CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AND TRANSLATION OF ENGLISH IDIOMS

As we know, translation is not only the communication between the two languages, but also the communication and transmission of the two kinds of cultural information. At present, the world of globalization requires us not to regard our own culture as the central culture, but to respect and absorb foreign cultures so as to catch up with the development of the world. So, we need new ideas of translating methods, especially when we translate culture-related material. To counter the vast cultural differences between English and Chinese idioms and the difficulties generated by the differences, there are four relatively practical methods that could be used in translation of English idioms.

1. Literal translation

Although there are many differences between English and Chinese language and culture, the people of the two nations still share some basic life experiences, conceptions of values in common. As a result, we can find many English and Chinese idioms that are similar both in form and meaning. Therefore, if the meanings and images in Chinese and English idioms have similar associations or refer to the same thing, the translator can choose literal translation directly.

Generally speaking, literal translation means “not to alter the original words and sentences”; strictly speaking, it strives “to keep the
sentiments and style of the original.” That’s why literal translation can best preserve the cultural elements and national characteristics of the source language, and it is the first choice when the idiom can be rendered literally without causing any possible misunderstanding. For example,

Strike while the iron is hot, the army scored a major victory.

趁热打铁, 部队打了个大胜仗。

The two expressions convey the same pragmatic meaning of “choose a good moment to act or make full use the opportunity”. Chinese readers can understand the idiom “strike while the iron is hot” has the similar cultural function in English as “趁热打铁” does in Chinese due to similar life experience.

All they wanted was to make bad blood between them, aggravate differences and fish in troubled waters.

他们就是要挑拨离间, 扩大分歧, 以便浑水摸鱼。

In the example, the idioms mean “take advantage of trouble “The source domains of both idioms came from people’s fishing experience fishermen believe that it is easy to catch fish when the water is “troubled” or rough. Because of fact that the fish come to the surface at this time and therefore it is easier to catch them.

Despite being a translation method, literal translation can also enrich the target language. In fact, we can find a lot of literally translated English idioms commonly accepted by Chinese people. For example:

an eye for eye, a tooth for tooth (以眼还眼, 以牙还牙)
the last supper (最后的晚餐)
new wine in old bottles (旧瓶装新酒)
cannot see the wood for the trees (只见树不见林)
Domino effect (多米诺效应)

2. Liberal translation

It is true that “equivalent effect” and “faithfulness” in translation can be well achieved by literal translation when rendering the above three kinds of English idioms. However, more English idioms are difficult or even impossible to translate literally due to the great difference between English and Chinese. In other words, most English idioms carry partially or entirely different cultural images or implications with Chinese. As we know, idioms carry all abundance of cultural features reflecting aspects of a nation’s life. So, many of them are figuratively contained. Because of great difference of cultures, differences exist in figure of speech and cultural connotations between English idioms and Chinese ones. For example, the Westerners love dogs and look on them as family members. So they say, “love me, love my dog.” In our minds, dogs should be for ever obedient like slaves. So we say, “丧家之犬” “狗腿子”, etc. What we like is the lovely creature—birds, who build nests on the roof and therefore comes the Chinese idiom “爱屋及乌”, whose meaning accords with that of the English idiom. As far as the two idioms are confined, their figurative images are different, but with the same implications.

3. Combination of literal translation with liberal translation

Sometimes, the method of literal translation and the method of free translation can be merged. According to LuXun, the former should be
regarded as primary and the latter as supplementary. It is impossible for one to translate an article or a book using only one method of translation. One must take a flexible attitude in order to avoid stiffness and unintelligibility. Sometimes one has to combine the two methods in translating even a single sentence, e.g. “Every dog has his day” — 人人都有得意时. Whether he should use literal translation or free translation depends on the interrelation between the source language text and the target language text.

We should use the method of literal translation and the method of free translation in a flexible way and with the former as the primary method. Here we should mention that many people prefer to use the idiom-for-idiom method. We should be careful in using this method and try to avoid using it in order to enrich the target language. After the Opium War, we borrowed many new words from the west. According to statistics, new foreign words account for almost half of Chinese words but foreign idioms cover only less than 1%. The reason lies in the fact that when translators translated foreign idioms, they are likely to use idiom-for-idiom method (it’s easy to use). For example, atoned to the teeth “武装到牙齿” is better than “全副武装” ; Where There’s Smoke, There’s Fire “有烟必有火, 无火不起烟” is better than “无风不起浪”. So although sometimes there exists all equivalent idiom in the target language, we still use literal method in order to enrich the target language and expand the cultural communication between different nations.

4. Literal translation with supplementary notes

Good literal translation can help Chinese readers to acquire the cultural information of English idioms, but direct literal translation without any notes will sometimes puzzle the readers. As a result, cultural gaps will be
produced naturally. Literal translation with notes may provide extra information about allusions, historical backgrounds, figurative meaning, context and sources, thus strengthening the acceptability of English idioms and retaining the original flavor at the same time.