Prototype Theory in Proverb Translation between English and Chinese

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[Abstract] Proverbs play an important role both in English and Chinese languages and cultures. Based on prototype theory, people can translate English and Chinese proverbs flexibly. With the help of prototype theory, it is easy for translators to know about the intention of the original proverb and choose the most appropriate method to translate English and Chinese proverbs to make target readers understand the true meaning of those proverbs.

[Keywords] prototype, proverb, translation

Introduction

Today, interaction between cultures is much more closely connected than in the past. We can now board a plane and fly anywhere in the world in a few hours. The reality of the new global economy makes today's contacts far more common than in any other period in world history. In communicating, people sometimes like to use proverbs because they can convey true meaning in a more concise way. Proverbs, as one of the important language elements, are formed in a longstanding practice. They come from people and are used by people. Proverbs are implicit, humorous, serious, and elegant, and they give people great pleasure. Proverbs contribute greatly to the distinguishing characteristics of different cultures. English and Chinese proverbs have different cultural features in terms of geography, history, religious beliefs, habits, and customs, so it is not easy to translate proverbs properly.

Generally speaking, there are three ways of translating English and Chinese proverbs: First, literal translation can keep the original text features and include the exotic characteristics that enrich the native language. Second, some translators advocate using the appropriate methods to deal with the translation of proverbs according to the basic character and individuality contained in cultural proverbs. Third, someone advocates researching the skills of the translation of proverbs from cultural differences and linguistic characteristics of proverbs.

To some extent, these views make a positive contribution to English-Chinese translation of proverbs. Since the 1980s, some western scholars have introduced prototype theory into translation studies, which has made great achievements in the translation. Through empirical studies, they conclude that translation is a prototype category, which is more helpful for analyzing prototypes in the original texts, as well as the target translation texts. Therefore, by using prototype theory, people can find the most effective method to translate English and Chinese proverbs. Consequently, the theory can help strengthen the communication between English and Chinese people.

Prototype Theory

"Prototype" means a person or an object that is considered (by many people) to be typical of its class or group. The prototype theory suggests that many mental concepts we have are really prototypes. People often define a concept by reference to typical instances. For example, a prototype of a bird would be more like a small bird that flies than, for instance, a large flightless

bird like an emu or a New Zealand kiwi. Prototype theory has been useful in investigations into how concepts are formed, e.g. What is considered a typical house and to what extent certain concepts can be considered universal or specific to certain cultures" (Richards, John Platt, & Heidi Platt, 2000, p. 374)

Prototype theory is proposed based on the lack of classical theory. It is one of the main theories of cognitive linguistics. According to classical category theory, the category of things is determined by the common characteristics of their members, and these members' status in the context is completely the same. However, the prototype theory includes the area that is not built above the shared features, and there is no one set of characteristics that accurately define the members of the spheres. Within the context, the characteristics of those members are not identical; in fact, there are big differences. "Category members link each other relying on the similarities of the family, and they continue to spread from the center. Prototype category is a typical representative of the category, which is also the center member of this area and has the largest family resemblance" (Rosch, 1978, p. 468).

Prototype theory has the following characteristics. First, the property and the number of the content of the category are uncertain, and they will change along with the needs of a person's cognition. Second, its features also have the distinction of center to edge and importance to unimportance. There is a great distinction in central properties, and the properties of edge and other closer categories are crossed. Third, the members have the characteristics of overlap. In other words, we can say that all the members have the common properties called a family resemblance. Fourth, it is not equal for the members' status. In fact, the central members have more common properties, so there is a distinction between central members and peripheral members.

From the characteristics of the prototype category, people can easily see that in the same category, the status of each member is not same. On the contrary, there is a distinction between center and edge. All the members of the same category are entitled to only part of the same attributes, a family resemblance. Although the prototype is often used to refer to the best members or typical representatives of category, the more precise meaning of the prototype is schematic mental representation in the core areas, and it is also the cognitive reference of categorization. The best members are just prototype cases with the largest family similarities.

Prototype theory originated in philosophy, anthropology, and cognitive psychology. The philosopher Wittgenstein, who majored in the philosophy of pragmatism, found deficiencies in the classical category and launched a challenge. Vickers, on the game's study, found that among the members there is no one common characteristic, which demonstrates the ambiguity of the border of members, the distinction between center and periphery, and the differences between membership dependencies; he proposes that the relationship between members is family resemblance. In the 20th century, B. Berlin and P. Kay studied the colors category of 98 kinds of languages and found that there were not only the basic colors of different languages, but also the most representative focal colors contained in a particular color. This finding showed that the scope the members' position was not entirely same. Members of the core area were more typical than the peripheral area. In the 1970's, Eleanor Rosch, as the representative of psychologists, found that the "original Type" played a key role in category and the category was built according to the prototype, which was at the center. The prototype is seen as cognitive reference point, and then the modern category theory, which is also called prototype theory, was built up.

"Categories developed in the 1970's by Eleanor Rosch and her colleagues" (Rosch, Mervis, Gray, Johnson, & Bayes-Braem, 1976, p. 382) and are referred to here as prototype theory. This theory has been applied to linguistic categories and can be shown in accordance with the

conclusions of many other 20th century linguists:

It is suggested that prototype theory should offer a principled approach to the exemplification of form - meaning relationships within language and to the development of language teaching exercises which focus upon specific aspects of the language system and which offer 'enriched' input to the "Language Acquisition Device" ; i .e . It offers a principled basis for the development and application of pedagogical grammars. (Lakoff, 1982, p. 367)

Prototype Theory in Proverb Translation

Proverbs, which derive from life, are the embodiment of the language and culture of a nation. Due to the differences of cultures, the words of same literal meaning may have completely different implications. Because of the different geographies, histories, religions, customs, and other aspects of life, English and Chinese proverbs have their own special characteristics, and they are closely linked with cultural traditions. In order to translate proverbs properly, we should have a better understanding of English and Chinese culture.

Prototype and Chinese Culture

Chinese history is primarily based on agricultural lifestyle from ancient times. People are inextricably linked with land. As a result, there are many Chinese proverbs related to rivers, land, and agriculture, such as 一帆风顺 (having a favorable wind all the way); 过河拆桥 (to burn the bridge after crossing it); and 拔苗助长 (to pull up seedlings to help them grow).

With five thousand years of history, China has many legends, fairy tales, and literary works. These rich resources give people not only many entertainment and happiness, but also many rich proverbs, such as 名落孙山 (The name is not in the list of successful candidates.) And 叶公好龙 (What the Lord loved was not the real dragons.) In Analects of Confucius, there are famous sentences, such as 有朋自远方来，不亦悦乎? (Is it not a delight after all to have friends come from afar?)

China is a country with a great diversity of religious beliefs. The main religions are Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, and Catholicism. The various religions in China have become part of the traditional Chinese thinking and culture. In China, all religions have equal status and coexist in tranquility. In China, Buddhism and Taoism play an important role in Chinese culture. Buddhism used to be the national religion of China. It still has a great influence on Chinese culture. Buddhism has shaped Chinese language, diet, arts, etc. Many proverbs related to Buddhism appear, such as 平安就是福 (Peace is the blessing); 身在福中不知福 (Living in fortune); and 天下兴亡，匹夫有责 (The rise and fall are of every person's responsibility).

Moreover, culture is closely related to customs and habits, which penetrates into every possible aspect of people's lives and cause great cultural differences between people with different living habits. Food, animals, colors, and so on are aspects of cultural tradition that are reflected in proverbs. For animals, such as dogs, Chinese people often despise them. Therefore, a dog is usually associated with a derogatory sense, such as 狐朋狗党 (Fox friends dog party literally), 狼心狗肺 (ungrateful), and 狗腿子 (henchman). However, Chinese people often describe dragon with a positive sense.

Prototype and English Culture

Britain is an island. People live along the seacoast, and their life is dependent on the sea. The

maritime industry takes priority in British history, which has a great influence on English proverbs' formation, such as "to take the wind out of one's sail," "to go with the stream/tide," "to be all at sea," "hook (land) one's fish," "have other fish to fry," and "play a fish." History has big influences on language and daily life. However, England is a country with a short history. It has a fewer important historical events than that of China. Therefore, the English language has a fewer proverbs from historical events than the Chinese language, such as "We are all Adam's children." There are also some proverbs from the Greek and Roman mythology, such as "Pandora's Box."

In many Western countries, especially the Anglo-Americans, people believe in Christianity, and those religious followers believe that God is the only god and the world was created by God .Therefore, many proverbs come from religious themes and activities. The teachings and beliefs in the Bible have contributed greatly to English proverbs, such as, "Nature does nothing in vain," "God helps those who help themselves," and "In the right church, but in the wrong pew."

Besides, different countries have different customs. English people have different understandings about animals, colors, foods, and etc. In most European countries, wheat is used for baking bread and barley for brewing wine. Bread, butter, jam, cheese, etc., are usually for daily meals. English people like dogs very much and take dogs as their faithful friends, which is different than in China. Therefore, many proverbs related to dogs have positive meanings, such as "Every dog has his day," "Love me, love my dog," and so on.

Strategies in Proverb Translation

Language is strongly influenced and shaped by culture. Language is the mirror of culture. Different nations have different cultures. Generally speaking, the major differences come from different geographies, histories, religions, and values. People in different countries will choose different objects to create their proverbs and express their feelings. Different things have special meanings in different countries. The inherent ideas formed in their minds are prototypes. Therefore, the prototype of proverbs is fundamental to the translation of English and Chinese proverbs, and it is very important to use proper strategies in proverb translation.

Similar Prototype

Some proverbs in English and Chinese are identical in both form and meaning. These proverbs are limited. These proverbs are the result of coincidence in languages. They will be not counteracted by national borderlines or cultural collision. In fact, they represent some global significance. There are some proverbs with similar prototypes in both English and Chinese, and they express same concepts. For example, both English and Chinese have the same ideas about the hen, the wolf, and the snake. Both Chinese and English like to use hen (母鸡) to describe a woman or a wife. Chinese say, 母鸡司晨,家之不祥 (It is a sad house where the hen crows louder than the cock). The associative meaning of a "wolf" in Chinese and English languages is same; people think that it is naturally vicious, cruel, and greedy for livestock, and it is the main crucial beast. The proverbs related to "wolf" reflected in the languages contain derogatory color, such as the Chinese proverb of 狼披羊皮还是狼 (A wolf in sheep's clothing). In English, there is a proverb like "A wolf may change his hair, but not his heart." Both English and Chinese don't like snakes. Therefore, people like to use it to symbolize a vicious heart or a person, such as 一朝被蛇咬，十年怕井绳;一年被蛇咬,三年见鳝跑；and 蛇走无声,奸计无影. The meanings of the corresponding English proverbs are "The person who was bitten by a serpent is afraid of a rope;" "If you were bitten by a snake, you are afraid of an eel"; and "Take heed of the snake in the grass."

Although there are differences in English and Chinese cultures, both English and Chinese can share similar emotions, social experiences, and feelings of some prototypes about proverbs. These proverbs have the same literal, figurative, and hidden meanings. Therefore, such kinds of proverbs can be translated literally. The literal meaning of these proverbs transmits the same cultural information, so they can be translated mutually.

The following are examples of identical prototypes: "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush." (一鸟在手胜过双鸟在林。)"; "Easy come, easy go." (来得容易，去得容易); "Practice makes perfect" (熟能生巧); " Forbidden fruit is sweet" (禁果分外甜); " Honesty is the best policy." (诚实是上策); "A good horse cannot be of a bad color" (好马无劣色。); " Example is better than precept" (身教胜于言传); "The great fish eat up the small" (大鱼吃小鱼); " Blood is thicker than water" (血浓于水); "Strike while the iron is hot" (趁热打铁); "Well begun is half done" (好的开始是成功的一半); and " Too many cooks spoil the broth" (橱子多了煮坏汤).

Different Prototype

In western countries, the lion known as "the King of Beasts," its image is symbolized as brave, fierce, and majestic, and the British also regard a lion as a symbol of their own country. In English proverbs, lions are often used to describe power, such as "lion in the way." In China, "the King of Beasts" is the tiger. The tiger owns a vigorous appearance and mighty momentum, and there is a pattern-like Chinese character, "王" (that means "king" in Chinese) in its forehead. Tigers are deeply loved and admired by Chinese people. Therefore, Chinese endow tigers with magnificent cultural associative meanings, such as bravery, dignity, and power. We often see this in proverbs, such as 老虎的胡子谁敢摸 (Who dares to touch the tiger's beard?). However, in English, we should translate it as "lion in the way," but not "tiger in the way."

Sometimes, English and Chinese convey the same meaning with different prototypes because of cultural differences and the culture-specific imagery is different. Literal translation is not proper in translating this kind of proverb because it will make the readers confused. Thus, we need to change the prototype into another prototype that native people are familiar with so that we can transmit the true meaning of this proverb, such as "Better be the head of a dog than the tail of a lion."

In English, most people think the dog's first quality is friendship. English people usually regard dogs as the symbol of the common person. Besides, the lion has a special meaning in English. Its image is symbolized as brave, fierce, and majestic things, and the British also regard a lion as a symbol of their own country, so in English proverbs, lions are often used to describe power. This proverb wants to express that it is better to be the leader of a less prestigious group than to be subordinate to a more prestigious one. In English people's eyes, a dog represents common things; however, lion stands for great things. There exists a contrast; therefore, the dog and the lion are proper to be used in this proverb.

In Chinese, a chicken represents good things. The chicken is a small animal, but Chinese people think it will bring good news and luck. In China, chickens are important for farmers. Cattle are symbolized as stubborn, hard-working, and strong. Because of the big difference between chickens and cattle，we translate this proverb into Chinese as 宁为鸡口，不为牛后 (I would rather be the mouth of a chicken than a cattle's rump). Thus, Chinese people use chickens and cattle instead of dogs and lions as prototypes in this proverb.

--"Sing psalms to a dead horse."
In English, horses are used for leisure activities, sports, and working purposes. Especially, horses

are important for English people to do work on farms. Horses are common for English people, so they are accustomed to using horses as prototypes in proverbs. In Chinese, cattle are symbolized as stubborn, hard-working, and strong. Cattle are helpful in farmers' work. The characteristics of cattle, especially stubborn, can be better used to express this proverb's meaning. Then, we translate this proverb into Chinese as 对牛弹琴,牛不入耳 (You play the stringed instrument to cattle, but the cattle won't listen to it). Therefore, Chinese people use cattle to replace horses in this proverb:
--"Go to the sea, if you would fish well."

Different from China, Britain is an island surrounded by the sea. People live along the seacoast, and they rely on the sea. Fish can't survive out of water. We all know the sea is extensive and capacious. Sea and fish are two proper prototypes in this proverb. In Chinese, the tiger is considered as the strongest animal. Chinese endow the tiger with magnificent cultural associative meanings, such as bravery, dignity, and power. Then, we translate this proverb into Chinese as 不入虎穴，焉得虎子 (If you don't get in a tiger's cave, you can't get the baby tigers). So, the scariness of tiger can better express the meaning of this proverb:
--"Kings and bears oft worry keepers."
In English, a bear mainly has the meaning of hunger, bad-temperedness, prudence, etc. This proverb means that the persons who keeps company with kings should be careful. Sometimes, danger may occur. So, keeping companying with kings, like keeping companying with hungry and prudent bears is dangerous. As a result, bear is proper in this proverb. In Chinese, the tiger is considered as the strongest animal. This proverb is translated into Chinese as 伴君如伴虎 (Keeping companying with kings is like keeping company with tigers.). So, a tiger is used as a prototype by Chinese people in this proverb.
--"Love me, love my dog."
In English, people think the dog's first quality is loyalty. English people usually regard the dog as the symbol of a common person. So, a dog is an appropriate prototype to use in this proverb. In Chinese, the crow means bad things, and a crow is a kind of unsavory food. Sometimes, crows inhabit the eaves. Chinese people think crows are bad and will drive them off. Therefore, it should be translated into Chinese as 爱屋及乌 (Love my house, love the crow on my roof). Here, a crow is used to express strong love. The crow is proper in this proverb.

No Corresponding Prototype

There are some English and Chinese proverbs in which we cannot find corresponding prototypes. Language is an important factor in translating proverbs. English and Chinese belong to different language families, and people in different cultures think differently. Besides the language, cultural factors, such as different customs, traditions, and cultural backgrounds, also play an important role in translating proverbs. Therefore, sometimes we cannot find a corresponding prototype about one concept in another culture. That is to say, Chinese may not use the prototypes that are used in English expressions. In this case, we must try to convert the original prototype into the target language and find the right expressions for those prototypes. We must be careful in choosing words when we translate these proverbs. If there is a conventional term in the target language, we may simply use it in our translation. In this way, the target readers can easily get the prototype in the concept. For those prototypes for which we cannot find a corresponding expression in the target language, our translations must be sense-oriented; thus, paraphrasing is available.

Dogs are common animals in English-speaking countries as well as in China. People are familiar with them, but there are different opinions between English people and Chinese people.

狗 (dog) has derogatory meanings in Chinese; however, "dog" is a good friend of people in English. In China, 狗眼看人低 (Those people who are with dog's eyes look down on others) is translated into "acting like a snob," in which "snob" replaces 狗 (dog). 狗嘴里吐不出象牙 (What can you expect from a dog but a bark) is easy to understand for Chinese people, but, in English, it must be translated into "A filthy mouth cannot utter decent language." And 狗咬吕洞宾不识好人心 (A dog doesn't know that lvdongbin is a good person and bites him). This proverb is common in China, but English people don't know the origin of this proverb. Therefore, they can only understand that the meaning of this proverb as "Don't snap and snarl at me when I'm trying to do my best for you." On the contrary, Englishmen like dogs because they think that dogs can hunt for them and look after their homes. They regard dogs as their companions and pets. "Old dog" refers to old person or experienced person in English; however, 老狗 (old dog) is a curse word in Chinese. "An old dog cannot alter his way of barking" means 上了年纪的人难改既定习惯 (It's difficult for older people to change their established habits). Because of different cultural implications, "old dog" can't be literally translated into 老狗 (old dog) because it will cause some cultural misunderstandings. Besides, "every dog has its day" means 凡人都有得意日 (Mortal has his lucky day). We never say 每条狗都有自己的日子 (Every dog has its day) in China, where dog does not refer to a person with affectionate meaning. Everybody has a spell of good fortune, success, or fame at least once in his or her life.

There are also different cultural implications about fish between English and Chinese. It contains a derogatory meaning to describe some bad things or persons in English. 鱼 (fish) has a lot of cultural implications in Chinese. For example, "a big fish (鱼) in a little or small pool," which means that someone is important or has many influences only in a small organization, group or community and so on. It is same with 大材小用 (Men have great talents employed in a small sphere.) Moreover, "A nice kettle of fish" can't be literally translated into 一锅好鱼 (A pot of good fish) because its cultural meaning is an awkward situation or a complete mess. It should be translated into 为难的处" (embarrassing situation) or 一团糟 (a complete mess) in Chinese. Another example is "Never offer to teach fish to swim" but can't be literally translated into 不要教鱼儿游水 (Do not teach fish to swim.)

Because its cultural meaning is don't teach someone who is more professional than you. It should be translated into 不要班门弄斧 (Don't show off to the people who are more excellent than you.) In Chinese. Also, there is "There's as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it," which also can't be literally translated into 海里的好鱼是取之不尽的 (In the sea, good fish are inexhaustible.). Its meaning is that even if we lose a chance, we would get another chance. There are some Chinese proverbs about fish, too. However, they can't be translated literally because English people can't understand the meaning, and those proverbs will lose their cultural implications. For instances, 人为刀俎，我为鱼肉 means to be fish or meat on somebody's chopping board—to be at the mercy of…. 鱼肉 (the flesh of fish) refers to the one who is at the mercy of those who hold the power to deliver punishment at will. 鱼和熊掌，不能兼得 (Literally, it means we can't have fish and a bear's palm together), which means we can't own both things that we love. It should be translated as "we can't have your cake, and eat it, too" in English. Only in this way can English people better understand the true meaning of this proverb.

Conclusion

Proverbs come from life, and they are an important part of language. Generally speaking, there are three ways of translating Chinese and English proverbs according to prototypes. For proverbs with similar prototypes, literal translation is available. It is easy to find its counterpart in the target language, and there is no difficulty for target readers to understand the implication of prototypes. Proverbs with different prototypes cannot be translated literally because people from different cultures have quite different ideas about the same object. We need to change the prototype into another prototype that the native people are familiar with. Therefore, we must make clear the prototype of one concept in a specific culture and find out the right prototype for the proverb. Besides, some prototypes are unique in one language and absent in other languages. Sometimes, we cannot find a corresponding prototype about a concept in another culture, so there may be   no available prototypes in the target language for the translator to use. Thus, free translation should be used when literal translation cannot actually translate hidden meanings. The third category is the combination of literal translation and free translation. Sometimes, for some proverbs, literal translation cannot make readers understand the meaning, and free translation can also not exactly express the meaning of the original proverb. Hence, literal translation and free translation are needed to be combined.

In summary, when we translate English and Chinese proverbs, we should act according to the special details to adopt the different strategies. The most important factor in the translation of proverbs between English and Chinese is to make clear the prototype about those proverbs in English and Chinese cultures. It not only helps the translator to find the   right way to translate the proverbs, but it also plays a significant role in the appreciation of proverbs in both English and Chinese cultures.

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