CULTURE VACANCY

A. What is Culture vacancy?

In 1950s, C.Hockett, an American linguist, found the phenomenon of vacancy in different culture and created a term “random holes in patterns” when he was analyzing the different syntax patterns of two language. While, the former Soviet Union theorists of translation, Baltimore Huda rove adopted a term “un-equivalent words” to define this phenomenon of vacancy existing between in two different cultures. Until in late of 1980s, Russian scholars Sorokin, etc. put forward the theory “vacancy” in their research of discourse between people and national culture characteristics.

The language of a nation, as the carrier of its culture, reflects colorful culture forms and a rich variety of culture phenomenon in the nation. However, distinct non-correspondences exists among two different nations as a result of regional divergence, social development and the influence of religion. The “non-correspondences” in Chinese and western culture performance in their unique ideology, values, different ways of thinking, and customs. Accordingly, culture vacancy emerged in different language and brought many difficulties to translators when translating, especially translating literal works.

B. Difficulties in translation of culture vacancy

1. Lexical vacancy

Lexical vacancy is the phenomenon of no equivalent vocabulary existing
in one culture to express the specific feature or meaning of another culture. One of the most difficult problems for translators to tackle with is lexical vacancy, which mainly embraces two kinds of phenomenon. One is the vacancy of words’ referential meaning.

For example, there is no equivalent vocabulary in English to convey the Chinese twelve Dizhi, which, together with 10 Tiangan, make up the Chinese lunar calendar. Besides, riddles about a character or word, historical characters, traditional foods and clothes, etc. can’t be expressed in English words.

Likewise, there are not equivalent Chinese characters to express some features in English culture. Another is the vacancy of words’ pragmatic meaning. “Pragmatic meaning refers to the significance appearing in the relationship between a language sign and the language user, which emphasis on the impact language signs have on language users, known as connotative meaning, associative meaning or symbolic meaning.”

Comparing with referential meaning, pragmatic meaning reflect a stronger specificity of a culture. For example, “鸳鸯” in Chinese is commonly used to describe “husband and wife”. While “mandarin duck” in English does not have such a pragmatic meaning.

2. Cultural images drained away

Recently, as literal translation attracts more and more attention in the study of translation, the translation of cultural images contained in vocabularies aroused more and more wide concern. Specific language sign carries particular cultural. Correspondingly, different cultures have different cultural images.
For example, an English slang “let the cat out of the bag” does not mean free the “cat” but means that someone has divulged a secret accidentally. Besides, the “fat cat” in “he is one of the literary fat cat” means “a tycoon”. In English culture, a cat has been thought as a creature with very strong living ability.

The English word “cat” carries many cultural images while there is no equivalent culture image in Chinese. However, due to the vacancy of the word’s pragmatic meaning in the translation of two different languages, the cultural image of “cat” drained away in E-C translation.