

Translating Cantonese Idioms: For a Purpose of Equivalent Communicative Effect

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ABSTRACT. *Equivalent Translation theory emphasises that the translated text makes the target readers get the equivalent effect as the original readers. Since idiom represents the uniqueness of a culture, translating idioms is a hard job. To have idiomatic expressions, behind which is the colourful local culture, known by readers from other countries needs transferring the effect on original readers in the target language to make target readers get the equivalent response. As a dialect close to ancient Chinese language, Cantonese abounds with many idioms that bear the speciality of Cantonese culture. Based on Equivalent Translation theory, by Literal Translation, Semantic Translation and Communicative Translation, the expressive effect of Cantonese idioms can be better transmitted to English readers, which can appeal readers' interest on Cantonese culture and is beneficial for cultural communication, as well as enlivening Cantonese.*

KEYWORDS: *Equivalent Translation; Cantonese culture; translation strategies; translating idioms; Cantonese protection*

1. Introduction

As a member of the Sino-Tibetan family of languages, Cantonese is precious for the regions south of the Five Ridges in China in terms of cultural heritage and cultural identity. But at present, theoretical or practical researches concerning translating Cantonese idioms are quite fewer than those concerning the comparison between written Chinese and foreign languages. In general, since Cantonese evolves from the ancient Chinese, retaining many ancient words and expressions, to translate Cantonese idiom is rather difficult, which needs integration of translation methods (Guan, 2018, p.1)

For cross-cultural and cross-linguistic translation, Equivalent Translation is useful and recommended, for it takes translation as a communicative practice and emphasises that the effect bared by source text (ST) on the original reader should be budged to the target receptor, which indicates an ideal communication. Thus, Equivalent Translation can be of theoretically significant for translating the Cantonese idiom into English, especially for most English readers who lack knowledge of Cantonese dialect, Equivalent Translation does help them grasp fundamentals of Cantonese, which is also beneficial for mutual understanding.

Furthermore, there are more tones and intonations with more than thirty particles in Cantonese differentiating meanings than in Mandarin, making Cantonese similar to German (Yip & Matthews, 2005, p. 389). English, by contrast, is intonation-oriented, for which a translator usually puts the tone and intonation factors aside, to re-construct the target language in the translation between English and German (Hervey, in Hickey, 2001, p. 18). Regarding such translation method, the examples in the paper are to revel the original meanings of the ST and TT (translated text), without considering specific tone and intonation which might change the meanings in a specific context.

2. Equivalent Translation and cross-linguistic communication

As early as 18th century, Tytler (2007) mentioned the theoretical fundamental of Equivalent Translation when he puts forward 'Principles for translation', namely, the target text ought to transfer the idea of the original work; how the TT conveys meanings should be the same as that of the ST; the naturalness of source text should not be changed in translating (p.9). Afterwards, these principles are developed into 'Functional Equivalence' or 'Dynamic Equivalence' that a proper translation should be based on the perspective of target reader's understanding, to assure the receptor can comprehend the ST by their habitual use of language and cultural conventions (Nida, 1964, p.12). And for cross-cultural exchange, Equivalent Translation is therefore crucial, because a translator should not only enable the addressee to 'know' the content but make the TT 'meaningful' (ibid. p. 128.)

Moreover, since the gap in etymology, the loss in meaning and adequacy is inevitable, albeit a translator can fulfil the translated effect as similar as possible (Newmark, 2001a, p.7). Nord (1997) also contends the translation should be receptor-centred, catering for particular requirements of the agent or specific reader (p.35), either can it fulfil the purpose of communication. Hence as far as delivering cultures as concerned, the criterion of 'equivalence' is probably making sense till it satisfies the receptor, getting the source language and culture close to the target addressee, which can attract the reader to further learn about the original work and culture. While for translating Cantonese idiom, the paramount significance is by any means spreading culture, avoiding 'cultural shock' in the meantime, to have Cantonese known by more people easily.

In the other place, daily communication needs accuracy in meaning and brief manner of expression (Grice, 1975), so does the cross-linguistic exchange, via which

communicators of both sides can get access to across different languages and culture. Thus, Semantic Translation and Communicative Translation are the better approaches to be accurate and brief (Newmark, 2001b, p.47), despite the inevitable nuances in meaning to some points if the translation is receptor oriented. On the one hand, concentrating on the target reader in translation enables the culture-stranger to take a shortcut to the original culture, which can give impetus to further communication.

On the other hand, the term 'equivalence' is considered 'adequacy' by those *Skopostheorie* advocators, who hold that the TT should function as the ST functioning in the source language context and should trigger the same communicative effect by the Functionism theory (Reiss & Vermeer, 1984, p. 140). Besides, Reiss (1984) generalises 'equivalence' as 'functional equivalence' and defines the involved translation strategy as 'Communicative Translation'.

In short, since the inter-lingual communication is conveying distinct cultures and speciality of languages, to efficiently transform the effect of the source language into the target language is thus based on staying in harmony with the logic and naturalness of the target language. The Cantonese idiom, for instance, is the informal use of the dialect, should be therefore translated into the informal expression of English to render the idiomatic style, so that the English reader can bridge to their comprehension on such a strange Chinese dialect.

3. Speciality of Cantonese and its translating difficulties

Before translating Cantonese into English, learning what characterises Cantonese should be a fundamental, which also determines the difference between translating Cantonese and ordinary Chinese-English translation.

First and foremost, Cantonese originates from Qin Dynasty due to the migrant from the then Central Plains region to Southern China. And because of the relatively peaceful circumstances in Southern China where most of Cantonese users settled in the past, the language system has not changed since Ming and Qing Dynasty and even there were many literary works written in Cantonese in Qing Dynasty (Snow, 2004, p. 6).

Since it shares the written system with modern Chinese, Cantonese is classified as a dialect in Chinese language community, albeit people outside Cantonese community might not comprehend Cantonese without training (Robins, 2011, pp. 64-66). And what differentiates Cantonese from other Chinese dialect is its fully-fledged written and grammatical system, with all modern Chinese characters being incorporated in Cantonese pronunciation and written system (Yip & Matthews, 2005, pp.1-3).

In terms of phonetics, Cantonese retains most of the classic Chinese pronunciation, the entering tone, for example. This is the reason some Chinese poetries are rhymed when they are read in Cantonese while in Mandarin cannot.

As for written system, although Cantonese shares the grammatical and written system with the modern Chinese, many an expression is completely different, and some standard Cantonese characters, especially those for informal expressions, cannot be found in the modern Chinese dictionaries accordingly. For instance, in Cantonese ‘哋 (dey⁶)’ refers to the plural personal pronoun, while the equivalent term in modern Chinese and northern dialects is ‘们’; ‘俾 (bei²)’ in Cantonese refers to ‘给 (give)’ and ‘被 (lead the passive voice)’ in modern Chinese, etc. The abundant words and expressions in Cantonese make its equivalent English translation a difficult and complicated process, and therefore a comprehensive consideration on translation strategy is a must.

Additionally, due to the early oversea migrants, Cantonese becomes well-known over the world, absorbing many loan words to maintain alive meanwhile; vice versa, many words in English are borrowed from Cantonese. For example, ‘巴士baa¹ si²’ (bus), ‘士多si⁶ do¹’ (store); ‘kumquat’ (金橘gem¹ gwat¹), ‘wok’ (鑊wok⁶).

Nowadays, besides being the most commonly spoken language in Hong Kong, Macau and Guangdong Province, Cantonese is the third commonest language in Canada and the fourth commonly used language in Australia, with almost 120,000,000 speakers all over the world. Hence taking Cantonese idioms as the objects of English study can benefit Cantonese’s liveliness as a classic Chinese dialect while spreading word for Chinese classic language culture.

Since Cantonese boasts distinct features in phonology, lexicon and grammar (Halliday, 1950), many problems and difficulties are unavoidable when translating it into English, be from culture, habitual use of language or even value of outlook, etc. Especially for those non-native Cantonese speakers. Besides, translating idioms does be a hard praxis for many translators, let alone to transfer the idiomatic effect of a rather ‘minor’ Chinese dialect.

3.1 Meaning and ambiguity

Some expressions in Cantonese might trigger ambiguity due to the dual meanings which may be opposite when interpreted in a different context. It can be made apparent by the collocation concerning ‘死 (die)’.

In general, ‘死’ indicates inauspiciousness in Chinese mores. While it can imply kind of praise when it is collocated with ‘咁好死 gam³ hou² sei²’ (What a good death), which means one deserves a smooth and happy life without any pain till his / her death. Regardless to retaining its original meaning ‘死’ (die), the collocation can give off an opposite meaning, which might get the non-native speakers confused, even so for Chinese speakers outside the Cantonese community, though the ‘死’ in a

Chinese phrase ‘不得好死’ (used to abuse other that s / he would die miserably) has a similar implication.

3.2 No equivalent term

The different etymology determines the fact that some idiomatic expressions in English cannot be found the equivalent term in Chinese languages with the same or similar meaning and implication. To be an illustration, ‘a fat cat’ in English indicating a wealthy man, ‘a watchdog’ referring to a supervision organisation or a law and ‘swan’ may imply an exceptional poet. Vice versa, many a Chinese cultural term has no equivalence in foreign language, such as ‘旗袍 (cheongsam)’, ‘青龙 (blue dragon)’, ‘马骝精 (a naughty child)’ and the like. To translate these cultural terms hence not only requires the translator to explain but also needs to fulfil the locutionary function in the communicative context.

4. Strategy to translating Cantonese idioms

The ideal outcome of translating is perhaps the Equivalent Translation, enabling the target reader to share the same feelings with the original reader as far as possible despite the different language and culture background (Reiu, 1953, p.1). So, for equivalence (or adequacy), concerning *A Dictionary of Cantonese Colloquialisms in English* by Guan (2018)¹ and the dictionary of Cantonese idioms (Ouyang, et al., 2018), the Literal Translation, Semantic Translation and Communicative Translation are applicable strategies to translating Cantonese idioms, and the illustrations are as follows.

4.1 Literal Translation

Literal Translation is to convert the words, phrases and sentences of ST to TT without changing the structure and original meaning, to retain the content and form (Zhou & Yang, 2019). Due to the distinction in the form of conveying meanings between Cantonese and English, quite a few samples can prove the Literal Translation is an ideal approach to Equivalent Translation. However, it cannot be denied that such means of translation can be vital for communication to some extent, which can be illustrated by the following examples:

- 1) 眼闊肚窄 (ngaan⁵ fut³ tou⁵ zaak³) Your eyes are bigger than your stomach
- 2) 黑口黑面 (hak¹ hau² hak¹ min⁶) A black look
- 3) 坐埋同條船 (co⁵ maai⁴ tung⁴ tiu⁴ syun⁴) Be in the same boat

¹ Examples from this dictionary are marked ‘(tran. Guan)’.

- 4) 險過剃頭 (him² gwo³ tai³ tau⁴) What a close shave hangs by a hair
- 5) 唔係你杯茶 (m⁴ hai⁶ nei⁵ bui¹ caa⁴) Be not your cup of tea
- 6) 廢柴 (fai⁴ caai⁴) Deadwood
- 7) 五十五 (ng⁵ sap⁶ ng⁵ sap⁶) Fifty-fifty
- 8) 插水 (caap³ seoi²) Take a dive

4.2 Semantic Translation

Aiming to correctly convey information, Semantic Translation is rather flexible in coping with the text. Furthermore, Semantic Translation is characterised by transforming the cultural terms into a culturally neutral ones (Newmark, 2001b, pp. 46-47). Say, when translating idioms by Semantic Translation, the translator would be more likely to ‘paraphrase’ the meaning of a culture-specific expression, which also the means of compiling a Cantonese-English dictionary. Such translation approach is fairly useful when translating the allegorical sayings or enigmatic folk simile, examples 9 to 29 can be proper illustrations.

- 9) 食枉米 (shik⁶ wong² mai⁵) A lousy guy

An idler (tran. Guan)

- 10) 亞茂整餅——冇個樣整個樣 (aa³ mau⁶ zing² beng²—mou⁵ go² joeng⁶ zing² go² joeng⁶) Show off on purpose but failing into dullness

Blaze a new path / be in class by oneself (tran. Guan)

- 11) 食人唔嚟骨 (sik⁶ jan⁴ m⁴ loe¹ gwat¹) Be insatiable of profits / Be greedy for gain (tran. Guan)

- 12) 八十歲番頭嫁——攞路行 (baat³ sap⁶ seoi³ faan¹ tau⁴ gaa³—lo² lou⁶ haang⁴)

Make a rod for one’s own back (tran. Guan)

- 13) 懶叻 (laan⁵ lek⁴) (What a) bright spark

- 14) 捉蟲入屎窟 (zuk³ cung⁴ jap⁶ si² fat¹) Put your neck on the block

Invite or ask for trouble (tran. Guan)

- 15) 兩頭唔到岸 (loeng⁵ tau⁴ m⁴ dou³ ngon⁶)

Fall between two stools

Neither sink nor swim in the middle of the sea / be in a dilemma (tran. Guan)

16) 黃皮樹了哥, 唔熟唔食 (wong⁴ pei⁴ syu⁶ liu⁵ go¹, m⁴ suk⁶ m⁴ sik⁶)

Familiarity breeds contempt

17) 執輸行頭, 慘過敗家 (zap¹ syu¹ hang⁴ tau⁴, caam² gwo³ baai⁶ gaa¹)

It would be disadvantageous not to take an immediate action in time. (tran. Guan)

18) 打起心肝 (dik¹ hei² sam¹ gon¹) Be determined

19) 擦鞋 (caat³ haai⁴)

Curry favour with somebody

Flatter / fawn upon / toady somebody (tran. Guan)

20) 食白果 (sik⁶ baak⁶ gwo²) Come to nothing / not come to anything

21) 得個吉 (dak¹ go³ gat¹) Draw a blank

22) 縮沙 (suk¹ saa¹)

Get cold feet

Shrink back / beat a retreat (tran. Guan)

23) 砌生豬肉 (cai³ saang¹ zyu¹ juk⁶) Wrong / corner somebody

24) 擘大個口 (嘴) 得個窿 (maak³ daai⁶ go³ hau² dak¹ go³ lung¹)

The jaw drooped

25) 喱啡 (le⁵ fe⁵) Messy / sloppy / be a lout

26) 濕濕嘍 (sap¹ sap¹ sou³) What an easy job / a child's play

27) 反骨仔 (faan² gwat¹ zai²) Betrayer / have a rebellious disposition

28) 督背脊 (duk¹ bui³ zek³) Rip up the back of somebody / speak ill of somebody behind his back (tran. Guan)

29) 拗曬頭 (ngaau¹ saai³ tau⁴) Mind-boggling

4.3 Communicative Translation

Taking translation as a social interaction, the Communicative Translation emphasises the TT should be acceptable and comprehensible for the receptor within his / her cultural context. To some points, text is merely 'offering information'

(Vermeer, 1982), and Communicative Translation is to assure the ST and TT produce the same or similar effect on both the original reader (or information sender) and target reader respectively, to realise the ideal inter-lingual communication. Otherwise, it may cause failure in exchange if the inter-culture communication is not equal to the inner-cultural one in terms of communicative effect.

As Newmark (2001b, p. 48) points out the Communicative Translation, in translating the vocative text, the essential is to realise 'Functional Equivalence'. Whereas, whether the 'function' equivalent or not does not depend on the 'sender', but the receiver (Nord, 1997, p. 28). Idioms are formed by the local daily communication, with emotional and imperative function, thus they are the typical functions of vocative text according to Bühler's classification (Newmark, 2001a, pp. 14-15). Therefore, from the light of communication, the Communicative Translation based on a function-oriented translation strategy would also be a proper approach to translating Cantonese idioms and to transmit the effect on the Cantonese speaker to the English reader.

For another hand, due to the strong emotive expression that matches an informal context, Cantonese idiom should also be transformed into the idiomatic English, forming a base for casting the equivalent effect, for idioms in different languages share an implied corresponding relation (Nida, 1964, p. 12). And examples 30-51 are the illustrated translation.

30) 頂硬上 (ding² ngaang⁶ soeng⁵) Bite the bullet

31) 識少少扮代表 (sik¹ siu² siu² baan⁶ doi⁶ biu²) What a clever Dick / clogs

32) 九唔搭八 (gau² m⁴ daap³ baat³) As different as chalk and cheese

33) 食得鹹魚抵得渴 (sik⁶ dak¹ haam⁴ jyu⁴ dai² dak¹ hot³)

Have made your bed and have to lie on it

34) 水魚 (seoi² jyu⁴) An easy game

35) 易過借火 (ji⁶ gwo³ je³ fo²) / 易過食生菜 (ji⁶ gwo³ sik⁶ saang¹ coi³) As easy as ABC / pie; be like taking candy from a baby

36) 執生 (zap¹ saang¹) Play by ear

37) 二世祖 (ji⁶ sai³ zou²)

A sponger / A fop (tran. Guan)

38) 頭耷耷眼濕濕 (tau⁴ dap¹ dap¹ ngaan⁵ sap¹ sap¹) Be down in the dumps

39) 阻頭阻勢 (zo² tau⁴ zo² sai³) Be under one's feet

40) 食粥食飯就睇你啦 (ik⁶ zuk¹ sik⁶ faan⁶ zau⁶ tai² nei⁵ laa¹) My life is on your coattails

41) 實死冇生 (sat⁶ sei² mou⁵ saang¹) / 死梗 (sei² gang²)

have had one's chips / be the dead meat

42) 你個頭近 (nei⁵ go³ tau⁴ gan⁶)

Your days are numbered

You've had your foot in the grave (tran. Guan)

43) 曬命 (saai³ ming⁶) Cut a dash (with something)

44) 食死貓 (sik⁶ sei² maau¹)

Carry the can for somebody / something

Be made a scapegoat (tran. Guan)

45) 捉痛腳 (zuk¹ tung³ goek³) Seize a chink in somebody's armour / black mark against somebody

46) 垃垃雜雜 (laap⁶ laap⁶ zaap⁶ zaap⁶) Bits and bobs

47) 發雞盲 (faat³ gai¹ maang⁴) As blind as a bat

48) 牙齒印 (ngaa⁴ ci² jan³) An old score; bad blood

49) 噴到成面屁 (pan³ dou³ sing⁴ min⁶ pei³) Pick / pull somebody to bits / pieces

50) 當黑 (dong¹ hak¹) A black day; not be somebody's day; be down on one's luck

51) 詐傻扮懵 (dzaa³ so⁴ baan⁶ mung²) Act / play the goat

5. Conclusion

As an empirical translation theory, Equivalent Translation highlights the application of Communicative Theory in translation and suggests the integration of different translation strategies, with centralising the target reader's position in the translating process. And in the inter-lingual exchange, the translator is not only a receiver, but a communicator (Hatim & Mason, 1997, p. 10), for which he or she needs to carry off two issues, a presupposition at first, and conveying the implications the second. Namely, a translator necessarily first, presumes what the reader / audience has known; second, manages to budge the implied meaning and illocutionary effect without changing the original textual function (p. 98).

Overall, Cantonese idiom is an accretion of the regional culture in Southern China, which is the representation of the local people's emotional expression and particular values. A translator hence ought not to literally convert the idiom to modern Chinese expression but necessarily begins with the analysis of the figure of speech and Cantonese culture, then translates it into the compatible English which is equally delicate and brief. As for function and significance, not only is the idiom translation an interaction of the two cultures, but also a development of Cantonese, conducting the maintenance of such a language fossil.

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