An Analysis of Mongolian Culture-Loaded Words and Their Translation Strategies

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Abstract

With massive cultural exchanges in the world, the translation of culture-loaded words is drawing the attention of translators. Because of different cultural backgrounds and mentalities, the translation of culture-loaded words may lead to misunderstanding or confusion to target readers. Thus, a good mastery of culture-loaded words is a must for translating. In this paper, the authors will mainly analyze the basic information of Mongolian culture-loaded words and give some translation strategies to it, hoping it can be useful to the translation of Mongolian culture-loaded words in the future.

Keyword: culture-loaded words, Mongolian culture, translation strategies

1. Introduction to Culture-Loaded Words and the Influence of Environmental Factor on Mongolian Culture

As a matter of fact, culture is so complicated and abstract that we cannot define what "culture" is in a few words. There are various definitions about culture given by linguists, translators and anthropologists from the different perspectives of culture. For example, Mary Snell-Hornby, a German translation theorist, noted culture as: "Culture is everything one needs to know, master and fuel in order to judge where people's behavior conforms to or deviates from what is expected from them in their social roles, and in order to make one's own behavior conform to the expectations of the society concerned—unless one is prepared to take the consequences of deviant behavior." (Snell-Hornby, 2001, p. 39) Edward Tylor, the father of anthropology said, "culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." (Tylor, 1871, p. 1)

To some degree, language and culture are indispensable from each other. Being a part of culture, language is also an important carrier for it. Susan Bassnett once compared language to the heart surrounded by culture as body (Bassnett, 2001, p. 14). Claire Kramsch defined their relationship as: "To begin with, the words people utter refer to common experience. They express facts, ideas or events that are communicable because they refer to a stock of knowledge about the world that other people share. Words also reflect their writer's attitudes and beliefs, their points of view, which are also those of others. In both cases, language expresses cultural reality" (Kramsch, 1988, p. 3). In general, there is no language on earth existing without culture. As a matter of fact, language is the hallmark of human activities, and embodies not only natural environment, history, custom, tradition but also people's religious belief, mentality, views on values, etc. And all these belong to the field of culture. Because of the influence of specific culture, language becomes unique and diversified, and reflects local custom and tradition. And the cultural differences in languages are not only about religious belief but also some things concerning every organic part of the culture. We can say without exaggeration that almost all the achievements we have been making in the past, such as literature, religion, philosophy, science, technology and economy, share the same breath with language, which indicates that the whole acquisition about these fields we have got are based on language.

And as a basic part of language, vocabulary stands for authentic national cultural characteristics, and is the most distinctive feature in language. Thus, we can name these words with national characteristics as "culture-loaded words" which distinguish the language in the long course of history. When it comes to culture-loaded words, by definition, "they are words loaded with specific national culture. They are the direct or indirect reflection of national culture in the structure of lexemes" (Hu, 1999, p. 64). Culture-loaded words are the ones that can best

embody the cultural information that a language carries, and also reflect social life. Culture-loaded words include cultural specialties, idioms, allusions, and figurative expressions. Generally speaking, culture-loaded words can be classified into the following categories, which are exclusive national vocabulary, and common vocabulary and idioms with the connotation of national culture. The exclusive national vocabulary means that these words are special and relatively exclusive or non-equivalent in semantic level compared with other languages. There is no doubt to say that the exclusiveness is the most distinctive feature of culture-loaded words, and reflects national culture directly or indirectly in lexical level. On account of different living environments and religious beliefs, different mentalities and perceptions are expressed in languages. For example, the culture-loaded words like "八股文" (stereotyped writing), "七言律诗" (seven-character octave) and "旗袍" (cheongsam) are exclusive in Chinese while the culture-loaded words like "Pandora's Box", "Judas" and "Paradise" are exclusive in English, as leaves a gap in cultural exchanges. As for the second category, it means that besides the common meanings of these words, there are some special implications or associative meanings in certain language. All these implications and associative meanings take root in its national culture and in return constitute special cultural characteristics as well. And the various implications and associative meanings in the culture-loaded words are still due to different social and environmental conditions. It is understandable that people may form different ideas and appraisals towards the same thing in the different countries. The word "dragon" is a good example to demonstrate this. From the perspective of Chinese culture, dragon is a symbol of power, dignity and luck which is connected with a positive meaning in the life. On the contrary, "dragon" is a symbol of malevolence or devil that relates to a negative meaning from the perspective of western culture.

On the whole, there are many factors which are decisive in the formation of the culture-loaded words. And natural geographical environment is an important one. The cultural tradition of certain ethnic group is the crystallization of different cultural elements which are determined by natural and social environment where people lives in. People are the ones who live in the environment, create their own history and gradually alter their local natural conditions. In return, geographical environment is the prerequisite for certain culture to emerge, exist and develop.

Concerning Mongolian culture, the word "Mongolia" originally referred to one tribe in the grassland. After the unification of the Mongol Empire by Genghis Khan, a new national community came into being and was named as "Mongolia". Meanwhile, they created their own language system—Mongolian. Mongolian, with a history of almost 800 years, is one of the oldest ethnic languages in the world, and is based on the Uighur language and affiliated to Altaic language family. Nowadays, the existing Mongolian has five vowel letters (two of them stand for two vowels respectively, so Mongolian has seven vowels in total) and twenty-four consonants. And the writing ways of these letters vary, which means that they depend on their positions in the words. In China, Mongolian was mainly used in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, Qinghai Province, Gansu Province, Liaoning Province, Jilin Province and Heilongjiang Province. In terms of natural geographical environment, the unique geographical conditions of Mongolian plateau offer Mongolian people primitive living space and possibility to create culture. Mongolian plateau leans against the Great Xing'an Ranges in the east, borders on Yinshan Mountains in the south, neighbors with Altai Mountains in the southwest and is separated by Sayan Mountains and Kent Mountains in the north, and is comparatively isolated from the other parts of China. The harsh natural conditions cultivate the way of local people to produce and live, and also give an impact on forming traditional culture. In the history of survival and advancement with the nature, Mongolian people form their own ways of praying, like nature worship, animal and plant worship, ghost worship, ancestor worship and totem worship. All these exert a profound significance to the formation and development of traditional Mongolian culture. At the same time, Mongolian people, who live mainly by nomadic herding, creates northern grassland culture based on this kind of unique geographical conditions.

Under the influence of natural geographical conditions, many Mongolian culture-loaded words came into being and can be divided into three categories, namely, material terms, conceptual terms and behavioral terms.

2. Culture-Loaded Words in Mongolian Culture

2.1 Material Terms in Mongolian Culture

Material terms refer to household items, material, geographical and custom words which mainly cover people's daily life. It is the grassland culture centering on nomadism that endows Mongolian people unique cultural traditions through years of survival and produce. At the same time, their lifestyle, strategy of warfare as well as entertainment are full of the characteristics of nomadic culture. In this way, many Mongolian words are the reflection of Mongolian nomadic life, and may become gap words in the western languages featuring industrial civilization. For example, there are some unique words in Mongolian food: "炒米" (Mongolian fried millet), "奶

茶" (Mongolian milk tea), "烤全羊" (roast whole lamb), "牛肉干" (beef jerky), "涮羊肉" (instant-boiled mutton), etc. Also the unique words in Mongolian clothing: "蒙古袍" (Mongolian robe), "蒙古靴" (Mongolian boot), etc. In addition, some words are in line with natural area or administrative zone, such as "戈壁" (Gobi desert), "旗" (Banner, an administrative unit roughly equivalent to a county), "盟" (League, an administrative unit roughly equivalent to a prefecture), etc.

2.2 Conceptual Terms in Mongolian Culture

Conceptual terms refer to the words of religious belief, social rule and view on values that pertain to the field of ideology. Besides the ordinary connotation of nature worship, the priority of life and harmonious coexistence between people and nature, there are some unique cores about religious belief in Mongolian culture. For instance, "Tengger" (Mongol heaven) worship is the core of Mongolian religious belief. In the eyes of Mongolian people, they believe that the "Tengger" is the highest domination in the world. The primitive religion that Mongolian people believed in is Shamanism; it was on the basis of nomadic economy and became Mongolian people's own religion. From the perspective of Shamanism, all the wealth that people have is blessed by the "Tengger". The typical example of this Mongolian religion is the action of "sacrificing Obo", which comes from the idea that Mongolian people believe that the god lives everywhere in the grassland and the Obo is a symbol of the god's residence. Nowadays, Obo—heap of stones is also used by the Mongolian and Tibetan as markings for roads or boundaries. Until now, whenever people see an Obo in the grassland, they will always pay a visit to it and put some rocks on the Obo as the way of praying. But unfortunately, only "萨满教" has its counterpart "Shamanism" in translated English version, other Mongolian cultural words like "腾格里" (Tengger) and "敖包" (Obo) are still not given the authorized English-translated versions that are accepted by the mass.

2.3 Behavioral Terms in Mongolian Culture

Behavioral terms refer to the words that cover music, painting, art, literature and folk customs. Due to their natural advantage, Mongolian people who inhabited along the river and in the grassland show us that they are passionate, straightforward and skilled at singing and dancing. Similar with other ethnic groups, by integrating their lifestyle and living conditions, Mongolian people created their own literature and folk customs with special grassland characteristics. For example, *A Secret History of the Mongols* is more an ancient Mongolian literary classic than a historical record. *The Story of Gessar* and *Jangar* are crowned as the Oriental *Iliad*. With respect to behavioral terms in Mongolian culture, it is difficult for us to find an English equivalent for Mongolian words with national characteristics，such as "那达慕" (Nadam, traditional Mongolian festival), "安代舞" (Andai Dance), "马头琴" (Mongol stringed instrument with a scroll carved like a horse's head) and so forth.

3. Translation Strategies for Mongolian Culture-Loaded Words

Translation is the transfer of the meaning from source language (SL) to target language (TL). As we all know, translation is not merely the transformation in language level, we cannot only translate the linguistic symbols of SL. Translating is a kind of adaptation cross the cultures, and translators may rewrite more or less in cultural level. Take China as an example. China, with 56 nationalities in total, is an ancient Oriental country which has extensive and profound cultural deposits in its history of more than 5,000 years. With the reform and opening-up policy deepened, China's international status is keeping on the rise. As China is playing a more and more important role in the world prosperity in terms of economic growth and world peace, a lot of people in the world have great interest in Chinese culture. Meanwhile, there are tremendous changes about people's material and spiritual life as well as living standards during the global exchanges of information and culture. But too much misunderstanding of China occurs in light of Chinese mentality and cultural background during the exchanges. Therefore, we must do our best to introduce our culture with national characteristics to the whole world if China wants to be understood in depth and in range by the world and to communicate in an effective way with other countries. And translation is one of the best ways to achieve so. Then, the translation of culture-loaded words in national languages is inevitable. But due to big differences in their ways of expressiveness between Chinese and English, it is rather difficult for us to find equivalent words in English in terms of the translation of culture-loaded words in Chinese national languages (Yang, 2009, p. 220). On one hand, the translator must be familiar with the two sides' cultural characteristics. On the other hand, some translation principles about these culture-loaded words are needed.

As the authors mentioned before, culture-loaded words are full of salient national cultural characteristics, we must give priority to these culture-loaded words which can cause nonequivalence of cultural image or cultural misleading in translation. According to Liao Qiyi's opinion in his book *Exploration of Contemporary Western Translation Theories*, he summarized three principles in translating the culture-loaded words:

1) The lexical meaning of source language is superior to its formation.

2) We must take the context of source language into consideration when choosing translated word.

3) We should turn implicit meanings in source language into explicit meanings in its translated version (Liao, 2002, p. 236).

In order to achieve the same reading experience and better understanding, we should do our translation under the guidance of these translation principles. It is important and necessary to express right national connotation to the world by translation.

In addition, the role of translators is another key in this process. What he or she will face is by no means single culture-loaded word but the whole culture connotation in two languages. In the meantime, cultural awareness is a must for the translator, which means that they must be fully qualified to realize the fact that translation is information exchange both in language and culture; and the difference in culture backgrounds, similar with the gap in languages, can cause communicative disorder. Also, the translator should apprehend cultural connotation of these culture-loaded words, and give target readers the same feeling or experience as the source text readers get. In order to achieve that, the employment of translation strategies must be appropriate and the difference in cultures should be taken into consideration.

Generally Speaking, there are three methods to deal with the translation of Mongolian culture-loaded words, namely, literal translation, transliteration and literal translation with transliteration. The literal translation focuses on national cultural characteristics in culture-loaded words, which can add an exotic atmosphere to its target readers. Transliteration concentrates on receptivity and cultural practice of target readers. And the third translation strategy is a combination of the former two methods. According to the features of culture-loaded words and the degree of cultural vacancy, different translation strategies can be applied.

3.1 Literal Translation

Literal translation is a translation method by which rhetoric, national and regional characteristics are kept in the TL without violating the language rules and destroying the same expressive effect. By using literal translation, the TL becomes more vigorous and more expressive, which can give target readers broader cultural vision. It is a way that target readers may gradually accept the cultural characteristics of the SL and the TL is enriched by literal translation in return.

Because of the big gap in Mongolian and English languages, there is too much vocabulary vacancy concerning culture-loaded words in them. And literal Translation is always the first option for translation. By using literal translation, we can maintain the original structure, style and image of Mongolian words at the most without depriving its national characteristics and cultural connotation. But sometimes, target readers may still feel confused about the implication that is only accessible to SL readers through literal translation. So, to add some in-text explanation to the translation to help TL readers make sense of it is a necessity. To be more precise, for the first occasion, we can add the modifier "Mongol" or "Mongolian" that indicates specific national characteristics in front of the normal word that exists in both languages. For instance, we can translate the following culture-loaded words "蒙古包", "蒙餐", and "蒙古摔跤" into "Mongolian yurt", "Mongolian food " and "Mongolian wrestling". As for the second occasion, we can translate Mongolian word directly into English according its original meaning, then give an explanation next to its translated version. As the authors mentioned before, we can translate "旗" into "Banner, an administrative unit roughly equivalent to a county" and "盟" into "League, an administrative unit roughly equivalent to a prefecture".

Besides, Mongolian cultural connotation must be maintained as far as possible through literal translation. For example, because of the special geographical location, the Mongolian is also a nation on the horseback. They have natural affection towards the horse because the horse is an important tool for Mongolian to create miracle, and give the horse different names according to its function, such as "战马" (stallion), "骏马" (steed) and "小马驹" (pony). Thus, in order to give target readers real Mongolian cultural characteristics and the connotation of Mongolian horse culture, different names of horses must be carefully applied for translators under the guidance of SL instead of the universal name "horse". (Chen & Wang, 2011, p. 80)

By doing so, the original meaning of these culture-loaded words can be better translated into English without causing too much misconception. Also, it enriches some English words' meanings in the translation, which is also significant.

3.2 Transliteration

Transliteration, by definition, is the process of converting words from one language to another language with a close approximation in phonetic sound. That is to say, we can use English letters to spell the approximate sound of SL. It is an alternative that uses sound to replace its meaning of SL in the translated version. For hundreds of

years, Chinese expanded its vocabulary through transliteration like "酒吧" (bar), "巧克力" (chocolate) and "维生素" (vitamin). Similarly, it was the same to English, such as "kungfu" (功夫), "koutou" (磕头) and "toufu" (豆腐), etc. It is perfectly suitable to translate by transliteration the words that refer to place, name, brand name and certain concept which can lead to cultural vacancy. Hence, acquaintance with pronunciation of two languages is a basic competence for the translator. In addition, when the translator uses transliteration for the first time, he or she may need to add an explanation to clarify the cultural background or its associative meaning in the culture-loaded words. Once target readers are familiar with these culture-loaded words which have been translated by transliteration through years, the translator may just use transliteration without explaining it. In light of translating Mongolian culture-loaded words, we can apply transliteration into the translation of Mongolian title, geographical name and religious belief, etc. For example, "浩特" (hot) is a special word in Mongolian culture which refers to a city or a village that people dwell in. When we translate "呼和浩特" (the capital city of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, China), its translated version can be "Hohhot" by its Mongolian sound instead of by Chinese Pinyin. Similarly, we can translate "成吉思汗" into "Genghis Khan", "呼伦贝尔" (a place in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, China) into "Hulun Buir" and "蒙古长调" (a special way of singing) into "Mongolian uurdin duu". In addition, transliteration is also applicable to the translation of cultural vacancy words, which means that some Mongolian words remain alien to English readers for the first time. For example, "那达慕" is a traditional festival for Mongolian people, containing wrestling, horse-riding and archery, at the same time, people also dance and sing there. So its translated version can be "Nadam". Besides, "乌力格尔" (story-telling in Mongolian) can be translated into "uulrgeer" and "好来宝" (a kind of Mongolian singing and chanting art) can be "holeboo".

What's more, the adoption of Mongolian sound instead of Chinese Pinyin in transliteration can better maintain the national characteristics of Mongolian nationality as well as respect the social and political status of minority nationality.

3.3 Literal Translation with Transliteration

This translation strategy goes for the phrase composed by one cultural vacancy word and one common word. In order to maintain the original cultural connotation, we can translate the cultural vacancy word by transliteration while the common one by literal translation. Here are some typical examples, "草库伦" is a word with Mongolian cultural feature, which means one form of grassland fence. We had better translate it into "grassland kulun". In addition, "勒勒车" can be translated into "lele cart" and "蒙古包" can be "Mongolian yurt".

4. Conclusion

In the translation practice, the culture-loaded words are one of the most difficult parts. It's also the direct reflection of national cultural characteristics. On account of the important relationship between culture and language, we must give priority to the translation of culture-loaded words in cultural exchanges. As for Mongolian culture-loaded words, the local geographical condition is a crucial factor in deciding its national cultural characteristics. These Mongolian culture-loaded words come from grassland culture. The translator may adopt different translation strategies according to different contexts and situations.

All in all, it is relatively difficult to translate the culture-loaded words with much cultural connotation. In the course of translation, the emergence of cultural vacancy words and the confrontation of two languages with different culture backgrounds are inevitable. For the translator, the only thing that they can do is to get familiar with the differences in two languages and cultures, and do their best to analyze the real intention of SL. Also, the translator should be aware that there is no fixed translation mode to guide practical translation, especially the translation of culture-loaded words. The most successful translation of culture-loaded words is to convey the cultural factors in these words.

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