

Study on the English Translation of Chinese Cuisine from the Perspective of Functional Equivalence Theory: Taking Yue Cuisine for Example

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Abstract: The English translation of Chinese cuisine, which is closely related to everyday life, has attracted great attention from worldwide. However, different cities have different characteristics in the catering industry. Although the translations of Chinese Cuisine can be found everywhere in catering, most of the translations are far from being satisfactory. And the studies on translations of Chinese Cuisine are mainly limited to methods and strategies based on personal experience without being based on the local culture and specialties. According to the contrastive study between Chinese and English cuisine, the paper tries to probe into the English translation of Chinese cuisine from the perspective of functional equivalence, taking Yue cuisine for example.

1. Introduction

Eugene A. Nida is a distinguished American translation theorist as well as a linguist. His translation theory has exerted a tremendous influence on translation studies in western countries. His works on translation set off the study of modern translation as an academic field (Snell-Hornby 1988: 1; Heylen 1993: 4; Baker 1998: 277), and he is regarded as the most influential one among all contemporary translation theorists (Newmark, 1993:133).^[1-2]

Nida's translation theory is closely related to his experience of Bible translating. Nida made his major contribution to descriptive linguistics. His doctoral thesis, *A Synopsis of English Syntax* (1943) adopted the immediate constituent model to analyze the English language in detail. And in this work, Nida emphasized the importance of linguistic study in the context of culture and society. In addition, he concentrated on the anthropological side of culture and communication. First, Nida mainly focused his attention on the theory and practice of translation and placed great emphasis on the role of the reader in translating. He also put forward a system of priorities in translation. Then Nida not only further explored the issues of meaning by adopting a sociosemiotics approach, but substituted "functional equivalence" for "dynamic equivalence" just to avoid unnecessary misunderstandings. He also modified his attitude towards "formal correspondence", which had been regarded as the opposite of "dynamic equivalence" in his early works of the sixties, and stated that only under certain circumstances should the form of the source text be changed. In his theory, Nida adopts a

scientific approach to translation.^[3]

When discussing the process of translation, Nida adopts the useful elements of the transformational generative grammar (TG grammar). He suggests that it is more effective to transfer the meaning from the source language to the receptor language on the kernel level, because the linguistic meaning of the original text is structurally the simplest and semantically most evident. Therefore, unlike the traditional translating procedure from the surface structure of one language to the surface structure of another language, Nida advances a three-step translation process: to analyze source-language expressions in terms of basic kernel sentences; to transform the kernel forms of the source language into the equivalent kernel forms of the receptor language; to transform the kernel utterances of the receptor language into the stylistically appropriate expressions (Nida 1964:68-69).^[4]

This process of translating helps the translator consciously avoid literal translation, in which he tends to match the formal structures of the two languages in question, and reproduces accurately the meaning of the source language in the receptor language. As a matter of fact, “dynamic equivalence” is confirmed not only by information theory but also by the fact that all good translations tend to be longer than their originals in terms of content, owing to the added information for the purpose of effective communication (Nida 1964:131).^[5] When handling transference of meanings, Nida adopts theories of semantics, sociolinguistics and sociosemiotics and so on. This also shows Nida’s scientific approach to translation. Nida holds that in translating, the first thing one should do is to understand thoroughly the meaning of the source text. Inadequate understanding of the original text is the major cause for failures in translation. “Dynamic equivalence” is Nida’s another major contribution to translation studies. The essential idea of “dynamic equivalence” was first mentioned by Nida in his article, “*Principles of Translation as Exemplified by Bible Translating*” (1959). In Nida’s theory, “dynamic equivalence” is defined with “receptors’ response” as its nature. Unlike traditional translation theories, which focus on verbal comparison between the original text and its translation, Nida’s concept of translating shifts from “the form of the message” to “the response of the receptor”. Thus, the importance of receptors’ role in translating is emphasized. In Nida’s view, when determining whether a translation is faithful to the original text or not, the critic should not compare the formal structures between the source text and its translation, but compare “receptors’ response”.^[6]

2. The Brief Introduction to Characteristics of Chinese Cuisine

Chinese cuisine with a long history, is one of the Chinese cultural treasures. Therefore, it is celebrated for various specialties in the world. In the past centuries, Chinese cookery has developed and matured, forming a rich cultural content. The variety of production and natural resources, the geographic environment and climates in locations mark the distinctive characteristics of local Chinese cuisine.^[7] It is characterized by fine selection of ingredients, precise processing, particular attention to the amount of fire, and substantial nourishment. In accordance with the region, local products, climate, historical factors, and dietary habits, local flavors and snacks as well as specialties have particular distinguishing features. (Chen Gang, 2004) Chinese culinary culture can date back to the ancient times. Its fine selection of the freshest ingredients, various cooking methods and plentiful cultural connotations have attracted many overseas visitors from near and far to appreciate the fruits of the culinary development. The culinary culture is reflected in the Chinese cuisine. China is known for its long history, vast territory and rich natural resources concerning Chinese culinary culture. Therefore, its complexity and variety make the translations of Chinese cuisine tough and knotty.^[8]

3. A Profile of Yue Cuisine

Yue cuisine which made its debut in Canton is one of eight major groups. It is characterized firstly by its wide and strict selection of ingredients. To begin with, seafood and game food are the first-rate courses. Apart from chicken, duck and goose, pigeon, emu, chukar, and quail also make delicious dishes. As to seafood, the Cantonese take to various delicacies from water, such as grouper, abalone, hairtail, squid, tuna, perch, eels, swamp crab, spiral shell, scallop, clam, freshwater mussel, lobster, prawn, crab and so on.^[9] Whereas their favorite game foods include reptiles as well as amphibians, such as Brazilian turtle, snake, Chinese freshwater turtle, Chinese wood frog and so on. In addition, Guangdong people are fond of light, delicious, refreshing and slippery tastes. Their cooking methods are mostly steaming, sauté and stir-frying with thick gravy.^[10] The third characteristic of Guangdong cuisine is plenty of supportive vegetables, due to the substantial scope of local produce. In the north of Guangdong are grown a lot of mushrooms and bamboo shoots. The fourth characteristic is the many kinds of porridge and refreshments. (Sun Weixin., 2004)

4. Application of Functional Equivalence Theory in English Translation of Chinese Cuisine

Eugene Nida, one of the most influential translation theorists, founded the theory of dynamic and functional equivalence. As against the traditional concept of linguistic or formal equivalence, he presented a communicative approach which distinguishes between formal and dynamic functional equivalence in translation. “Formal equivalence” refers to faithful reproduction of source text formal elements while “dynamic equivalence” denotes acquisition of equivalent extra-linguistic communicative effect. He advocates dynamic functional equivalence as translation criteria in several books.^[11]

“Dynamic equivalence is ... to be defined in terms of the degree to which the receptors of the message in the receptor language respond to it in substantially the same manner as the receptor in the source language. This response can never be identical..., but there should be a high degree of equivalence of response, or the translation will have failed to accomplish its purpose” (Nida 1969:24).

Later, Nida decided to use the term “functional equivalence” to replace the often misunderstood “dynamic”. He explains that the new term seems to “provide a much sounder basis for talking about translation as a form of communication with a focus on what translation does or perform (Nida 1993:124).

Nida makes his definition of functional equivalence on two levels. A minimal, realistic definition could be stated as “The readers of a translated text should be able to comprehend it to the point that they can conceive of how the original readers of the text must have understood and appreciated it”. And his maximal, ideal definition could be understood as “The readers of a translated text should be able to understand and appreciate it in essentially the same manner as the original readers did.”

Functional equivalence observes the principle of equivalent effect on the receivers, that is, the relationship between the receptor and the translated message should aim at being the same as that between the original receptor and the source language message. It attempts to render receptor words from one language to another, and caters to the receptor’s linguistic competence and cultural backgrounds. As Doctor Nida (2001) views, “in general it is best to speak of functional equivalence in terms of a range of adequacy, since no translation is ever completely equivalent. A number of different translations can in fact represent varying degrees of equivalence”. Formal correspondence sometimes distorts the grammatical and stylistic patterns of the target language, and hence distorts the message, only to cause the translation to be ambiguous or awkward. However, functional equivalence sometimes changes the form of the source text, but preserves the message of the source language, because it transforms the message in the receptor language. Of the two, Doctor Nida

undoubtedly favors the latter. “If a more or less literal correspondence is functionally equivalent in both designative and associative meaning, then obviously no adjustments in form are necessary. But if this is not the case, the translators should make some adjustments in order to achieve the closest natural equivalence”.^[12]

Although Nida’s theory used to be widely accepted as the most authoritative in translation circle, there is still some limitations in it in that he did not realize that in some cases target texts may have entirely different purposes from their source texts and therefore may perform entirely different functions from their source texts.

Eugene A. Nida’s translation theory has been discussed extensively since it was introduced into China. Therefore, his theory of functional equivalence has been highly valued and has an impact on the practice of translation in general. It can be applied as a guiding criterion in English Translation of Chinese Cuisine.

4.1 Strategies for English Translation of Chinese Cuisine

When the English translation of Chinese Cuisine fails to meet the absolute equivalence in meaning, it is well worth in probing into for translators to how to achieve the functional equivalence to a great extent. First of all, Attention should be paid to the differences of cultures between China and the West, including dish names, materials, and gastronomy, especially dietary cultures. Western cuisine is different from Chinese cuisine. For example, Western cuisine is inclined to science and nutrition, while Chinese cuisine is inclined to artistry. In the eyes of Chinese people, cuisine is not merely for satisfying the stomach, but is also a creative art. (Sun Weixin, 2004) Chinese people are expert at eating. They not only eat all kinds of animals but also eat certain animal’s viscera that the Westerners do not eat. In Chinese people’s opinion, liver is nutrimental for blood; kidney is nutrimental for kidney; etc. However, animal’s viscera are used for animal feed in the Western culture, so the Westerners do not eat them. For example, People in Guangdong Province eat *baked cicadas* and *roasted beetles* at restaurant. In addition, when the English translation of Chinese Cuisine, emphasis should be laid on form equivalence of common dish names as well as content equivalence of culturally-loaded dish names. For example, drinking crab cactus flowers is the favorite in Canton Province. Garnishing and dotting are in need due to the aesthetic standard. Moreover, the cutting techniques just can satisfy the good-looking requirement. Therefore, “*Stewed Pork Soup with Crab Cactus Flowers*” is translated according to content equivalence of culturally-loaded dish names. This Soup looks as beautiful as flowers. The aesthetic standard is taken into consideration.^[13]

4.1.1 Literal Translation

Literal translation, generally speaking, keeps the general form of source language and the structure and the metaphor of the original. However, it is necessary that literal translation should make some adjustments so as to make target language smooth, clean and acceptable. After reading, target language readers can have almost the same feeling as the source language readers. There are some differences between literal translation and word-for-word translation. Word-for-word translation is inferior to literal translation, for word-for-word translation is stiff and unintelligible. Most of the Chinese cuisine are the realistic description of the dish; therefore, the strategy of literal translation is applied to most cases concerning the translation of Chinese cuisine. In addition, some literal translations fail to have a full reflection on the dish’s metaphoric and humanistic implications. As a result, explanatory notes should be added to the translation as a supplement in order to achieve the aim of faithfulness or loyalty to the original language. “Generally, in communicative as in semantic translation, provided that equivalent-effect is secured, the literal word-for-word translation

is not only the best; it is the only valid method of translation. There is no excuse for unnecessary ‘synonyms’, let alone paraphrases, in any type of translation”. (Newmark, 2001a: 39) For instance, Yue Cuisine holds fastidious norms in selecting ingredients which require Qingyuan (County) chicken and Wenchang (County) chicken. Therefore, *white cut chicken* is translated directly. Other examples of literal translation include *Fried Oyster*, *Three Cup Chicken*, *Salt Baked Chicken*, *Roast Suckling Pig*, etc. From the above-mentioned examples, it can be seen that each component of each translation can be fit to the corresponding position in the formula, which is the most common rule applied to all the literal translations of Chinese cuisine. As far as the explanatory notes of the translation are concerned, the method of literal translation plus explanatory notes aims to avoid the confusion caused by culture or conflict in the target language. The translation of the dish (*Green Dragons Crossing the Sea Vegetable Soup*) is a famous soup in Cantonese cuisine, whose name sounds frightened. As a matter of fact, it is nothing but a basin of water celery. When translating this dish, we should translate it into *Green Dragons Crossing the Sea* and plus the explanatory notes *Vegetable Soup*.

4.1.2 Free Translation

Free translation is an alternative approach which is used mainly to convey the meaning and spirit of the original without trying to reproduce its sentence patterns or figures of speech. This approach is most frequently adopted when it is really impossible for the translator to do literal translation. Compared with literal translation, free translation is different in the English translation of Chinese cuisine. In a word, literal translation is by no means word-for-word translation and free translation is far from random translation. For instance, *Fried Rice-Noodle with Beef* is cooked with beef and rice-noodle. However, it is translated into “*Cow River*”, which is word-for-word translation. The translator doesn’t understand what the dish is at all, let alone the foreigners. When translating it, we must consider the method of cooking and its materials. It should be translated into *Fried Rice-Noodle with Beef*. Therefore, there are still many problems in the English translations of Chinese cuisine. For another instance, *The Dragon Fighting Against the Tiger* is a Cantonese famous dish in which *Dragon* means *Snake* and *Tiger* means *Cat*; therefore, this dish is regarded as “snake meat” simmering “cat meat”. If it is directly translated into *the Dragon Fighting Against the Tiger*, the foreign visitors will be dumbfounded. When directly translated into *Stewed Snake and Wild Cat*, it seems too simple. Therefore, the dish is correctly translated into *The Dragon Fighting Against the Tiger*, (*Stewed Snake and Wild Cat*). (Cheng Jinneng, Lü Hefa, 2008)

4.2 Problems in the English Translation of Chinese Cuisine

Without a doubt, Chinese cuisine is popular among the people all over the world in terms of its color, aroma and taste. Every friend that travels to China would like to taste as well as learn about Chinese cuisine. It is a part of our cross-cultural communication to introduce Chinese cuisine to the foreign friends. Therefore, it is very necessary that a precise and idiomatic English translation of Chinese cuisine should be presented to them. Taking Yue cuisine for example, it can be seen that many English translations of dish names fail to convey true ideas. For example, *WonTon* is a kind of dumpling soup which is named by Cantonese. Its correct translation should be *WonTon*, which has been widely accepted. However, we can read *Top Soup Cloud Swallows* in a menu. Obviously, it belongs to literal translation or word-for-word translation. As a matter of fact, the dish should also be translated into *Won Ton Soup*.

As to these errors, some effective measures must be taken to solve the problems in the English translation of Chinese cuisine. Attention should be paid to the methods of English translation, to the background of cultures from different countries, to the customary usage of different languages.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, when translating Chinese cuisine with local Styles and Specialties, we mustn't be as punctilious as literal meaning. It is very important for us to try to translate them according to their pragmatic meanings. Additionally, we should further learn about the basic knowledge of cooking methods as well as Chinese cuisine culture. Therefore, Chinese cuisine enjoys a high reputation in the world. It is due to the diversity of the climate, products and customs that there are widely different food styles and tastes in local regions.

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