What is vocabulary vacancy? It is something that can be identified with specific words in one language, but need to be expressed going around in circles in another language. Such as in our daily life, if you do not know what happened to Nixon in 1970s, you will be confused about the word Watergate, which is used to refer to scandals in general. Because there is a vocabulary vacancy in Chinese, if the translators do not understand the exact meaning, they may have difficulties in back translation. That is why studying on vocabulary vacancy is so important.

Reasons to result vocabulary vacancy

1. Differences in living environment and experience

As we all know, language is the reflection of objective world. What kind of environment people live in, what kind of language they may produce. If something does not exist in the objective world of some people, there may be a lexical gap in their language. Such as the word salad is originated from France. There is no such kind of dish in UK, yet no corresponding expressing in English. So, British borrowed the word salad from French into English. So is the Chinese language.

In Chinese, we always say 吃闲饭, 吃香, 吃不消. But in English, we can not make corresponding word by word. Thus, free translation is necessary. 吃闲饭 means lead an idle life; 吃香 means be very popular; 吃不消 means more than
one can stand.

Another example, if one translate 东施效颦 into Dongshi imitates Xishi, western readers may feel confused. Who is Dongshi? Why imitates Xishi? The better translation in: The ugly imitates the beautiful in such a distorted way that the ugliness of the ugly becomes worse.

2. Differences in meaning association and cultural image

Differences in meaning association and cultural image are actually cultural information gap. As a result, the reflective meaning and social meaning of words are not corresponded. Animals, numbers and colors are the most typical in this kind of words.

In English, lion is the king of animal, symbolizing braveness, fierceness and majesty. The King of UK, Richard I, is called the Lion-Heart, for his braveness. There are also many idioms with lion. But when translating them into Chinese, we usually use 虎 (tiger) instead of 狮 (lion), because Chinese people think tiger is the king and the most brave animal. For example: play oneself in the lion’s mouse is translated as 置身虎穴; like a key in a lion’s hide is translated as 狐假虎威.

3. Non equivalence in meaning and cultural connotation

Non equivalence in meaning and cultural connotation of English and Chinese words mainly reflected in conceptual meaning, connotative meaning and collocative meaning.

Conceptual meaning is the basic meaning of a word. If you do not understand the conceptual meaning, you may raise communication conflict. Such as 叔叔 in Chinese indicate younger brothers of father. While in English, uncle indicates brothers of both father and mother. The same
examples are grandfather, grandmother, aunt, cousin, etc.

Connotative meaning is the meaning outside conceptual meaning, always linked with the nature and feature of objective reality. Such as idealism in English, does not contain praise or criticism meaning. But in Chinese, the meaning of idealism, 理想主义, is a pejorative word.

Collocative meaning indicates the systematic relation between word and word. It is always established by usage, thus, you can not use collocative rule of one language into another. Such as in Chinese we say 红茶, while in English we say black tea instead of red tea. Black coffer in English while 浓咖啡 in Chinese; strong tea in English while 浓茶 in Chinese.