

A Contrastive Study on Numerical Idioms and Translation Strategies from the Perspective of Cognitive Linguistics

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Abstract: Numerical idiom is an important part of the English and Chinese language because of its concise form and vividness. This paper explores them from the perspective of cognitive linguistics, believing that numerical idioms are not only a language phenomenon but also a cognitive method of human beings. The analysis and contrast of a variety of specific examples of numerical idioms are employed to show similarities existing between English and Chinese numerical idioms due to similar living environment and cognitive base. Meanwhile, different cultural psychology and influence upon cross cultural communication result in differences between English and Chinese numerical idioms.

Keywords: cognitive linguistics, numerical idiom, contrast, study

1. Introduction

Numbers are used to represent objects/things, which is a common phenomenon of all nations and runs through the most part of human social development. Numbers are one of the symbols of the progress of human social civilization. From the knotted rope records of primitive tribes to the digitization of modern computer programming in the information age, people are inseparable from numbers and their calculations. Numbers are widely used in human social practice and have left a deep imprint on human language. In her book *Chinese Number Culture*, Wu Huiying refers to numbers as “the second language of the Chinese people”^[1]. This statement also applies to other countries and peoples.

Most numerical idioms are accumulated and spread in the process of people's use under certain social, economic and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, in specific cultures and societies, numerical idioms generally have certain extended cultural semantics or implicit semantics. For example, “ten o'clock scholar” cannot be directly understood as “scholar at ten o'clock”, but actually means “lazy, procrastinating student”. People who are not familiar with the English idiom will be puzzled when they see “like sixty”, and it is actually used to describe the fast movement or speed. English is known to have a huge vocabulary and new words and phrases are still emerging, and numerical idioms are no exception. English and Chinese numerical idioms have a variety of forms and different structures, and play a non-negligible role in people's daily information communication.

There are a large number of numbers related colloquialisms in human language, which are fixed phrases formed by cardinal words or ordinal words combined with other words. Many of numerical idioms in English come from idioms in English, while most of numerical idioms in Chinese come from idioms, proverbs, colloquialisms, and some number phrases and idiomatic expressions of numerical words. They are closely related to a nation's living environment, historical development, economic life, religious beliefs, customs and habits.

2. Explore the similarities and differences between English and Chinese numerical idioms from a cognitive perspective

According to cognitive linguistic theory, like cognition, language is produced by human beings on the basis of experiencing the objective world, and cognition is the premise of language. Language is the product of human cognitive development to a certain stage, and at the same time, the development of human language is subject to cognitive development^[2]. People of different nationalities have different cognitive abilities for the world, because people of different nationalities have different social cultures, living environments, religious beliefs, and their own experiences. Therefore, people of different

nationalities must have differences in cognitive ability, and there will be different understandings of the same language expression; Conversely, people of different nationalities will express the same meaning in different forms of expression.

2.1 Cognitive equivalence

Due to the commonality between the objective world of human existence and social development, there is also a consensus among different peoples on the understanding of the external world, and the development and use of human language also confirms this. At the same time, people of different nationalities have basically the same physiological structure, and their cognition and experience of the external world are basically similar. Although the languages of various peoples are very different, their perception of the objective world and the inner world of human beings and their perception results are similar. Therefore, the cognitive abilities of different ethnic groups are similar, and there must be many expressions of cognitive equivalence in language^[3]. English-Chinese numeral colloquialisms sometimes choose the same number to express the same thing or the same meaning.

2.2 Cognitive deviation

Cognitive deviation refers to the English and Chinese numbers colloquial saying that the numbers are different but have the same meaning, that is, different digital colloquialisms express the same meaning. According to cognitive linguistic theory, language is the result of human cognition organizing and processing the experience of the objective world, and human experience stems from the interaction between people and the external living environment^[4]. The form of language expression reflects the differences in socio-economic culture, historical background, etc. In both English and Chinese, there are a large number of numbers that have the same meaning but use different numbers.

In English, "One over the eight" means that if a person drinks 8 pints of beer, he will not get drunk, but beyond this limit he will be somewhat drunk. Therefore, the idiom pragmatically means "to drink an extra drink" or "somewhat drunk." Chinese and English numbers colloquially numbers are not equivalent, but they express the same meaning. Chinese use "groups of three or five" to represent the concept of "several people, some people", while English used "in threes and fours" to represent a similar concept. The numbers are different, but the meaning is the same.

2.3 Cognitive deficit

The two peoples of English and Chinese must have different cognitive experiences, resulting in differences in language expression. When the two ethnic groups of English and Chinese lack the same cognitive equivalence or cognitive bias, cognitive deficit will be caused.

Chinese often use the phrase "three friends of the cold years" (pine, bamboo, and plum blossom) to express "the good quality of perseverance," and the "three mountains" are used as a metaphor for the exploitation and oppression of old China by bureaucracy, feudalism, and imperialism. It is difficult for Westerners to understand the metaphorical meaning of these words. Similarly, it is difficult for Chinese to understand that the English words "the upper ten" and "the four hundred" refer to "aristocracy and social elite", and these numerical sayings transcend the original meaning and refer to "a certain type of person or thing", reflecting the difference between the traditional culture and social systems of the two peoples. "In the seventh heaven" is rooted in Islam. Believers in Islam believe that there are seven heavens, and the seventh heaven is the highest level, ruled by Abraham, the father of all nations^[5]. Thus, in the seventh heaven means "in Elysium" or "extremely happy." "Three sheets in the wind" is a nautical term, where sheet is "sail ankle cord". Both sheets in (or to) the wind means that the two sail ankle cords are loose, and the boat will be very bumpy. Later, people used this phrase to mean "very drunk".

3. Translation strategies for numerical idioms from a cognitive perspective

Idioms are the essence and condensation of a national culture. The most important thing in idiom translation is how to properly translate the cultural factors contained in the idiom. Naturalization and alienation are two specific means of dealing with cultural factors in translation. The so-called "naturalization" refers to the process of translation by adhering to the linguistic traditions of one's own culture and returning to authentic language expressions. "Alienation" refers to the expression of

accommodating the linguistic characteristics of foreign cultures and absorbing foreign Chinese dialects in the translation process. In the case of numerical idiom translation, the translator should give preference to alienated translation without causing misunderstanding or obscurity. This can not only introduce foreign cultures, but also promote the development of the Chinese and enrich the expression of the Chinese. In some cases, due to cultural gaps and differences in expressions in different languages, alienated translations can lead to readers being confused or obscure. At this time, we can only retreat to the second place and adopt the naturalized translation method. Accordingly, this paper proposes the following translation strategies: literal translation, literal annotation, borrowing, naturalization, and paraphrase.

3.1 *Literal translation*

Some numerical idioms, due to their strong cross-language cultural commonality, are vivid and self-explanatory. In this case, it is entirely possible to use literal translation to fully convey the referential, verbal and pragmatic meanings of the original text, while introducing a common foreign language culture, and enriching the Chinese language. For example:

- 1) A cat has nine lives.
- 2) One swallow does not make a summer.

In traditional Chinese culture, there is also a saying similar to “cats have nine lives”, so a literal translation of sentence 1) will not cause misunderstanding. China is located in the northern hemisphere, and in the summer swallows migrate back, this natural phenomenon is in line with the psychology of Chinese, so the 2) sentence can be completely literal, which not only retains the image of the original language, but also enriches the expression of Chinese.

The translation of these sentences is not only faithful to the image of the original text, but also conveys the spiritual essence of the original text, which is the most ideal translation.

3.2 *Literal annotation*

Some numerical idioms are born under specific historical and cultural conditions. If it is translated literally, it is likely to be difficult for the reader to understand or accept. In this case, literal annotation is the best choice. In this way, the vivid image of the original language can be retained, and the meaning of the original language can be completely reproduced. For example, “a nine days’ wonder” originated from an ancient Roman custom that whenever there was an anomaly in nature, the Romans regarded it as a bad omen, and in order to eliminate disasters, the Catholic Church always held a nine-day religious prayer ceremony, which was novena, but no one talked about it after the ceremony. If the idiom is literally translated as “the miracle of nine days”, it may feel confusing, but if it is only taken metaphorically, translated as “a sensational thing” or “existing for a short time”, the imagery of the original text disappears. Therefore, the literal annotation method is adopted to not only completely reproduce the image of the original text, but also convey the pragmatic meaning of the original text. For example:

- 3) Do not keep all your eggs in one basket.

Example 3) refers to not staking all your efforts or hopes on one thing or one person, and not making a desperate bet. The literal translation may not be very clear. However, if annotations are added, the vivid metaphor of the original text is preserved without losing its pragmatic meaning.

3.3 *Borrowing*

Some English-Chinese numerical idioms have both the same image and numbers, but also have similar contexts in which they are used. At this point, borrowing can be used. For example:

- 4) I see no sign of the actual approach of this hundred percent French paradise.
- 5) Experiencing a little frustration is not necessarily a bad thing, a fall into the pit, a gain in your wit.

Here, “hundred percent” and “a fall into the pit, a gain in your wit” have similar expressions in Chinese, and when they are translated into English, their English counterparts can be used directly.

3.4 Naturalization

Both English and Chinese are highly developed languages and both have a wealth of numerical idioms. Due to the different ways of thinking, some Chinese numerical idioms and English numerical idioms do not correspond exactly in form, but they have the same connotation and the same or similar images and metaphors. In this case, it is advisable to use the naturalization method. For example:

6) His wife was away and the house was at sixes and sevens.

7) Think twice before you leap.

In example 6), if “at sixes and sevens” is literally translated as “chaotic six and seven mess”, it obviously does not conform to the expression habit of Chinese, so it can be treated by naturalization. In example 7), “think twice before you leap” is also not in line with the Chinese expression. Under this situation, sense should be given priority over form and naturalization should be adopted.

3.5 Paraphrase

Some numerical idioms cannot be literally translated due to their strong local and national overtones, and there is no corresponding idiom that can be naturalized. At this point, we have to adopt a paraphrased translation, sacrificing its figurative and figurative meaning and retaining its pragmatic meaning. Depending on the context, fluency of the context and the integrity of meaning should be given priority. For example:

8) The children were in the seventh heaven with their new toys.

In example 8), “in the seventh heaven” is derived from religion. Muslims believe that there are seven heavens, and the seventh heaven is the highest level, ruled by Abraham, the father of all nations. In Jewish hagiology, the sevenfold heavens refer to the highest level of heaven where God and angels dwell, the land of bliss. Therefore, “in the seventh heaven” can be literally translated to “in the seventh heaven”, which is used metaphorically to mean “in Elysium”, “in happy heaven” or “extremely happy”. In this example, the literal translation will be very confusing, so it is advisable to use a paraphrasing method, omitting the numbers and not translating them, only taking their metaphorical meanings.

4. Conclusion

Different ethnic groups have different histories and cultures, and numerical idioms are the crystallization of a national culture and the rich cultural heritage of mankind. From a cognitive point of view, there are both similarities and differences between English and Chinese numerical idioms, reflecting the way different peoples understand and transform the world. Since human physiological mechanisms are basically the same, there must be a common cognitive structure, resulting in the existence of the same or similar number colloquialisms in both Chinese and English. However, the external environment of the survival of different ethnic groups also affects the way human cognition, resulting in certain differences between English and Chinese numerical idioms. Therefore, language learners should start from a cognitive perspective in order to better understand and transmit the information contained in language Chinese and complete cross-cultural communication activities.

The translation of idioms boils down to how to transform the cultural factors contained in the idiom. Numerical idioms are no exception. Naturalization and alienation are two important means of dealing with cultural factors in translation. As long as it can convey the meaning and effect of the original text, it should adopt an alienated translation. Naturalized translation is only used when it does not convey the meaning of the original text or may lead to misunderstanding. Therefore, translators should adopt different translation strategies after correctly understanding the culture contained in the idiom. Accordingly, the author proposes five methods of translation of English-Chinese numerical idioms: literal translation, literal annotation, borrowing, naturalization, and paraphrase. Numerical idioms are one of the symbols of the progress of human social civilization and reflect social and cultural life, so by learning the translation of English-Chinese numerical idioms, we can deepen our understanding of various national cultures and improve our cross-cultural language communication skills.

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