It is most likely that news translators will be confronted with the direct and sharp conflict between two cultures, including ideologies, moral systems and socio-political structures, for example, the different attitude toward the sensitive political issues of Sino-US relations, Taiwan problems and so on.

An example taken from The New York Times will be used to better illustrate this point:

Communist China insists self-governing, democratic Taiwan is part of its territory and alternately uses diplomacy and threats to push for unification. (*The New York Times*, March 21, 2006)

As is known to all, Taiwan was a part of China in history, just for the reason it can’t be back to our motherland up to now. In this report, two adjectives “self-governing” and “democratic” are used to modify Taiwan. The ideological discrepancy is obvious here. Their attempt to set Taiwan apart from the mainland is evident. Therefore, “self-governing” and “democratic” cannot be translated as “自治的” and “民主的” directly. In actual practice of translation, these two adjectives can be omitted so as to eliminate the ideological discrepancy here.

For example:

Beijing—the new Chinese government will continue to follow unswervingly the policy of peaceful reunification of the motherland on basis of “one country, two systems”, said new Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao here. (*China Daily*, March 19, 2003)

Here “reunification” is used to emphasize that Taiwan has been one part of China. This simple word, clearly expressed the meaning of the news, at the same time expressing the general stand on the problem, namely, Taiwan is a part of China.

## 4. Translation Strategies of Cultural Factors in Journalistic English

English newspapers, as a means of information carrier, are becoming indispensable in people’s life. As cultural and information carrier, news plays an important role in international communication, especially in spreading news outside or receiving news. Under such circumstances, news translation plays an important role in improving mutual communication. It helps the readers mastering one language to get the information collected and reported in another language. The main purpose of news translation is to transmit information, and meanwhile, the efficiency and accuracy of the news must be taken into account.

### 4.1 Translation Methods for Culture-Specific Words

In the process of journalistic English translation, translators should conform to the target culture in the target language so as to have better communicative function and achieve the ideal purpose. When translating, translators should know the connotation and cultural meaning of culture-specific words besides their literal meaning because people in different culture have different understanding and recognition due to the difference in language, culture, politics and customs.

In the following part, some methods will be presented that are frequently used in the translation of culture-specific words in journalistic English in an inclusive and exemplifying manner.

#### 4.1.1 Transliteration

Transliteration, the transference of sounds from one phonological system to another or rendering according to pronunciation, is a frequently adopted method to translate those household nouns with a particular cultural flavor. More and more westerners are increasingly interested in Chinese “ping-pong” (乒乓), “kungfu” (功夫), “tai chi chuan” (太极拳), Hong Kong (香港), Confucius (孔夫子), kowtow (磕头), etc.

For example:

1. It is common in kung fu for a beginner to be taught by a high-ranking student, and Wong was one of Yip's best. 功夫 (Time, P73, August 15-22, 2005)

2. The show, which covers the reigns of emperors Kang-hsi, Yung Cheng and Chien-lung, consists of 400 objects mostly on loan from Beijing's Palace Museum. 康熙、雍正、乾隆 (Newsweek P54, Nov. 21, 2005)

#### 4.1.2 Transliteration with Explanation

This method attempts to translate words into Chinese according to its pronunciation plus an explanation so as to give readers a clearer picture of the original idea. Proper explanation followed functions as a brief and intermediate method to promote cultural exchanges. e.g., Hamas: 哈马斯组织 Euro: 欧元 Grammy: 格莱美音乐奖 Baroque: 巴洛克艺术 domino: 多米诺骨牌 El Nino: 厄尔尼诺现象.

More examples:

1. Eighteen hundred years ago, an emperor fond of its forests named the area Anji, which means "peaceful auspiciousness". 安吉 (Time P40, Dec. 5, 2005)

2. The flow of Chinese from rural villages to cities has swelled into a mangliu, or peasant flood, and it is perhaps natural that outsiders tend to dwell on the dangers. 盲流 (Newsweek P51, Dec.12, 2005)

#### 4.1.3 Literal Translation

Literal translation is also called word-for-word translation. Peter Newmark says that "literal translation is the first step in translation" (Newmark, 2004:76). The truth is a proper literal translation is more helpful and effective in the transferring of a cultural message by its retaining the original taste that is within the reach of the reader.

The death of the Princess of Wales unleashed outpourings of newly-coined honorifics, for instance "a present-day Cinderella whose clock struck midnight all too soon."

戴安娜王妃的逝世导致了大量新敬语的产生, 比如“一个当代灰姑娘的故事, 只是午夜钟声过早地敲响”(Note 4)

Here "the Princess of Wales" just refers to Diana. The famous tale of Cinderella is cited to indicate that Diana comes from an ordinary family but is married to the British prince, somewhat like Cinderella. In the tale, Cinderella gets sympathy from the fairy to attend the party held in the Palace but is required to come back before midnight. Otherwise, the horse and carriage will be cat and pumpkin again. "Whose clock struck midnight all too soon" indicates that Diana dies too early. Therefore this literary quotation can be translated literally as "当代灰姑娘, 只是午夜钟声过早地敲响".

#### 4.1.4 Literal Translation with Explanation

Each language has a lot of underlying information which the native can perceive without much explanation. However, no receptors of a translation can be as completely informed of the background information in the source text, and hence be in a position to understand and appreciate the message which is known only from the cultural context. As a result, when a literal translation is inadequate to express the hidden information or the function of the original message, an explanation is necessary.

*It was Friday and soon they'd go out and get drunk.*

星期五发薪日到了, 他们马上要上街去喝个酩酊大醉。(Note 5)

In Britain, workers get their wages on Friday. The Chinese people are less likely to have knowledge about this. Therefore, the explanation "发薪日" is added so as to make the Chinese version easily understood, and at the same time the cultural flavor is retained.

### 4.2 Translation Methods for Cultural Background in Journalistic Texts

#### 4.2.1 Interpretive Translation

The strategy of interpretive translation is one to deal with the problem caused by those language items when it is difficult to retain completely or directly their strong national color of the source language. The aim of this approach is to communicate information by conveying the implied or associative meanings of the original text, but meanwhile, its national and cultural features are lost. To achieve this purpose, the translators must process the original words in a proper way according to the customs of the target languages and the acceptability of the readers. There are many ways of processing, including addition, deletion, the transformation of words, positive approach and reverse translation, to name a few. All these methods are the interpretation of the original words. Here are some case studies for illustrations.

For instance, “Good Friday Accord” is always rendered as “美丽星期五协议”. Actually, Good Friday is a religious holiday on which Jesus suffered from death in cross, consequently, it should be put into “耶稣受难日协议”.

Sometimes even those most frequently-used words prove to be a constant headache for a translator.

*French symbol (the Eiffel Tower) still has that special something.* (21st Century, Jan. 2, 2003)

If the method of literally translation is adopted here and this sentence is rendered as “法兰西的象征还有那么一些特别的东西”, the flavor of the original language is completely lost with the intended message being vaguely conveyed. Therefore, in order to avoid misreading, an idiomatic expression in the target language culture is found and the above sentence may be rendered in a tentative manner as “法兰西的象征至今风采犹存”. (Note 6)

#### 4.2.2 Adaptation

As is known to all, faithfulness used to be regarded as the basic rule in translation in the history of translation in China as well as in the West. Nowadays, concerns has shifted to the target information and target audiences of rendering texts, therefore adaptation is becoming increasingly important in translation than ever.

Adapted translation is a kind of translation method of combining edition and translation. Translators must adapt and reorganize the source text, then do translation by using adapted translation. The purposes of adaptation and reorganization are, on one hand, to make the source text so perfect that can be accepted by the readers, and on the other hand to make the source text in a clear and orderly manner.

The Christmas decision to send troops into Panama has gone down well at home. A Newsweek poll found that 80% of Americans approved of the invasion. Among Democrats, normally suspicious of Republican Rambolism, 74% did so.

圣诞节做出的巴拿马发兵的决定在国内颇受拥护。《新闻周刊》的一项民意调查表明，80%的美国人赞成入侵。通常对共和党的兰博式好战精神持怀疑态度的民主党人中也有74%赞成此举。(Note 7)

Rambo is the hero in the movie of The First Blood and he bears the brave and warlike feature. His image has already melted into American culture.

#### 4.3 Adaptation in Translation of Ideological Discrepancies

Ideology refers to ideas, value concepts, and assumptions, cultural or political, which are related to the power and authority of persons or institutions in a specific society. Ideological adaptation discussed here means the changes that are made in the target language as appropriate so that the translated text is in line with the ideological structure, especially political correctness, of the target language readers.

Fleischer insisted the surveillance flights would resume but the timing was unclear. (Reuters, 4/17/2001)

弗莱彻坚持说对中国沿岸的间谍侦察飞行将继续，只是时间尚未确定。

It is known to all that the American spy flight clashed the Chinese surveillance flight on April 1, 2001, and it is considered the most serious military friction between China and the USA since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries. The Chinese government commanded America to stop the spy action, but owing to its political stand, Reuters news didn't think that was “a spy action”, or “surveillance along Chinese coastal lines”, but only used a neutral word “surveillance flights”. As a result, when translating, the method of adaptation should be applied, the background information should be supplied, but it is not necessary to depict the whole happenings because there are abundant Chinese news reports readers can refer to.

### 5. Conclusion

The cultural factors of translation have been laid more and more emphasis on in the past decades. Scholars and experts in this field recognize that translation is not merely an information-transmitting process, but a “culture transcending process” (Note 8).

This paper explores the translation of journalistic English from a cultural perspective. Journalistic translation is playing an increasingly important role in the accelerating cross-cultural interaction in the 21st century. Undoubtedly, journalistic English translation can make a good branch of translation studies. The study of journalism translation must be carried out in a combination of journalism writing and translation theories. Journalistic English translation is supposed to subject to certain criteria, which are determined by the nature of translation and the more importantly by the specific purposes of translation.

All in all, the Chinese translation of journalistic English still has a long way to go. We must adhere to the study

and research of the theories and techniques it involves, and keep up the spirit of devotion to the translation cause.

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