An analysis of Pragmatic Failures in Chinese-English Translation Based on Multiple Factors

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Abstract: As an important way of cross-cultural communication, the accuracy of Chinese-English translation depends on whether the translator conveys the intention of the native speaker correctly. However, pragmatic errors often occur in daily Chinese-English translation, which often leads to misunderstandings. Firstly, this paper briefly introduces the characteristics of the three terms and defines the criteria of pragmatic failure in translation. Then it analyzes the causes of pragmatic failure in E-C translation from four aspects. The previous argument is reinforced by illustrating several typical comparative examples. The four main factors leading to pragmatic failure in Chinese-English translation are the translator's ignorance of Chinese culture, lack of common cultural context between China and Britain, translator's unproficiency in grammar, and ignorance of context. The reasons for several types of pragmatic failures analyzed in this study are worth thinking about. In the future, it is necessary to cultivate multi-disciplinary and culturally rich translation talents.

1. Introduction

As globalization has been inevitable and people all over the world are gradually adapting to it, cross-cultural communication is becoming more and more important to global development. Pragmatic translation, as an important method of cross-cultural communication, is increasingly popular and widely applied. But due to the absence of shared cultural context, translators' inadequate experiences of translation, or some other reasons, pragmatic failure occurs quite often. Pragmatic failures in Chinese-English translation usually arise foreign speakers' confusion about the original meaning and even misunderstandings about Chinese culture. Therefore, if we want to avoid pragmatic failures in C/E translation, analyzing and conclude the reasons are very necessary.

2. Pragmatic Equivalence in Translation

As a way of intercultural communication, translation plays a decisive role. It transforms the source language into the target language, aiming to let the non-native speakers understand what native speakers are talking about. But during this transformation, many problems emerge, e.g. pragmatic failures, i.e. the intention of native speakers might be transformed incorrectly. Therefore, how to translate and do it right is very important in intercultural communication.

2.1 Translation

Translation is a kind of communicative activity. Many scholars have studied translation in different ways. For example, Catford, one of the most influential theorists, offered a semantic method of equivalent translation; Nida, later than Catford, push forward the reader-based translation theory; and then Newmark made a comparison between semantic translation and communicative translation. And nowadays, most translators were taught to and were trained for free translation, i.e. a well-translated text is as creative as a newly-written essay. That is to translate semantically rather than grammatically.

2.2 Pragmatic Failure

The concept of pragmatic failure was first proposed in 1983 by Thomas in his thesis Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Failure. Thomas defined this concept as "an illocutionary force that cannot understand the original utterance" [2]. Meanwhile, he suggests that a speaker's linguistic competence involves "grammatical competence", which refers to the ability to make sentences in English correctly, and "pragmatic competence", which refers to the ability to understand language in text and the ability to use language effectively to achieve a particular purpose. Pragmatic failure is not a lexical or grammatical failure, but an inability to understand what is meant by what is said. In other words, pragmatic failure means the speaker's lack of pragmatic competence, i.e. the speaker cannot comprehend language in context appreciably when pragmatic failure occurs.

2.3 Pragmatic Equivalence in Translation

To achieve equivalence in translation is to "translate meaning", i.e. a successful translation depends on a correct transfer from the source language to the target language [10]. Thus, the accurate comprehension of the source language is the key factor to successful translation. But traditional studies mainly focus on the translator's ability to translate sentence by sentence grammatically or semantically but rarely pay attention to achieving the pragmatic equivalence between source language and target language, in which pragmatic failure is easy to appear.

3. Pragmatic Failures in Chinese-English Translation

Nowadays, many translation workers didn't major in Chinese literature or English literature in university; they have just been trained for several years to practice their techniques of translation; thus, they are to some extent lack knowledge of the cultural context of the text they are handling. And since China is culturally rich, many Chinese words contain their cultural background that foreigners are not familiar with. So, when these cultural words are not properly translated, pragmatic failures may occur [4-5].

3.1 Some Reasons for Pragmatic Failure in C/E Translation

According to Thomas, "pragmatic failure occurs when the speaker fails to use language effectively to achieve a specific communicative purpose, or when the hearer fails to recognize the intention or the illocutionary force of the speaker's utterance in the context of communication". Pragmatic failure may occur when speakers come from different cultural backgrounds, i.e. pragmatic failure occurs in cross-cultural communication. Sometimes, it also occurs among speakers who share the same cultural background, i.e. occurs in intra-cultural communication. But here we just talk about several reasons for cross-cultural communication, taking C/E translation for instance.

3.1.1 Translator's Ignorance of Chinese Culture

As the author has already mentioned above many C/E translators didn't major in English literature or Chinese literature in university, and they lack knowledge about the culture of both English-speaking countries and China. So, when they encounter some unfamiliar Chinese terms, they may be confused at the first. To comprehend and then translate those terms accurately will be very difficult for them. Here are two contrastive translation versions for example:

Translator 1: You are really like Madam Xianglin.

Translator 2: You are so chattering that you annoyed me.

By contrasting these two versions, we can easily find that Translator 1 is unaware of a Chinese allusion that the name "Xiang lin sao" in Chinese usually refers to someone who always talks about his/her unluck once and once again, making others annoyed. He immediately translated "xiang lin sao" into "Madam Xianglin", which makes readers confused about who on earth Madam Xianglin is. But Translator 2 has the awareness of this allusion and has considered the lack of this allusion in English; thus, translator 2 technically omitted the confusing word "Xiang lin sao" for English readers and avoided pragmatic failure.

3.1.2 Lack of Shared Cultural Background

When we look at principles of translation, an important one is to explain or omit properly. Because there must be a wide gap between the culture of the source language and the target language. For example, traditional Chinese medicine has been for a very long time impossible for the Western world to understand; Western medicine also used to be unacceptable for the Chinese. Apart from medical differences, the usage of kinship words in Chinese culture and Western culture is also of huge differences. These two aspects are the main points that are often mistaken by green hands and those who rarely cover English versions of literature. Here are some different versions of a typical example:

Version 1: Don't eat that chocolate! It brings heat to your body.

Version 2: Don't eat that chocolate! It's too hot.

Version 3: Don't eat that chocolate! It brings you weight.

In traditional Chinese medicine culture, chocolate is believed to be of "re", which makes the blood hot and even arises acne on the face. Both the first two versions are not reasonable. No matter which of the first two versions, they are all conveying the information that the chocolate is hot. Even in version 1, the chocolate is so hot that it can heat the human body. But chocolate is exactly not hot in common sense, so the first two versions will inevitably confuse. This is the result of inconsideration of the lack of unshared cultural background. While in version 3, the translator did a good job. The translator has considered the unshared cultural background, and appreciably replaced the word "shang huo" with "weight", i.e. the translator successfully replaced this cultural context with its counterpart in English culture. Therefore, pragmatic failure is avoided.

Version 1: Ming, this is Dad's friend, Uncle Li.

Version 2: Ming, this is my friend, Uncle Li.

Version 3: Ming, this is my friend, Mr. Li.

In Eastern Asian countries, such like China, Japan, and Korea, kinship words are often used as a title of someone inside or outside family members to show kindness and closeness. But in English-speaking countries, like Britain and US, kinship words are only used for describing family relationships. So, seeing the first version, English speakers may feel confused about "whose dad is this dad", and "why does he call his friend uncle". In version two, it seems the translator has realized that English speakers never call themselves any kinship words like "dad", "mom", etc. But the translator of version 2 didn't realize that English speakers also never call any person who is not of their family with kinship words. Therefore, concluding the drawbacks of the first two versions, the translator of

version 3 has done a good job.

3.1.3 Translator's Grammatical Incompetence—Usage of Chinglish

Most C/E translators are Chinese who were born in China, brought up in China, and had rarely been exposed to an English-speaking environment until they went to college which they majored in English; so, they have been speaking and studying Chinese for more years than they have done on English. Though they have been learning English for at least 9 years before they became English majors, without efficient practices, they can't help to recall the syntax of their mother tongue, i.e. they may subconsciously apply Chinese English in their translation works. And the differences between Chinese and English from the aspect of syntax are conclude in Aesthetics and Translation: A Textbook as follows [7]:

> *"The overall mode of thinking is also reflected in the structure of Chinese text. It is a parallel arrangement which is like drifting over water so that subjects and predicates are hardly distinguishable. Only different priorities are tellable; sentences and phrases are hard to differentiate from each other. So do subjects and predicates. Without thinking carefully, analyzing a sentence as a hierarchical structure would be very difficult. On the contrary, English has tellable priorities of its sentence constituents and its overall clarity."*

And according to Li Wenzhong (1993), Chinese English (Chinglish) is a product of the influence and interference of the Chinese language [6]. And in The Translator's Guide to Chinglish by Joan Pinkham, there are usually unnecessary words or overworked introductory structures in Chinglish sentences, i.e. Chinglish is users' grammatical incompetence [1]. Therefore, C/E translators who use Chinglish are incompetent to express the original idea in English efficiently. Here are several examples:

Version 1: We need to achieve the objective of clarity in ideology.

Version 2: We need to be clear in our ideology.

Version 1: The principal task at present is to do an excellent job in disseminating and applying the results of scientific and technological research.

Version 2: The principal task at present is to disseminate and apply the results of scientific and technological research.

It seems like nothing is wrong with the transfer of literal meanings. But by contrasting the different versions of the translation, we find that version 2 is much better than version 1, because version 1 is not concise enough, i.e. there are some redundant structures in version 1. Obviously, "objective" can be expressed as a to-do structure; thus, "the objective of clarity" can be replaced with "to be clear" in version 2. It is logical that the "task" is "to disseminate and apply" rather than "to do a good job". In version 1, it can be taken for granted that people not only should disseminate and apply the results but also should do it very well, which is additional to the original meaning and might raise misunderstandings. And then pragmatic failure appears.

3.1.4 Ignorance of Context

According to the contextualist view of meaning, context can be divided into two kinds: the situational context and the linguistic context. Situational context refers to the spatiotemporal situation that linguistic communication occurs. While the linguistic context refers to the context contained in the text. [3]

In our daily life, public signs that are printed some brief words to remind people to be careful or not to do something, are easy to be seen. But due to the large number of demands and the profitable market, many factories follow this trend without deeply studying the translation of those public signs. Many of them just translate the slogans using an online translator. But online translator merely

translates human input, no matter what context it is, which usually raise confusion. Here is a typical example of ignoring situational context:

Version 1: Carefully Slide!

Version 2: Wet Floor. Watch Out!

In this example, we can easily recognize the problem. It is caused by a complete homonym in Chinese. The word "grounds" in Chinese can be uttered as de or dì in different contexts. When it is the signal of an adverb, it is uttered as de; when it is a noun, i.e. when it means ground in English, it is uttered as d ì But online translators cannot distinguish such differences of pronunciation; thus, the sentence is transferred into version 1, which is suggesting people slide carefully here. While in version 2, such puzzling mistake has been avoided, and pragmatic equivalence has been achieved in a very concise way.

There is another example, which is for the ignorance of linguistic context:

Version 1: When she returned home, Huniu threw herself down on the bed and sobbed.

Version 2: When Tigress got home, she threw herself on the brick bed and had a good cry.

This sentence is adapted from the Chinese novel Camel Xiangzi. And the character "hu niu", whose name can be transliterated as Huniu, is depicted as a girl who is strong, rude, and a little bit stupid. But the word "hu", uttered as hu, is equal to being silly in the northeast dialect of China. So, if we merely transliterate the name of the character, the vividness between lines will not be performed. Meanwhile, in Mandarin Chinese, there is an idiom called "mu lao hu", literally meaning tigress, is usually used to describe women who are rude and irritable. Therefore, it is more appreciable to translate "hu niu" into Tigress rather than merely transliterate it. On the contrary, if the translator insists on translating it into Huniu, it is an intolerable ignorance of the linguistic context, which will produce an apparent pragmatic failure [8-9].

4. Conclusions

Brief previous characterizations of three terminologies defined the criterion of pragmatic failures in translation; that is, a successful translation depends on its pragmatic equivalence, i.e. if the meaning of the source language is pragmatically transferred into the target language, it is a good translation. Then, the author analyzed reasons for pragmatic failures in C/E translation made from four perspectives. And by illustrating several typical contrastive examples, the previous arguments were re-enhanced. The four main factors that lead to pragmatic failures in Chinese-English translation are translator's ignorance of Chinese culture, lack of shared cultural context between Chinese speaker and English speaker, translator's grammatical incompetence, and ignorance of context. And these factors are almost the results of the rapid development of inter-cultural communication, i.e. rapid development produces incompetent translators whose pragmatic incompetence results in pragmatic failures in their translation works. But since rapid development is inevitable and China is culturally rich, pragmatic failures in Chinese-English translation are inescapable. But in what ways translators are possible to avoid pragmatic failures is still study-worthy.

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