

## A Tentative Analysis of English Translation of Mongolian Proverbs from the Intercultural Perspective

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### Abstract

This paper firstly focuses on the definitions of proverbs, the characteristics of Mongolian proverbs and the importance of translation of Mongolian proverbs. The paper points out that the translation of Mongolian proverbs plays an increasing role in the cross-cultural communication. From the intercultural perspective, this paper mainly explores how to apply literal translation, free translation, domestication and foreignization strategies to translate Mongolian proverbs into English, based on different living environments, traditional customs and religious beliefs.

**Keywords:** Mongolian proverbs, cultural differences, English proverbs, translation strategies

### 1. Introduction to Mongolian Proverbs and the Significance of Their English Translation

Mongolian people, as a nation on horsebacks, possess a long history, unique national characteristics and special grassland culture. In the long process of nomadic way of life, Mongolian people have formed their own way of cognitive ability to explain nature and society. They use their philosophy and practical experience to pass down their language and culture. With the rapid development of global economy, the cross-cultural communication is becoming more and more frequent. Mongolian culture, as a kind of special one melting into the culture of the world, attracts much more attention of the public. Proverbs as one of clues to show different cultural backgrounds make a great contribution to the exchanges of Mongolian culture and other cultures forming the intercultural communication. Therefore, the study of translation of Mongolian proverbs is becoming more and more necessary.

The proverb is one of the oldest and the most precious cultural heritages. It origins from life experience and working practice, and reflects life. According to *Longman Modern English Dictionary*, the proverb is defined as “a brief familiar maxim of folk wisdom, usually compressed in form, often involving a bold image and frequently a jingle that catches the memory” (Watson, 1976, p. 899). “What is a proverb, but the experience and observation of several ages, gathered and summed up into one expression” (Stevenson, 1987, p. 1906) is Stevenson’s definition in the *MacMillan Book of Proverbs, Maxims & Famous Phrases. Oxford Advanced Learner’s English-Chinese dictionary* defines a proverb as “a short well-known saying that states a general truth or gives advice” (Hornby, 2002, p. 1193). As the crystallization of language and wisdom of human beings, proverbs are concise in style, enriched in connotation, fixed in form and show common things and truth in life. Loaded with civilization and cultural characteristics, the proverb and its translation show a great significance in promoting the cross-cultural communication.

Apart from the same characteristics as other proverbs, Mongolian proverbs also have their own unique characteristics. Mongolian proverbs are a kind of folk literature with strong rhythm. Some proverbs are formed by one line; others may be consisted by two, three or four lines. The sentence structure of a Mongolian proverb is symmetric and neat. The meanings of some Mongolian proverbs are relatively independent and integrated. Some proverbs are used as an independent communicative unit, and sometimes may be used as parts of sentences. From the syntactic and semantic aspects, some Mongolian proverbs are consistent, others are not. As the summary of Mongolian experience and knowledge, Mongolian proverbs can reflect a lot of aspects of Mongolian life in a simple way. Moreover, Mongolian proverbs play a guiding and educational role in people’s daily life. So a good study of Mongolian proverbs and translation of them has a vital significance in the study of Mongolian culture and its exchanges with other cultures in the international communication.

In order to explore Mongolian culture from Mongolian proverbs, people begin to study the translation of Mongolian proverbs. By translating Mongolian proverbs, people can understand the different features of Mongolian people in their living environment, traditional customs, and religious beliefs. Furthermore, the translations of Mongolian proverbs can make people enjoy special feelings of the grassland and enthusiasm of Mongolian people. In addition, the translation of Mongolian proverbs can not only spread Mongolian culture but also promote the development and prosperity of the culture of the world. Therefore, it is quite necessary to translate Mongolian proverbs into English, for English is a world-wide language and a working language in the intercultural communication.

The translation of proverbs involves a lot of cultural background knowledge. We can further explore Mongolian culture by studying Mongolian proverbs. However, big cultural differences make the study of translation of Mongolian proverbs still have a long way to go.

## 2. The Cultural Differences between Mongolian Proverbs and English Ones

Though there are some similarities in Mongolian proverbs and English ones, the big cultural differences between them are the key difficult point in translating Mongolian proverbs into English.

Culture can derive from a certain living environment. People's observation and reflection towards the world and their individual manner will certainly be influenced by their living environment. Mongolian and English people live in quite different environments. Mongolian people live in the places with large areas of grasslands and a lot of lakes. Normally, on the grasslands it is quite dry in spring, very cold in winter, and rains in summer and autumn. This kind of situation on the grasslands is not proper for Mongolian people to go in for agriculture. Hence, in order to survive, Mongolian people only migrate along the rivers and grasslands. The most important things to them are grasslands, rivers and livestock, so their proverbs often are related to these things. A typical Mongolian proverb “蒿草茂盛的草原马群肥壮，碱性草甸的牧场羊群肥壮” (Munggenagola, 2007) (Here is Chinese version), from the literal meaning, it means that on the wormwood grasslands horses can become fat and strong, and on the alkaline meadows sheep and goats can become fat and strong. This proverb means that wormwood grasslands and alkaline meadows are good for the growth of horses and sheep and goats. It is known that wormwood grows on the half-wet grasslands, and contains water, calcium and other nutritional ingredients, which are good for the growth of horses. *Aneurolepididum chinense*, also named as the grass of sheep and goats, grows on the low and plain grasslands. Moreover, it is full of calcium which is good for the growth of sheep and goats. To sum up, the wormwood and *aneurolepididum chinense* are the main food of livestock on the grasslands, so Mongolian people apply these things into their proverb which properly reflects their living environment. However, the United Kingdom is an island country surrounded by sea. So water and ships are playing an irreplaceable role in British people's life. English expressions are more related to water and sea, such as proverbs “spend money like water”, “living without an aim, are like sailing without a compass”, “in a calm sea, every man is a pilot” and “a smooth sea never made a skillful mariner”. All these English proverbs reflect British people's life and social philosophy. In some English proverbs, water and sea can be compared to trouble and sometimes are treated as the pillar of life. Therefore, without a study of British cultural background and living environment, there must be some confusion in understanding English proverbs and expressions.

Mongolian and English people create different traditional customs. As everyone knows that Mongolian people live on the grasslands with lots of livestock. However, after the destruction of one piece of grassland they need to move to other grasslands by horses. Horses are the main transporting tools for Mongolian people on the grasslands. Mongolian people regard horses as their best friends and close companions. So there are a large number of Mongolian proverbs are related to horses. The following Mongolian proverbs all are with the image “horse” in them: “好男儿出在马背上”, “没有马的男人, 就像没有翅膀的鹰”, “重由轻开始, 骏马从小开始”, “中年失友, 半路丢马”, “蒙族靠马生活, 像汉族靠买卖”, “与其有上千匹马, 不如千名朋友”, “礼品马的牙不能看, 嫂子的座位不能坐” (Chinese version). Let's discuss another Mongolian proverb “没有人不犯错, 没有马不失蹄” (Chinese version), from the literal meaning, it means that no man is without his own shortcoming and no horse is without its stumble. And its free translation is that “no man is perfect”. Mongolian people love horses so much as English people love dogs. For Mongolian people horses are not only their main transporting tools and good friends, but also the representatives of good husbands. So in Mongolian proverbs a horse often refers to man and his action. But, British people like dogs very much, and treat dogs as their permanent companions, which comes from their traditional customs. They use the image of dog to imply some behaviors of human beings, so a lot of English proverbs are related to dogs, such as “every dog has his day”, “love me love my dog”, “old dogs learn no new tricks”, “it is ill to waken sleeping dogs”, “to teach the dog to bark” and “the scalded dog fears cold water” (Chen, 2007). From the image of dog, we can see the importance of dog in their daily life. Obviously, people in the different cultural backgrounds create different traditional

customs.

The religion is a part of culture as well. The proverb has a close relationship with the culture, and can reflect the effect of religion on the language. (Ping & Zhang, 2000, p. 109) In the early days Mongolian people believed in Shamanism and now Lamaism, which are the two main traditional religions of people who lived on the northern Mongolian grasslands. In the 13th century the government of Yuan dynasty started to accept Tibetan Buddhism, but common Mongolian people still believed in Shamanism. In the second half of the 16th century, a lot of people from Mongolian upper class began to believe in the Tibetan Buddhism and gradually had it popular among common Mongolian people. So, later the essence of the Tibetan Buddhism is deeply rooted in Mongolian people's mind, and guide their behaviors and manners in their daily life. Such as Mongolian proverb “想着佛祖，睡觉就不会梦到鬼” (Chinese version), from the literal meaning, it means that you will not dream of a ghost when you have Buddha in your mind. And from the free translation, it means that if there is Buddha in your heart, bad fortune will not trouble you. Because in Mongolian culture, Mongolian people believe in Buddha, and think that Buddha is a symbol of holiness and justice, and also believe that justice will beat down evil in the end. So they combine these two images into this proverb vividly. However, English people believe in Christianity and think that God is the only master and the unique savior of the world. Only God could get his sons and daughters out of sufferings. So a lot of their proverbs come from the Bible, and are related to God and church that go into lots of aspects of people's daily life. Such English proverbs as “man proposes, God disposes”, “God helps those who help themselves” and “he that serves God for money will serve the devil for better wages” and “no cross, no crown” (Chen, 2007). In these proverbs, English people highlight the energy and strength of God, and show their great respect and trust to God.

By analyzing Mongolian proverbs and English ones, we know that big cultural differences exist in them, but we still can take some translation principles and strategies to translate Mongolian proverbs into English, and promote the exchanges of Mongolian culture and other cultures of the world.

### **3. The Principles and Strategies Applied in the Translation of Mongolian Proverbs into English**

As a matter of fact, it is difficult to translate Mongolian proverbs into English. The translation of Mongolian proverbs is not only to translate words as faithfully, expressively and elegantly as possible, but also to spread Mongolian culture to foreign countries on the condition of retaining vivid images, national characteristics and art of Mongolian proverbs. The following two points should be paid attention to.

Firstly, don't translate the words too literally. It is well known that proverbs are brief and easily understood. And literal translation is the basic method to be used in the translation of proverbs. There are metaphors and some images in Mongolian proverbs, so extremely using of literal translation would lead to the misunderstanding or confusion of Mongolian proverbs.

Secondly, the translator should draw more attention to national characteristics in the course of translation, for the proverb may embody the factor of the history, culture, economy, customs, living experience and religion of one nation. Such as an English proverb “we must not lie down, and cry, God help us”, this proverb means that “it is better to help oneself than ask for help”. And there is a following Mongolian proverb to match it, “使唤别人不如自己动手” (Chinese version). God is the term of Christian and there are a lot of proverbs relating to God in English, while most Mongolian people believe in Tibetan Buddhism, not Christianity, so the word “God” is replaced by “Buddha” in Mongolian proverbs. However, there is no corresponding proverb in Mongolian, so the above mentioned translation is a suitable one.

Generally speaking, not extremely using of literal translation and considering of national characteristics are the two major principles applied in the translation of Mongolian proverbs. In addition to the above mentioned, the popularization can also be a principle to be noticed. A large number of proverbs are spread orally and created by common people, so in the course of translation, that the translated version is also supposed to accord with the popularization can be a good standard.

On the premise of understanding of these principles, choosing proper translation strategies is of great significance. In our opinion, the following strategies can be used in translating Mongolian proverbs.

The first strategy is literal translation. The definition of literal translation in Wikipedia.org (2007) is that “literal translation, or directed translation is not only the rendering of both of meanings and original forms but also conveyance of source language culture.” Some of English proverbs' translations have rooted in Chinese proverbs, like “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth”, “knowledge is power” and “easy come, easy go” and so forth. These proverbs can be literally translated into Chinese. That is to say, the translator can use similar Chinese proverbs to translate this kind of English proverbs, vice versa. This strategy can be used in translating Mongolian proverbs to

English as well. For example, the literal translation of Mongolian proverb “趁热打铁” (Chinese version) is “strike while the iron is hot”, and Mongolian proverb “人靠衣装” (Chinese version) can be translated as “apparel makes the man”. Although differences exist between Mongolian and English culture, there are similar values in both cultures showed by the appearance of a certain number of proverbs. The same images in the proverbs can be used in the different languages. Therefore, in order to translate these proverbs, either Mongolian or English, literal translation is a basic and proper method.

The second strategy is free translation. For some of proverbs, literal translation is not suitable. Because the reader of target language neither knows about the cultural background of source language nor understands such word-for-word translation. In such cases, the translator had better use free translation instead of literal translation. Free translation would get rid of forms and figures of speech bearing on the purpose of exact expression of target language. To some extent, free translation and Eugene Nida's translation theory—functional equivalence are converging now. Take some Mongolian proverbs for examples. Mongolian proverb “对猫来说是游戏，但对老鼠来说是死亡” (Chinese version), from the literal meaning, it means that one thing is a game for a cat but death for a rat, while its free translation—“one man's meat is another's poison” can express the idea clearly. Here, the images “cat” and “rat” in the Mongolian proverb refer to people in English, and the using of free translation conveys hidden meanings delivered by the metaphor. Another example—Mongolian proverb “和平时期想着危险，享福的时候想着苦难” (Chinese version), from the literal meaning, it means that one should prepare for danger and suffering in the times of peace and life of enjoyment, so its free translation can be written as “to be vigilant in peace time”. Another Mongolian proverb “眼睛里的灰尘，牙缝里的肉” (Chinese version), the “dust” and “meat” here refer to the barrier in one's life, so its free translation is “a thorn in one's side”. Mongolian proverbs and English ones can use different things to express the same ideas. Free translation used in the translation of above mentioned proverbs avoids misunderstanding and other problems caused by literal translation.

The third strategy is domestication. Domestication and foreignization put forward by Lawrence Venuti in his work *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (1995) focus on not only linguistic values but also cultural values. A target reader tends to understand a translated version with his or her own experience. Using domestication to translate a source text is a kind of target-culture-oriented activity. This strategy—domestication can be applied to settle the problems of translation of Mongolian proverbs into English. For instance, Mongolian proverb “去哪里就唱哪里的歌” (Chinese version), its literal meaning is “to sing songs of the town where one arrives”. Mongolian people are good at singing and dancing, and this becomes means of socialization to show their hospitality. So “sing songs of the town where one arrives” means that one gets along well with locals or observes local disciplines and obeys local laws. Therefore, by using translating strategy—domestication this Mongolian proverb can be translated as an English proverb “When in Rome, do as the Romans do”. Another Mongolian proverb “拆东墙补西墙” (Chinese version), its free translation can be “one copes with affairs in non-fundamental way”, while this one can be translated as another English proverb “rob Peter to pay Paul” if domestication strategy is used in its translation. Domestication aims to make the reader of target language understand the culture of source language in his or her thinking and expressing way. And this translation strategy is considered to be a good one in translating such kind of proverbs.

The fourth strategy is foreignization. Foreignization conveys foreign cultural characteristics into a target language and thus enriches the target language. For example, when a religious term mentioned in Mongolian proverbs has no homologous term in a target language culture, foreignization strategy should be employed in English translation. A lot of Mongolian proverbs reflect a kind of nomadic life and load the unique national characteristics. On account of quite different living environment and traditional customs, domestication is not a suitable strategy to convey Mongolian exotic culture. So foreignization will be adopted under such conditions. Such as Mongolian proverb “下雨前的大风，像佛祖面前的鬼” (Chinese version), it has no corresponding one in English, and the word “佛祖” is a religious term, so it can be translated by using foreignization to retain its original color as “the gale before the rain is detestable just like a furious monster before the Buddha”. This Mongolian proverb vividly describes the special weather of Mongolian plateau. Mongolian proverb “只会数五个数字，知道的地方只有草原” (Chinese version) refers to “one man is so ignorant that he knows no numbers but the first five and knows no place but his home—the grassland”. This Mongolian proverb describes a person knowing nothing but the grassland. Another Mongolian proverb “没有草场就没有马，没有马就没有肉” (Chinese version) expresses the grassland, the horse and the meat are of great importance in Mongolian daily life. Its translation is “the number of horses will decrease if there is no grass, and there is no food if there is no horse”.

The use of the above mentioned four translation strategies should be measured in a relative way. The relative,

appropriate and reasonable use of these strategies is of great importance. In a word, these strategies should be used flexibly in the translation of Mongolian proverbs into English.

#### 4. Conclusion

After a comprehension of the characteristics and cultural differences of Mongolian and English proverbs, there are two translation principles to be followed and four translation strategies to be employed in the translation of Mongolian proverbs into English. The four strategies should be used in a flexible way to translate source language proverbs. Only by a good study of the characteristics and cultural background of Mongolian proverbs and applying suitable principles and strategies to translate Mongolian proverbs could the translator convey the original culture to foreigners and make an effective cross-cultural communication.

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