

Mongolian Culture Specific Words and the Translation Strategies

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Received: August 4, 2014 Accepted: September 14, 2014 Online Published: October 1, 2014

doi:10.5539/ijel.v4n5p126 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ijel.v4n5p126>

Abstract

There are many cultural differences between Mongolian and English words, which results in some Mongolian language's failing to find the equivalent words in English languages, forming some culture gapped words. This article analyzes the characteristics of Mongolian culture specific words, explores the different translation strategies and suggests that transliteration, literal translation and combination of transliteration and literal translation can be used to realize the cross-cultural communication smoothly.

Keywords: Mongolian, culture specific words, translation strategies

1. Introduction

Language is not only a symbolic system and an information carrier, but also a tool of National thought and perception. The vocabulary in language bears the values, life style, social life and historical traditions of certain nationalities. Because of cultural differences, there exists lexical equivalence and lexical gap between Mongolian language and English language. Complete equivalent vocabulary refers to the common words that have the same or similar meaning in these two languages, while gaped vocabulary refers to the vocabulary that lacks the same or similar words in the other language. These gap vocabulary in generally is vocabulary that has a certain ethnic and cultural characteristics (culture specific words) or vocabulary that has rich cultural connotation (culture-loaded words). For example, Mongolian word "Mongol ger" is a gaped word in English language because there are no equivalent entities in these two cultures either in shape or in meaning. From the strict sense "Mongol ger" is not a tent in Chinese language, nor the yurt in English language but the one that is most able to adapt to the grassland ecological environment, the one that carries the rich connotation of Mongolian nomadic culture and the one that fits for the Mongolian people to live in. Mongol ger symbolizes "Sun and Moon" including connotation of reunion and hospitality. Translating these culture specific words requires translators to have keen cultural awareness. Translators need not only to transmit the meaning of the words accurately, but also explain its cultural connotation accurately.

2. Culture Specific Words in Mongolian Language

Mongolian people live on the Prairie. Mongolians belong to Nomads whose main mode of production is animal husbandry. They have created a splendid prairie culture in the long nomadic life. Prairie culture is created by the generations of ancestor tribes, ethnic groups who live on the prairie generation by generation. This culture is adept to environment of grassland and this culture includes people's mode of production, lifestyles along with customs, political systems, ideology, religion and literary art which are fit for this mode of production and lifestyle. Prairie culture has effect on Mongolian language, which is directly reflected in the Mongolian words. The specific culture words include words of material culture, words of concept culture and words of behavioral culture.

2.1 Words of Material Culture in Mongolian Language

Words of material culture refer to the words that are related to people's living environment, basic necessities of daily life, for example, clothes, food, house, travel, a variety of artifacts, transactional words, including mass nouns, geographical nouns, custom nouns. Prairie culture which is revolved around nomadic life is created when Mongolian people live, produce and struggle on the vast grassland. And this culture is traditional ethnic culture which has its own distinct features. Mongolian people's clothes, food, shelter and travel cannot be separated from characteristics of nomadic culture, and even their means of warfare and entertainment have the characteristics of nomadic culture. Therefore, a lot of words which can reflect Mongolian nomadic life have

distinct characteristics of prairie culture. These words have become culture-gapped words in English language that has features of industrial civilization. For example, Mongolian specific culture words that show Mongolian unique food culture: “乌日馍”, “炒米”, “奶茶”, “奶酪”, “奶豆腐”, “手扒肉”, “烤全羊”, “牛肉干”, “涮羊肉” and “蒙古馅饼” etc. The Mongolian specific culture words that show Mongolian distinct clothing culture: “蒙古袍”, “蒙古靴”, “蒙古刀” etc. as well as words “戈壁”, “盟”, “旗”, “苏木”, “嘎查” that are closely related to Mongolian natural and administrative geographical position.

2.2 Words of Concept Culture in Mongolian Language

Words of concept culture refer to the words that belong to religious belief, social rules and social value related to ideology. In Mongolian culture there exists not only nature worship in a general sense, life first, the faith of ecological harmony, but also has its unique religious belief. “腾格里 worship” is the main content of Mongolian religion. In the concept of Mongolians, “腾格里” is the highest dominator who is alive and has soul. “萨满教” is the original religion that Mongolians worship most. Shamanism is formed on the basis of nomadic economy and is Mongolians’ own religion. In addition, “祭敖包” is also a popular Mongolian religious belief. The ancient Mongolians believed that the whole nationality wealth is given by “腾格里”, all the places have their “腾格里”, therefore they built “敖包” as spirit tablets, praying for “腾格里’s blessing. Today when people go to the places where there are “腾格里”, they will dismount from a horse, add a few stones to the “敖包” and pray before they leave the places. Among these three culture specific words, it is only “萨满教” that has its transliteration word “Shamanism” in English dictionary. However, “腾格里” and “敖包” are still no formal English translation forms.

2.3 Words of Behavioral Culture in Mongolian Language

Words Behavior culture include words on music, painting, art, literature and customs. Like the other nationalities, Mongolian nationality creates literary and artistic works as well as folk entertainment forms that have unique characteristics of prairie culture during long-term nomadic life. A Secret History of the Mongols is not only a high-valued history book but also is a good Mongolian classical literature. Mongolian epic The Story of Gessaar and Jangar are known as the Orient “Llriad”. People on the grassland have inhabited by the river. Grassland nomadic life shaped Mongolians’ characters: enthusiasm and passion, being capable of singing and dancing. Grassland nomadic life created artistic form and recreation that has distinct Mongolian cultural characteristics. For example, “那达慕” “蒙古摔跤” “安代舞” “蒙古四胡”, “马头琴”, “胡仁乌力格尔”, “蒙古长调”, “好来宝” and “乌兰牧骑” etc. These words on artistic forms and entertainment have strong cultural characteristics of Mongolians; therefore it is difficult for these words to find equivalent words in English vocabulary that have the identical meaning.

3. Translation Strategies of Culture Specific Words in Mongolian Language

Translation is not only the transmission of the language on the language level, but also is the rewriting of the original works on the cultural level. Culture specific words have distinctive ethnic and cultural characteristics. If these specific words cannot be translated appropriately, it will lead readers from different cultural background difficult to understand the language accurately, which will result in cultural disposition or cultural misleading, affecting the culture exchange and spread between different cultures, so it is very important to pay attention to the connotation of words and make the readers be able to obtain the cultural experience identical or similar to the original works’ readers when translating culture specific words. In order to achieve this, choices of translation strategies will be of great importance.

There have been two main translation strategies: one is transliteration and literal translation, that is, the semantic-oriented foreignization. Adopting transliteration and literal translation methods aims at keeping the primitive culture connotation, enhancing exotic sense. The other is free translation, which is the culture-oriented domestication. Adopting free translation method aims at taking readers’ comprehension ability and cultural habits into consideration. In the process of translation, which strategies should be chosen depends on the formation characteristics of these culture specific words as well as degree of cultural vacancy.

3.1 Transliteration

Transliteration is a process in which source language graphological unit are replace by target language graphological units. The aim of transliteration is to represent the script of a source language by using the letters or symbols of another script, usually in accordance with the orthographical conventions of the target language. But it is not as simple as that. As Newmark (1988: 10) points out that “translation is not only the transmission of knowledge and the creation of understanding, but also the transmission of culture.” Transliteration is usually applied to translate cultural things or phenomena words especially used to translate persons’ names, places’

names, terms, trade names, etc. which have distinctive cultural connotations and ethnic characteristics. These words are almost culture-gapped words. Using transliteration to translate Mongolian culture specific words into English vocabulary is to use English letters to mark the pronunciations of the Mongolian words. For example, Mongolian place name“呼和浩特”, it cannot be translated into “Huhehaote” in Chinese alphabet ,it can be marked by English letters as “Hohhot”, similarly“额尔古纳”should be translated into “Ergun”,“成吉思汗”should be translated into “Genghis Khan”,“忽必烈”should be translated into “Kublai Khan”,“鄂尔多斯”should be translated into “Erdos”,“布里亚特”should be translated into“Buryat”.Why are not Mongolian proper names translated by Chinese alphabets? Because transliteration can keep the ethnic characteristics of the source culture better, and at the same time can show the respect for social status of national minorities. In addition to that, transliteration is also adopted to translate words that exists in one culture, but don't exist in the other culture, that is culture-gapped words. For example, Mongolians popular and distinctive festival “敖包”, “敖包”should be transliterated into “Obo”. In addition to that, there are traditional Mongolian mass entertainment gatherings“那达慕”,“那达慕” should be transliterated into “Nadam” as well as distinctive Mongolian rap art“胡仁乌力格尔”and “好来宝”. “胡仁乌力格尔”should be transliterated into “Huren Ulger”, “好来宝”should be transliterated into “Holbo”.

3.2 Literal Translation

Literal translation means doing translation from one language into another following the denotative meaning of the words and not to change the images, figures of speech and national features in the original. This may help to reserve the national flavor of source language and make the readers of target language accept the cultural characters of source language. Many of the Mongolian words of material culture have corresponding similar expression in English language, but there is big difference in culture connotations. These culture-gapped words are often translated by using literal translation. For example: “蒙古袍”,“蒙古刀”,“蒙古马”,“蒙古馅饼”,“蒙餐”,“蒙古摔跤”etc. These cultural words are formed by common words plus qualifier “Mongolian”. Among these Mongolian words, “靴(boot)”, “袍(gown)”, “刀(knife)”, “馅饼(pie)”, “摔跤(wrestling)” are all common mass noun, there are corresponding same words in English language, so qualifiers “Mongolian” can be added to these words, forming distinctive Mongolian culture specific words. For example, “蒙古袍”can be translated into “Mongolian gown”, “蒙古刀”can be translated into, “Mongolian knife”, “蒙古马”can be translated into “Mongolian horse”, “蒙古馅饼”can be translated into “Mongolian pie”, “蒙餐”can be translated into “Mongolian food” and “蒙古摔跤”can be translated into “Mongolian wrestling”.

3.3 Combination of Transliteration and Literal Translation

Some Mongolian culture specific words are phrases comprised of two parts. The first part is a culture gapped word; the second part is a common word. In order to maintain the culture connotation of the words, these words can be translated by transliteration combined with literal translation, that is, culture gapped word can be translated by transliteration and common word can by translated by literal translation. For example,“勒勒车”can be translated into “lele cart”,“乌兰牧骑表演队”can be translated into “Ulan muqir troupe”,“安代舞”can be translated into “Ande dance”,“炒米”can be translated into “Mongol bada” “蒙古包”can be translated into “Mongol ger”. Adopting this translation strategies can show the Mongolian characteristics of these words, and can easily be accepted by readers.

4. Conclusion

Generally speaking, the specific words in one language become the gapped words in other language. Translating culture specific words must pay attention to the culture connotation of these specific words and respect for the social status of source language nationalities. According to the formation of the culture specific words and the level of the vacancy, strategies of transliteration, literal translation, transliteration combined with literal translation can be used to achieve the transmission of the connotation of the specific words.

Acknowledgments

This thesis has been completed with the help of teachers of School of Mongolia, Hu Richa and Hu Hejile. Without their substantial support and professional instruction, this paper would never have been finished. Thanks for their instruction on Mongolian cultures, which have broadened my horizon and enriched my knowledge. That laid a solid basis for my thesis.

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