

# Analysis of the Influence of Cross-Cultural Factors on English-Chinese Translation

Zhang Zhaokai

*Jilin Normal University, Changchun, Jilin, 130103, China*

**Abstract:** Language is a tool that humans use to communicate with each other. In general, there are large differences between language forms in different countries. As a common language all over the world, English has been widely used in various cross-cultural international communication activities. In recent years, the exchanges between China and developed countries have become more and more frequent. At the same time, Chinese-English translation and English-Chinese translation are particularly important. Because there are great differences in cultural factors in different countries, there will naturally be some differences in their English translations and literal meanings. In response to this, the article analyzes the influence of cross-cultural factors on English-Chinese translation by comparing the history and culture of the East and the West, and explores what principles should be followed in cross-cultural translation.

**Keywords:** cross-cultural; factors; English-Chinese; translation; influence

## 1. Introduction

With the continuous development of globalization, the whole world is becoming more and more diverse. Various cultures collide with each other. People from different races, cultures, and religious backgrounds from all over the world live, work, study, and cooperate in the same place. At the same time, everyone has their own unique identity, beliefs and values. Cultural diversity can make a country stronger and more dynamic. However, in today's multicultural context, even without language barriers, intercultural communication seems to be quite challenging. But this is understandable, since each culture has its own set of assumptions and customs when it comes to interacting face-to-face and conveying certain points of view. This cross-cultural language communication and transmission barrier has also caused a lot of trouble in English translation work. Whether it is translation or interpretation, it is difficult to avoid this practical problem, so we have to arouse our thinking and attention. Tracing back to the source, the differences in Chinese and Western languages lie in the cultural differences between China and Western countries, and cultural differences should be explored from a historical perspective.

## 2. Comparison of main differences between Chinese and Western languages and cultures

### 2.1. Comparison of cultural differences

The main difference between Chinese and Western cultures is that China is an Eastern country, and its traditional culture is completely different from that of the West. Chinese culture has a history of more than 5,000 years. Over the millennia, Chinese people have developed their own music, musical instruments, painting techniques, traditional medicine, and cooking methods, which are completely different from Western culture. Westerners find Chinese culture complicated and difficult to understand because Chinese culture has its own values, background and belief system. There is a huge difference between the major philosophies of life in the East and West. Westerners believe in self-sacrifice to achieve goals like success and happiness, while Chinese have an ethic of behavior that relies on their inner world and the idea of eternal reincarnation. The Western approach is to seek outward, while the Chinese prefer to adopt a systematic approach and seek inward.<sup>[1]</sup>

### 2.2. Comparison of language differences

Returning to the level of language, Wang Zuoliang (1989), a famous translator in my country,

proposed that "translation studies should be combined with cultural comparison, and cultural comparison should be regarded as the decisive factor in translation studies." He also pointed out that "translation not only involves language issues as well as cultural issues. The translator must not only understand foreign cultures, but also deeply understand the culture of his own nation. Not only that, but also constantly compare the two cultures, because the real equivalence should be in their respective meaning, function, scope, emotional color, influence, etc. in different cultures are all equivalent, and the translator must be a real cultural person."

The structure of English is "Tree Language", and the structure of Chinese is "Bamboo Language". In addition to subject-predicate-object, English also has attributive clauses, adverbial clauses, and non-predicate verbs as adverbial clauses. All the things to be expressed in English can be combined into a long sentence, and the main clause in this long sentence is the trunk, the subordinate clauses are the branches, and there are sentences in the sentence, like a big tree. A main clause can have several subordinate clauses, which is equivalent to that a tree trunk can have several branches, and the subordinate clauses can have small clauses to modify it, which is equivalent to branches on the branches. This is the characteristic of English tree structure. We are all too familiar with Chinese sentences. Chinese is "bamboo-like", section by section, like bamboo. There are many loose sentences (Loose Sentences), run-on sentences (Run-on Sentences), and contracted sentences (Contracted Sentences) in the sentence, and do not pay attention to the relationship between so many main clauses. A sentence before a comma or a period is a complete meaning. But although Chinese language seems fragmented, it has its inner logic.<sup>[2]</sup>

In addition, English is the subject-prominent language (Subject-Prominent Language), while Chinese is the subject-prominent language (Theme-Prominent Language). The subject is prominent, which means that the core sentence pattern of the language is the framework composed of subject + predicate. For example, there are 5 sentence patterns in modern English:

SV: The sun rises

SVC: She looks beautiful

SVO: She played the guitar

SVOO: She gives me a book

SVOC: They made him their leader

All declarative sentences and interrogative sentences in English must have a subject, and the subject is the description object of the predicate, which is placed at the beginning of the sentence and occupies an important position in the sentence. The subject not only determines the number of verbs, but also determines the morphological changes of the predicate verbs. These are the characteristics of subject-prominent language.

However, Chinese, as a topic-prominent language, refers to a language in which the basic structure of the sentence is the information unit topic and comment, so the sentence is often expressed as a "topic-comment" framework. E.g:

Topics: Comments:

I like apples very much.

Basketball is a sport that everyone loves to play.

I don't know anything about the language Japanese

On the other hand, the most obvious difference is the written appearance of the language. Chinese uses Chinese characters, which are unpronounceable, while English words use the alphabet, because it is a pinyin language, the speaker can read the words. Fortunately for language learners, Pinyin helps by providing phonetic representations of Chinese characters. Pinyin uses romanized letters, but the pronunciation of each letter is unique to Pinyin. While this may seem like a huge disadvantage, there is another aspect that must be considered. In some ways, Chinese characters are like paintings. Some elements, called radicals, have meaning. So while you can't say the character's voice, you can extract meaning from the character. And if you know that mu means eyes and shu jie means water, in another form of water, then it's easy to understand that leis mean water for eyes or tears. Note that some of the character components do have voices attached. After you're really familiar with the language, you might be able to guess the sound of a character from the ingredients -- but that's not a foolproof way to read Chinese. You may have seen pinyin before and noticed the lines above some of the letters. Those

are tones. Chinese has four tones. For most English speakers, tone is a very unique concept. We need to pay attention when we listen and when we speak! If you pronounce the same syllable with different tones, the corresponding meanings will be very different. In English, intonation indicates emotion, while in Chinese, intonation indicates meaning. English makes extensive use of abstract nouns, while Chinese usually uses concrete nouns. This comes from Chinese philosophy, which interprets man and his life as a microcosm in the larger world of nature. Therefore, many abstract nouns in Chinese are expressed by concrete things in nature. English puts more emphasis on the first part of the sentence while Chinese put the emphasis on the last part of the sentence. This characteristic is especially apparent in sentences which include logic with drawing conclusions or expression of results. In English, the conclusion is described first, and the facts are described at the end of the sentence. In Chinese, it is the opposite. First, the facts will be described and then the results, conclusions, etc. In terms of structure, the Chinese "hope" is easy to understand, so they do not rely on large structures to express it, but divide long sentences into several short sentences. Therefore, it is common for long sentences in English to use a lot of modifiers, while short sentences in Chinese are more often connected by commas.<sup>[3]</sup>

### ***2.3. The relationship between language and culture***

Language and culture are interdependent and influence each other. Language is an important carrier of culture, and culture will in turn limit language. Language is an important part of culture. Without language, culture cannot be discussed. It is only through language that culture can be passed on from generation to generation. Language is an important means of maintaining a way of life, and almost every cultural group has its own unique language. Culture is the sum of material wealth and spiritual wealth created by human beings in the process of social and historical development, while language is the external form of human thinking. People communicate through language to express their inner rich thoughts. Culture is the content of language, language is the carrier of culture, and the two are inseparable. The differences between Chinese and Western cultures can be reflected in different aspects of their respective languages, and this difference will have a certain impact on the semantic understanding in the process of English-Chinese translation. Therefore, in English-Chinese translation activities, we must take into account the cultural differences between China and the West, fully understand the connotation of the original text from the perspective of their respective cultures, and use appropriate semantic expressions to accurately translate the original text.

## **3. Reasons for the differences between Chinese and Western languages**

### ***3.1. From the perspective of cultural history***

The difference between Chinese and Western languages is the difference in the way of thinking and the focus of thinking, and of course its expression is different. Some words and some key words are actually impossible to translate. For example, to describe the spiritual realm of the Chinese, it may be more appropriate to sum it up in one word, but it is difficult for the West to find a corresponding vocabulary. Although "LOGOS" in English also has a meaning similar to "Tao" in Chinese, it seems that it still cannot explain the meaning of "Tao" in Chinese. Traditional Chinese culture does not emphasize speculative reasoning. The most important thing in China is enlightenment, such as Wang Yangming's enlightenment, Wang Yangming's enlightenment, Laozi's enlightenment, Zen enlightenment, Bodhidharma's enlightenment by facing the wall, etc. Eastern culture, including the enlightenment of ancient India, is a process of self-understanding. Chinese language and culture are also greatly influenced by the three religious cultures of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. From an ethnological point of view, people of the yellow race have the largest brain capacity and relatively high understanding, so they don't need to explain everything thoroughly. For example, our Chinese cosmology has long used the two abstract things of "yin and yang" to describe, while the West pays attention to rationality, quantification, and concreteness in everything.

English, on the other hand, attaches great importance to the clarity of language, and the pursuit of language clarity is more reflected in Aristotle's research on logic, and has achieved very high achievements. Westerners tend to like to use reasoning to draw correct conclusions. Westerners care about the process of thinking, while Chinese pay more attention to results. The explicitness of Western language is particularly strong, and their desire to communicate through the logic of language and words is particularly strong, so they pursue the accuracy and logic of language. For example, Socrates, the ancient Greek philosopher, went out to find people to chat and argue, and presented their thoughts

more clearly through clear language confrontation. This is the basic style of Western language thinking.

### ***3.2. Geographical perspective***

China has been a semi-closed continental geographical environment since ancient times. In contrast, Western culture originated in the Greek peninsula and its adjacent coastal areas, an open ocean geography. Due to the different environments, the descriptions of physical geography are different, the associations caused by the imagery of physical geography are different, and the extended meanings given to the imagery of physical geography are also very different. For example: China faces the sea to the east and mountains to the west, so in China, the east wind is the spring breeze, a symbol of warmth. And the west wind is bitter to the Chinese, and the west wind is generally a representative of desolation and desolation. On the contrary, the geographical environment of the UK is just the opposite of that of China. To the west is the Atlantic Ocean, and the westerly wind symbolizes the arrival of spring, which is warm and suitable in the eyes of the British. "Ode to the West Wind" by the famous British poet Shelley is a tribute to the West Wind: "Oh, West Wind, if winter comes, can spring be far behind?" Wuyishan black tea purchased from China is darker and black in color, hence the name. Similarly, brown sugar is called in English: Brown Sugar, and yellow movies are called in English: Blue Movie.<sup>[4]</sup>

### ***3.3. From a socio-social perspective***

Since ancient times, China's economy has been able to be self-sufficient, and it has the characteristics of small scale, slow development and relatively stable. The feudal system, which has remained unchanged for thousands of years, has had an important impact on the formation of Chinese cultural thought. The core and essence of Chinese cultural thought is Confucianism. The understanding of the world represented by Confucianism is not based on curiosity about the mysteries of nature, but out of concern for feudal society and ethics. The focus of Chinese thinking is different from that of Westerners. In the West, due to the rise of navigation and the prosperity of commerce, ancient Greek philosophers were very interested in astronomy, meteorology, geometry, physics and mathematics. And gradually formed a scientific tradition in the West that focuses on exploring the mysteries of nature. Under the guidance of Bacon's phrase "knowledge is power", Westerners regard exploring and conquering nature as their primary goal. To sum up, in the context of social customs, the cultural differences between China and the West appear more prominent.

## **4. Principles that should be followed in English-Chinese translation**

In the context of cultural differences, English-Chinese translation should follow the principle of seeking common ground while reserving differences. Eugene Nida believes that the highest standard of translation is to achieve complete functional equivalence between the target language and the target language. Yan Fu, a well-known Chinese translator, also has the concept of faithfulness and elegance in translation. The belief in integrity is to require the translation to be faithful to the original text and the original meaning. However, from a practical point of view, this is very difficult to achieve. In the face of objective cultural differences in translation, translators should strive to seek common ground while reserving differences.<sup>[5]</sup>

Although there are some differences between Chinese and Western cultures, they can also be well integrated. Therefore, the author believes that translators can refer to the four principles mentioned by Peter Newmark in his translation course (A Textbook of Translation):

Focus on the literal meaning of the original text (The Textual Level)

Focus on what the text actually refers to (The Referential Level)

Do not deviate from the central idea of the original text (The Cohesive Level)

The vocabulary and grammar of the translation should be natural and appropriate (The Level of Naturalness)

Pay more attention to the background of the actual article to choose the most suitable translation method for translation. Translators should also communicate with people with cross-cultural backgrounds, such as international students in China and teachers with international teaching experience, based on the actual situation of the translation work. Constantly summarize and optimize their own methods and abilities to deal with cross-cultural translation problems, so that they can adopt

appropriate countermeasures to carry out English-Chinese translation work.

## 5. Conclusion

In my opinion, this is an example of how culture and philosophy affect language, because Chinese philosophy and thought are very pragmatic. On the other hand, English has many cultures and philosophies, so it is necessary to extend the way things are expressed. Another method Chinese uses to make the most accurate expression is the use of idioms. Idioms are an indispensable part of Chinese culture and wisdom, as almost every idiom is a summary of traditional Chinese legends and expresses a kind of insight. I hope you learned a lot about the differences between the two languages and how to start understanding Chinese.

To sum up, the issue of cultural differences between China and the West is rich and complex. Therefore, in order to be able to translate English and Chinese handily, the translator must not only master the languages of the two countries, but also have a profound cultural heritage and a deep understanding of the differences between Chinese and Western cultures. Only in this way can real language parity and cultural parity be realized.

## References

- [1] Liu Guojun, Chen Shaoye, Wang Tao, etc. *Library Catalog* [M]. Beijing: Higher Education Press, 1957: 15-18.
- [2] Lian Shuneng. *A Comparative Study of English and Chinese* [M]. Beijing: Higher Education Press, 2010: 16.
- [3] Lu Wei. *The influence of cultural differences on English translation* [J]. *Oversea English*, 2019, (04): 200-201.
- [4] Li Xiaoxia. *On the Influence of English Culture on English Translation* [J]. *Overseas English*. 2020 (16): 38-39.
- [5] Peter Newmark. *A Textbook Of Translation* [M]. ShangHai foreign language education press. 1988: 1.