

Error Analysis of Students' Homework from the Perspective of Cross-Cultural Translation

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Abstract: Translation is one of the most important courses for English major students. When students do their translation exercises, they inevitably make mistakes. In previous studies, many articles have attributed such mistakes to students' poor English proficiency or to their lack of writing skills in both Chinese and English. However, few articles have discussed these mistakes from a cultural perspective. In this article, the author collects these mistakes from students' homework and analyzes them from the perspective of cross-cultural translation. She categorizes the mistakes into three types: lexical, sentence, and paragraph level. The author provides examples from the students' translation homework, discusses the reasons behind these mistakes, and in some cases, offers better translations. Additionally, the author provides suggestions to help English major students improve their cultural awareness and translation skills, along with tips for translation teachers. It is hoped that this article will help English major students avoid such mistakes in the future and help them, as well as their translation teachers, recognize the importance of cultural awareness in translation.

Keywords: Cultural translation, translation errors, homework analysis

1. Introduction

Cultural awareness is a vitally important aspect of communication, especially in today's world of ever-increasing exchanges between different countries. Consequently, it is necessary for teachers to improve the cultural awareness of their students in translation courses. This article lists translation errors from students in their homework in C-E and E-C translation and analyses the errors from the perspective of cross-cultural translation. It is hoped that the article can improve students' cultural awareness and thus improve their translation.

2. Translation Errors and the Reasons for Such Errors

2.1. Translation Errors at Lexical Level

Words are the smallest units in a language and the correct understanding and translation of words is vitally important. Two types of translation errors can be attributed to insufficient cross-cultural translation ability: errors from differences in the associative meanings of words and errors due to differences in modes of thinking.

2.1.1. Errors from Difference in Associative Meanings of Words

Leech classified word meaning into two types: conceptual meaning and associative meaning [1]. While conceptual meaning is assumed to be the central factor in linguistic communication and is stable in history and in different cultures, associative meaning is open-ended and varies with the individual's experience. Connotative meaning, affective meaning, social meaning and collocative meaning are all types of associative meaning.

Due to differences between Chinese and English cultures, a word with the same conceptual meaning might have a different associative meaning in the two languages. If students fail to notice such differences, they will make errors in their translation. For example:

Example 1: It is a happy day when two lovers decide to tie the knot and get married.

Student Translation: 今天是个高兴的日子,两位恋人决定系上绳结后结婚。

Analysis: The student correctly translates the conceptual meaning of the word “knot” as “绳结” but fails to notice the connotative meaning of it. Here the connotative meaning of the word “knot” is getting married, so it should be translated into “喜结连理”.

Example 2: In reply to your inquiry of 25th March, we are pleased to offer you the following.

Student Translation: 现回复贵方 3 月 25 日询价,我们很高兴为您提供以下服务。

Analysis: The conceptual meaning of the word “offer” is indeed to provide or to supply something. However, when the word is used in this sentence, the translator needs to notice that it is used in Business English, so it should be translated to “报盘” according to its social meaning.

Example 3: China probably calculates that even if the Northern regime went completely over the edge, they couldn't damage China too much because they don't have enough nukes to do so.

Student Translation: 中国大概算计的是,就算朝鲜政权完全失控了,由于没有足够的核武器,朝鲜也不可能给中国带来很大损伤。

Analysis: In the translation, the neutral word “calculate” is translated into a derogatory word “算计” as a result of an unawareness of the difference in the word's affective meaning between the two languages. Here the correct translation should be “考虑”, which is a neutral word in Chinese.

Example 4: 文化产业园区是文化产业发展的重要载体,在辐射带动区域文化产业等方面发挥着重要作用。

Student Translation: As an important carrier for the development of cultural industries, a cultural zone plays an important role in areas such as radiating the nearby regions by improvement of quality and efficiency of cultural industry.

Analysis: In Chinese, the word “辐射” can be paired with regions, meaning “to serve as the center and help the surrounding regions in development”. The English word “radiate”, though sharing the same cognitive meaning as “to spread out in all directions from a central point” with “辐射”, does not contain a similar collocative meaning and cannot be paired with regions. As a result, the translator should have applied free translation in this sentence and the word “辐射” should have been translated to “the help in”.

2.1.2. Errors from Difference in Modes of Thinking

Chinese speakers tend to make a summary at the end of phrases so that readers can easily understand the nature of what has been communicated. However, similar summaries would be strange in English sentences.

Example 5: 和其他野生动物一样,鹿在营养丰富、食物充足的夏秋两季繁殖、生长并储存脂肪。

Student Translation: Like most wildlife deer reproduce, grow, and store fat in the two seasons of summer and fall when there is plenty of nutritious food available.

Analysis: In the original Chinese sentence, “两季” is the summary of the seasons summer and autumn, telling the readers the time of the year. As there is no similar summary in English, the translator should delete the summary and simply translate this as “in summer and autumn”.

Example 6: Oxidation will make iron and steel rusty.

Student Translation: 氧化会使钢铁生锈。

Analysis: When we translate a derivative noun from English to Chinese, we can add a summary word at the end of it to improve fluency in Chinese. For example, preparation may be translated to 准备工作, segregation to 隔离政策 and resolution to 解决方法. In the case of this example, oxidation can be translated to 氧化作用.

To correctly translate a word, a translator not only needs to put it into the correct context but also needs to view it from a cultural perspective. This means the translator must correctly understand the word's conceptual meaning as well as its associative meaning and understand the difference in modes of thinking.

2.2. Translation Errors at Sentential Level

Differences between Chinese and English cultures cause differences in sentence structure in the two languages. When translating between the two languages, a translator should also be aware of such differences and avoid making the following errors:

2.2.1. Errors from Differences in Sentence Structure

Chinese and English sentences are very different in terms of their structure. English sentences can be compared to a tree, with a main sentence as the trunk and subordinate clauses as branches. On the other hand, there is no clear subordinate structure in a Chinese sentence; instead, segments in a Chinese sentence are placed in a parallel structure. Thus, a Chinese sentence is compared to bamboo. When a translator translates between the two languages, they need to notice such differences and make adjustments in the translation.

Example 7: By the eighteenth century, the rise of industrialism in the west was accompanied by a decline of religion that cannot be seen as an accidental concurrence.

Student Translation: 十八世纪以来,西方的工业化上升被信仰的减弱所伴随,这两者的同时发生并不是偶然。

Analysis: In the source text, the underlined part is the main sentence and can be viewed as the trunk of a tree. The rest of the sentence is considered the smaller branches. In the translation, the translator keeps the original English structure in Chinese, making it difficult to understand for Chinese readers. The underlined part of the sentence can be translated into two parallel segments in Chinese, for example: “西方随着工业化的兴起,信仰的力量越来越弱”.

Example 8: 依靠粗放型增长方式实现经济增长越来越难以为继。

Student Translation: Relying on extensive growth mode to achieve economic growth is becoming more difficult to sustain.

Analysis: The source sentence is a typical Chinese sentence that can be divided into three parts: 依靠粗放型增长方式, 实现经济增长, and 越来越难以为继. The student translator has followed

the original sentence pattern in the target text, which does not fit the sentence structure of an English sentence. A better translation would be “It is more and more difficult to achieve economic growth by relying on extensive growth mode.”

2.2.2. Errors from Hypotaxis in English and Parataxis in Chinese

English is an inflectional language, while Chinese is a non-inflectional language. A reader can easily understand an English sentence by analysing its sentence structure, as each part of the sentence should strictly follow grammatical rules. On the other hand, Chinese readers have to rely solely on the meaning of the words, as few grammatical rules are used in forming Chinese sentences [2]. Such differences between the sentences in the two languages are summarised as hypotaxis in English and parataxis in Chinese, causing many errors in sentence organisation while students translate. The following are some examples:

Example 9: The days were short, for it was now December.

Student Translation: 白天变短,因为现在已经是十二月份了。

Analysis: English uses a hypotaxis sentence structure, so words indicating the relationship between different phrases are necessary. Consequently, the source sentence needs to keep the word “for” in it because it not only shows a causal relationship but more importantly is the indicator of the following subordinate clause. When it is translated into Chinese, a parataxis language, there is no need to keep it because Chinese readers can see the causal relation. As a result, 因为 can be deleted in the translation to make it succinct.

Example 10: 文化是一个国家、一个民族的灵魂。文化兴国运兴,文化强民族强。

Student Translation: Culture is a country and nation’s soul. Our culture thrives and our country will thrive. Our culture is strong and our nation will be strong.

Analysis: The source sentence is in Chinese, a parataxis language, so there are no linking words showing logical links between each part. However, when translated into English, it is better to add the linking word “only if” in translation. A sample translation would be “Our country will thrive only if our culture thrives, and our nation will be strong only if our culture is strong”.

2.2.3. Errors from Non-verbal Code Conversion

In the process of exchanging information, both verbal codes and non-verbal codes matter. Therefore, in translation, a translator should not only convert verbal codes but should also notice the missing non-verbal codes.

Example 11: Like, why drop \$1,400 on a frilly dress you’ll wear once before it turns to moth food when you can rock the most expensive shoes of the season and look great doing it?

Student Translation: 比如,当你可以脚踏本季最贵的鞋子而且看起来神采奕奕,何必还要去花费 1,400 美金去买一件只穿一次而后就被蛀掉的褶皱裙子?

Analysis: In English culture, people will easily associate a frilly dress with a wedding gown. In Chinese culture, there is no such association because a Chinese wedding dress is not frilly at all. As a result, when the source text is translated, the translator should not literally translate “a frilly dress” but should add the non-verbal codes hidden in the source text and translate it into “婚纱”.

Example 12: 在西安的六十四米高的大雁塔是玄奘西游印度回国后的居留之地。

Student Translation: The 64-meter-high Dayan Pagoda in Xi’an is the place where Xuan Zang once lived after returning from India.

Analysis: For Chinese readers, the name Xuan Zang is clearly associated with the monk in the Tang Dynasty who brought Buddhist scriptures to China. However, this non-verbal code is not

familiar to English readers. So, in the English translation, an introduction to this great monk should also be added after his name.

2.2.4. Errors from Differences in Sentence Boundaries

There are only three ways to structure a sentence in English correctly: a simple sentence, formed with one main clause; a compound sentence, formed with two or more main clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction; and a complex sentence formed with one main clause and one or more subordinating clauses, joined by a subordinating conjunction [3]. On the contrary, Chinese sentences are formed by one or more clauses and there are no grammar rules in how to join them together [4]. As a result, translators need to adjust sentence boundaries during translation, joining two or more sentences into one, or dividing one sentence into two or more, so as to follow grammatical rules in the English language. Here is one example:

Example 13: 中国在自己发展的长河中,形成了优良的历史文化传统。这些传统,随着时代变迁和社会进步获得扬弃和发展,对今天中国人的价值观念、生活方式和中国的发展道路,具有深刻的影响。

Student Translation: In the prolonged course of development, China has formed its fine historical and cultural traditions. These traditions, with the changes of the times and social progress, have been either developed or discarded, and have exerted a profound impact on the values and way of life of the Chinese people, and on China's road of development today.

Analysis: In the source text, the object of the first sentence is "traditions", which is also the subject of the second sentence. It would be better for translators to combine the two sentences, instead of translating into two separate sentences. A better translation could be:

In the prolonged course of development, China has formed its fine historical and cultural traditions, which have been either developed or discarded with the changes of the times and social progress, and have exerted a profound impact on the values and way of life of the Chinese people, and on China's road of development today.

Example 14: Smaller class sizes in early grades translated into students scoring higher on math tests in later grades in Tennessee's experiment to see if smaller classes improved education.

Student Translation: 低年级小班教学会转化为高年级更高的数学成绩,田纳西州一项为了验证小班教学提高教育水平的实验表明。

Analysis: The source text is a long and complicated sentence while in Chinese shorter clauses are preferred. Therefore, it would be better to translate the sentence into shorter clauses instead of one with a long and complicated structure. A better translation could be:

为了验证小班教学是否提高教育水平,田纳西州组织了一项实验。实验表明,低年级实行小班教学,高年级后,数学成绩确实更高。

Due to different thinking patterns and cultures, sentence structures are different in Chinese and English. As a result, translators should always keep such differences in mind and make adjustments in their translation, so as to produce a translation that is understandable to readers of the target language.

2.3. Translation Errors at the Paragraph Level

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, a paragraph is "a short part of a text, consisting of at least one sentence and beginning on a new line. It usually deals with a single event, description, idea, etc." [5] A similar definition is found in the Chinese equivalent of a paragraph "段落", which refers to a

basic unit in a text that includes one or more sentences and expresses a piece of a complete message. However, due to cultural differences, there are differences in the organisation of paragraphs. Translators should be aware of such differences and make changes in their translations.

An English paragraph usually starts with a topic sentence, followed by more sentences which support the topic. However, a Chinese paragraph tends to list evidence first and make a summary at the end. Such a difference comes from different mindsets in English and Chinese cultures. Consequently, translators should be aware of such a difference and make adjustments in sentence order, so readers of the target language can better understand the paragraph [2]. For example:

Example 15: 受罗马梵蒂冈派遣,他远渡重洋,到日本来传教,已有 20 多年时间了。

Student Translation: Sent by Vatican, he had travelled across the oceans to Japan as a missionary for more than twenty years.

Analysis: It would be a better translation if the sentence starts with “It has been more than twenty years since ...”.

Example 16: But he sometimes has trouble staying awake in class during the high tourist season, when he spends hours scaling vertiginous temple steps and baking in the tropical sun.

Student Translation: 然而,在旅游的旺季,他有时候很难在课堂上保持清醒,因为每天他都要在炙热的热带阳光下爬上几乎垂直的寺庙阶梯数个小时。

Analysis: The source text starts with a topic sentence “he sometimes has trouble staying awake” which is followed by the reasons for this. When this is translated into Chinese, however, translators should be aware that Chinese paragraphs tend to start with a discussion of reasons and end with a result. Therefore, a better translation would be: “然而,在旅游的旺季,他每天都要爬上那令人晕眩的神庙台阶,且还不得不在热带阳光的炙烤下暴晒数个小时,这难免让他在晚间的课堂上难以保持清醒。”

3. Suggestions for English Major Students and Teachers Teaching Translation

3.1. Develop Cultural Awareness

Students of English majors should develop cultural awareness when they learn how to translate. Developing cultural awareness means that they need to not only appreciate the beauty of Chinese culture but also need to embrace other cultures as well. It also means they should see the differences in both cultures in terms of word order, implied meaning and background information, and make adjustments in their translation. To improve students’ cultural awareness, teachers can organise activities in class such as comparing different translations of the same source text and including more cultural elements in translation exercises. Besides, teachers can also ask students to play different roles as English speakers or Chinese speakers and discuss how such cultural roles affect their understanding of a text.

3.2. Accumulate More Cultural Knowledge

To understand a culture, students need to accumulate related knowledge, such as its history, geographic location, literature, customs, traditions and religious beliefs. Not knowing such cultural knowledge will result in a lack of cultural awareness, causing mistakes in translations. Therefore, teachers should include such knowledge in translation exercises and encourage students to take related courses such as “A Guide to English-Speaking Countries”, “History of Western Culture”, and “English and American Literature”.

4. Conclusion

Language is the carrier of culture and culture is an important element in language. Communication between two languages is effective only when the communicators are aware of cultural differences. Therefore, English major students should develop cultural awareness and accumulate more knowledge in both Chinese and English cultures, so as to become better cross-cultural communicators and good translators. It is only through this work that they can tell good Chinese stories to foreigners, help them know more about China and spread Chinese culture across the world.

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