

Study on English Nautical Idioms and Their Translation Strategies from the Perspective of Social-semiotics

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Abstract: Nautical idiom is an important part of English idioms and an indispensable part of the English language. This paper first discusses the three levels of meanings of social-semiotics and their relation to translation from the perspective of social-semiotics respectively. Then, five translation strategies are proposed for rendering English nautical idioms into Chinese: literal translation, borrowing, literal translation plus paraphrase, adaptation and sense translation, to convey the three levels of meanings of English nautical idioms more accurately into Chinese.

1. Introduction

Nautical idioms refer to idioms, proverbs, colloquialisms, afterwords, and slang related to nautical activities^[1]. Nautical idiom is a language continuously refined and summarized by a nation in long-term sailing practice activities, which has experienced the test of time and condenses crystallization of the wisdom of sailors engaged in nautical activities. Nautical idioms are a facet of nautical culture, and nautical culture is an important branch of a nation's culture, carrying profound cultural information, and reflecting cultural characteristics of a nation from a particular perspective.

Translation is not only an inter-linguistic communication activity, but also an intercultural communication activity. The biggest obstacle to translation activities is not the process of switching between different languages, but how to deal with the cultural factors embedded in the language and realize the process of changing different cultures. Nida, a famous American translator, believes that language and culture are inseparable, and language contains extremely rich cultural information and cultural connotations. The same is true for translation of English nautical idioms, where it is necessary to consider how to maximize transformation of cultural information and cultural connotations contained in idioms. In view of this, this paper analyzes translation strategies of English nautical idioms from the perspective of social semiotics.

2. The three levels of meaning in social-semiotics and their relationship to translation

Morris's semiotic theory proposes that all symbols are composed of three levels: the carrier of the symbol, the signifier of the sign, and the interpreter, which constitute the three levels of meaning in semiotics, namely existential meaning, formal meaning and practical meaning. Existential meaning refers to the relationship between the symbol and the object referential; Formal meaning refers to the relationship of a symbol to other symbols; The practical meaning refers to the relationship

between the symbol and the interpreter^[2]. For any particular symbol, the sum of existential meaning, formal meaning, and practical meaning constitutes the complete meaning of the symbol. In addition, different symbols contain these three meanings in different quantities, some symbols contain only one meaning, some symbols have both meanings, and some symbols have all three meanings. Morris believed that linguistic symbols also have three types of meanings, namely , verbal meaning, and pragmatic meaning.

2.1 Relationship between referential meaning and translation

Denotative meaning is the relationship between a linguistic symbol and the subjective (objective) world it describes. Human beings all live on the earth, and the living environment is basically the same. At the same time, the physiological structure of different peoples and the way they perceive nature are also basically similar, which makes it possible to have the same referent of linguistic symbols in different languages. From the perspective of social semiotics, translation is the equivalence conversion between the source language symbol and the target language symbol, and the prerequisite for achieving the equivalent transformation is the same referent of different language symbols^[3]. That is, the higher the agreement between the reference of the source symbol and the target symbol, the easier it is to achieve this equivalent conversion; Conversely, the harder it is to achieve.

Saussure, the founder of modern linguistic theory, pointed out that linguistic symbols and the combination they refer to are arbitrary. In every language, linguistic symbols are arbitrarily combined with various substances, and then combined in a certain way. Due to the arbitrariness of language, one language symbol and its signifier are often different from the symbols and its referent of another language, especially the seafaring idioms with rich cultural information and distinctive national characteristics.

2.2 Relationship between verbal meaning and translation

Verbal meaning is the interrelationship between linguistic symbols, that is, the relationship between phonetics, vocabulary, syntax, discourse, etc. In different cultural backgrounds, people's thinking styles, living customs, and language habits naturally lead to different relationships between symbols and symbols in different language symbol systems. At this level, the translation process needs to reproduce the combination order of symbols and symbols in the source language as much as possible. This is sometimes difficult to do due to the huge differences between the two language symbology. In the actual translation process, except for the high requirements of poetry translation on the transformation of the meaning in the language, there is no need for other translations to entangle whether the verbal meaning in the translated text is the same as the verbal meaning of the source text.

2.3 Relationship between pragmatic meaning and translation

Pragmatic meaning is the relationship between linguistic symbols and linguistic signs. Due to the different cultural backgrounds, social environments, natural environments and other aspects of speakers of different languages, the symbols of the two languages will have different effects on their respective interpreters. In this sense, translation is the process of trying to make the translated symbols have the same effect on the target language reader as the original language symbols have on the source language readers^[4].

3. Translation strategies of English nautical idioms from the perspective of social-semiotics

Based on the results discussed above, it is difficult for the two language symbols to correspond completely one-to-one at the level of referential, verbal and pragmatic meanings, and the social semiotic translation method is to strive for the maximum equivalence of the original language symbols and the translated language symbols at the level of referential, verbal and pragmatic within the scope of the grammar and expression habits of the translation and under the premise of ensuring the most important meaning of translation. In the process of translation, the translator should strive to convert and convey as much of the various meanings carried by the source language as much as possible to the reader of the translated language^[5]. The two languages of English and Chinese belong to completely different language families, and there are great differences in phonetics, vocabulary, syntax and passages, which objectively makes it difficult for the three meanings of English nautical idioms to be completely expressed in Chinese at the same time.

The biggest difficulty in idiom translation is how to deal with the cultural factors embedded in idioms, and English nautical idiom translation is no exception. Adaptation and alienation are two common ways to deal with cultural factors. The so-called adaptation means to convey the content of the original text in a way that is accepted by the target language reader. Alienation refers to the absorption of foreign language expressions, requiring translators to move closer to the author, take the target language culture as the destination, and adopt the source language expression method to convey the content of the original text. As far as the translation of nautical idioms is concerned, this paper proposes the following translation strategies: literal translation, borrowing, literal translation plus paraphrase, adaptation and sense translation.

3.1 Literal translation

For those English nautical idioms that refer to the same thing/idea as Chinese, the literal translation method should be used as much as possible, which will not cause a reduction in information and can also enrich expressions in Chinese. For example:

- 1) In the deepest water is the best fishing.
- 2) The good seaman is known in bad weather.
- 3) A good sailor may mistake in a dark night.

In the translation of the above three example sentences, from the perspective of social semiotic translation, the referential meaning and pragmatic meaning can basically be conveyed. It can be seen that the literal translation of English nautical idioms not only does not cause barriers to understanding, but also allows Chinese readers to experience foreign cultures.

3.2 Borrowing

The way of thinking embodied in some English nautical idioms is very similar to the way of thinking of the Chinese people, and similar expressions exist in Chinese, which can be borrowed at this time. For example:

- 4) Tom is quick-witted and he always takes the wind out of his sails when he argues with others.
- 5) He is a man good at trimming his sails.
- 6) Fish for a needle in the ocean.

In the past, ships were powered by sail blowing the wind, so many idioms related to sails were produced among the crew, and many idioms are still used today on various other occasions. In example 4), the idiom “take the wind out of one's sails” originally means “when two ships fight, use their own ship to block the wind of the enemy ship and slow down the enemy ship”. In example 5),

“trim one's sails” means “adjust the sails to adapt to changes in wind direction”, and can mean “change the concept to adapt to different situations”. In example 6), “fish for a needle in the ocean” means “to accomplish the impossible”, and the referential meaning is highly consistent with the pragmatic meaning, so it can be borrowed directly when translated.

Other similar English seafaring idioms include “fish for compliments”, “burn one's boat”, and “a sea of people”.

3.3 Literal translation plus paraphrase

Some English nautical idioms embody a unique way of thinking in English, and if translated literally, the translator may be confused and unable to understand the figurative meaning. If the metaphor is sacrificed by paraphrasing, although it conveys the essence of the message, it greatly reduces the literary brilliance. In this case, you can choose a literal translation plus paraphrase, which can not only retain the vivid metaphor of the source language, but also reproduce the meaning of the source language. For example:

- 7) When the ship comes home.
- 8) A small leak will sink the ship
- 9) Cry stinking fish

In the above three examples, the meaning of the idiom is first literally translated to convey the referential meaning, but due to cultural differences, the pragmatic meaning is different, and then it is necessary to add paraphrases so that the translated reader can obtain similar pragmatic meaning.

3.4 Adaptation

The living environment of the two peoples of English and Chinese is different, the British maritime culture is more developed, there are a large number of nautical idioms in the English vocabulary, and the Chinese mainland culture is more developed, although the Chinese coastline is long, there are also some nautical idioms, but the number is far lower than the English nautical idioms. Therefore, when translating English nautical idioms, the “adapted” translation can be used, using Chinese idioms with the same connotation or derivation, the same or similar image, for example:

- 10) Fish begins to stink at the head.
- 11) She is all at sea when she heard the news.
- 12) We will need all hands to the pumps if we want to win the victory..
- 13) Hoist sail when the wind is fair.

In translating the above four examples, in order to ensure the full communication of pragmatic meaning, the referential meaning was abandoned, and the adapted translation was adopted, using similar expressions in the Chinese.

3.5 Sense Translation

Some English seafaring idioms have strong local and national overtones, and cannot be borrowed, literally translated, and adapted. In this case, sense translation can be adopted, abandoning the figurative meaning of the idiom and retaining its pragmatic meaning, while ensuring the fluidity of the context and the integrity of the meaning according to the context. For example:

- 14) The blacksmith came down the street, three sheets in the wind.
- 15) I'm sorry I can't go boating with you. I have other fish to fry.

In example 14), “three sheets in the wind” is a nautical idiom, where sheet is “sail ankle cord”.

“Both sheets in (or to) the wind” means “two sail ankle cords are loose”, and the ship will jolt badly due to the uneven force on the sails. Later the phrase was used to mean “drunk”. Three sheets in the wind is based on its exaggeration, meaning “drunk”^[6]. The idiom can only be paraphrased, retaining its pragmatic meaning and discarding its figurative metaphor. Similarly, “I have other fish to fry” in Example 15) can only be paraphrased, retaining its pragmatic meaning as “there are other things to do” .

4. Conclusion

By analyzing the translation of English nautical idioms from the perspective of social-semiotics, we have a clearer understanding of the essence of translation, that is, translation is not only the corresponding transformation of the denotative meaning of linguistic symbols, but also the equivalent transformation of the verbal meaning and pragmatic meaning of linguistic symbols as much as possible. As far as the translation of English nautical idioms is concerned, the social semiotic translation method requires translators to analyze the three levels of meanings contained in English nautical idioms according to the specific context of the use of the idioms, and adopt various flexible and appropriate translation strategies to maximize the referential, verbal and pragmatic meanings carried by the idiom.

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