A Study on the Translation of Culture-Loaded Words from the Perspective of Memetics

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Abstract: Memetics is a theory based on biology that explains cultural transmission. Memes are the basic units of cultural transmission. Culture-loaded words refer to unique vocabulary and idioms within a certain culture, reflecting the history, society, and lifestyles of different countries and ethnicities. Due to significant cultural differences between the Western world and China, translating culture-loaded words poses an unavoidable challenge for translators. This paper uses memetics as its theoretical foundation, classifies cultures according to Nida's categories, and analyzes the application of memetics in the English translation of culture-loaded words through examples.

Keywords: Memetics; Culture-loaded words; Translation

1. Introduction

The concept of the meme was first introduced by British biologist Richard Dawkins, a professor at the University of Oxford. In his book *The Selfish Gene*, Dawkins defined memes as units of cultural transmission or imitation [1]. Memes encompass a wide range of fields. Dawkins' student Blackmore argued that any information capable of being replicated and disseminated can be termed a meme [2]. Translation serves as a survival machine for memes. For memes to spread across different cultures, translation is indispensable. Culture-loaded words carry rich cultural connotations and refer to lexical items that describe phenomena unique to a particular culture. They reflect the accumulated ways of life shaped by the long-term historical development of different ethnic groups. There exist significant differences between China and the Western world in terms of natural environment, religion, language, and socio-cultural aspects. If a certain cultural element is absent in another culture, translators must adopt appropriate strategies to achieve basic equivalence between the source and target texts. Culture-loaded words are a type of cultural meme, which makes it possible to study their translation strategies from the perspective of memetics. The transmission of China's millennia-old cultural heritage is a responsibility of the new era. How to accurately translate Chinese culture-loaded words to better promote China's culture and social values to the outside world has become an issue that cannot be overlooked. This

paper will analyze the translation of culture-loaded words from the perspective of memetics.

2. Definition and classification of culture-loaded words

Language is the most universal and influential medium of cultural expression. The diversity of cultures means that language carries specific and varied cultural connotations. Every country possesses a wealth of culturally embedded vocabulary, covering material, social, and ideological aspects. However, their counterparts in another language and cultural context may be equivalent, inclusive, overlapping, or entirely absent. "Most terms with missing semantic relations are culture-loaded" [3], which may lead to translation difficulties due to the lack of corresponding or predetermined equivalents in the target language. The definition and classification of culture-loaded words remain contentious topics in translation studies, with scholars both domestically and internationally offering varying interpretations.

2.1. Definition of culture-loaded words

Culture-loaded words, also referred to as cultural terms, culturally connotative words, or culturally embedded expressions, encompass historical legacies such as idioms, proverbs, allusions, special proper nouns, as well as contemporary colloquialisms and idiomatic expressions. These words reflect a nation's religious beliefs, values, customs, and aesthetic preferences. Numerous scholars have explored this concept. For instance, the renowned American translator Eugene Nida argued that culture-loaded words are unique to a specific ethnic culture and that, in another cultural context, only approximate equivalents—rather than exact counterparts— can be found [4]. Similarly, Mona Baker, in her book *In Other Words: A Coursebook on Translation*, notes: "The way in which the source-language word expresses a concept may not have a corresponding expression in the target culture. Such concepts are often referred to as 'culture-specific items'" [5].

Some scholars further contend that culture-loaded words are lexical items for which no equivalent linguistic information exists in the target language.

2.2. Classification of culture-loaded words

Regarding the classification of culture-loaded words, scholars both in China and abroad hold divergent views, and a unified conclusion has yet to be reached. However, given the intrinsic connection between culture and language, most classifications are grounded in cultural categorization. For instance, Malinowski, a founding figure of modern anthropology, divided culture into four dimensions in *A Scientific Theory of Culture*: material culture, spiritual culture, language, and social organization [6]. Wang Rongpei, based on various aspects of human life, proposed an eight-category classification of culture-loaded words: terms in the political domain, terms in the social domain, allusions and legendary terms, animal and plant terms, color terms, body-related terms, food terms, and miscellaneous terms [7]. Among these frameworks, Nida's classification of cultural elements in language has gained the widest acceptance. In *Toward a Science of Translating*, he categorized culture into five types: ecological culture, material culture, linguistic culture, social culture, and religious culture [4].

In summary, scholars' classifications of culture exhibit considerable overlap, and culture itself is characterized by its broad and extensive scope. Consequently, the categorization of both culture and culture-loaded words remains flexible. In this paper, the analysis of culture-loaded word translation in the given texts will be conducted based on Nida's cultural classification framework.

3. The application of memetics in the translation of culture-loaded words

According to the classification proposed by American translation theorist Eugene Nida, culture can be categorized into five types based on its characteristics: ecological culture, material culture, linguistic culture, social culture, and religious culture [4]. Following Nida's framework, this paper will conduct case studies across these five dimensions: ecological culture-loaded words, material culture-loaded words, linguistic culture-loaded words, social culture-loaded words, and religious culture-loaded words.

3.1. Ecological culture-loaded words

Different regions possess distinct ecological cultures, as the formation and development of culture are inseparable from their corresponding ecological environments. When humans coexist harmoniously with nature, they accumulate production and life experiences, thereby endowing ecological elements with cultural significance. Due to variations in geographical locations and habitats, different nations and ethnic groups perceive the natural world differently. Ecological culture-loaded words primarily include vocabulary related to animals, plants, climate, and geography.

The geographical region in which a nation or ethnic group resides influences their way of life and their perception of the ecological environment. This, in turn, shapes their understanding and memory of ecological-cultural content in literature, giving culture a distinct regional character. For example, the Qinling Mountains and the Yellow River are emblematic of China's unique ecological culture. Geographical differences, such as mountains, rivers, lakes, and seas, create a divide between Chinese classical texts and overseas readers. Consequently, under such disparities, translators must decode the ecological-cultural memes embedded in Chinese classical texts with local characteristics and re-encode them through meme replication. This process ensures that target-language readers can also appreciate the cultural connotations conveyed in these texts.

Example 1

ST [8]: 尤其因为他母亲这种女人，叫她苦守寒窑，无论怎么苦她也可以忍受，可是她有她的身份，她那种宗法社会的观念非常强烈，绝不肯在滕妾面前跌了架子的。

TT [9]: His mother was the sort of woman who could face any hardship, as long as her dignity was not threatened. And her dignity was rooted in the tradition hierarchy: she'd never let a concubine take precedence over her.

The term " 寒 窑 " carries extended cultural connotations derived from the Chinese folk legend "Wang Baochuan Faithfully Waited in Her Cold Cave Dwelling for Eighteen Years." This story tells of Wang Baochuan's unwavering devotion to her husband Xue Pinggui. Defying familial opposition, she chose to marry him and live humbly in a "loess cave dwelling"—a traditional Chinese architectural structure designed to be warm in winter and cool in summer, adapting to the local climate. Such dwellings have no direct counterpart in Western architecture. After Xue Pinggui left for war, Wang Baochuan endured extreme hardship while faithfully awaiting his return for eighteen years. Her story has become a cultural symbol of loyalty, resilience, and the virtues of enduring suffering for love. In literary translation, the translator must thoroughly analyze the source text, delving into the author's artistic intent, emotional undertones, and central themes to faithfully recreate the work's essence while meticulously handling every detail [10]. When translating the phrase " 苦守寒窑 " (endured hardship in the cold cave dwelling), the translator employed "omission" to avoid overloading the target reader with culturally opaque details. Instead of literally rendering the architectural and historical context, the phrase was distilled to its core meaning: who could face any hardship.

3.2. Material culture-loaded words

Material culture primarily refers to tangible objects created by humans, arising from socio-economic and technological development. These artifacts are closely tied to daily life and typically include tools, clothing, food, housing, transportation, urban structures, architecture, and artistic objects. By processing and adapting natural materials to meet living needs, each civilization develops distinct material products—utensils, garments, dwellings—shaped by its unique productive demands.

Example 2

ST [8]: 家里等父亲回来祭祖宗吃<u>团圆饭</u>小公馆偏偏故意地扣留不放。

TT [9]: They'd wait for his father to come home and lead the ceremony, then have a <u>family meal</u>. But his father would always be late, held back by this or the other, over at the concubine's place.

Cultural context factors pose a significant and highly crucial challenge for translators. In the process of translation practice, translators must fully recognize the cultural context elements of the original text and must maintain a high degree of sensitivity to the subtle differences in meanings of the original text's lexical meanings, syntactic relationships, and the underlying meanings within the broader social and cultural contexts. The material culture-loaded term "团圆饭" is a unique folk custom during the Spring Festival, a traditional Chinese festival. It refers to a family gathering around a steaming dinner table, enjoying a harmonious and festive atmosphere. Here, the translator employs the method of literal translation, directly translating "团圆饭" as "family meal," which partially conveys the cultural information carried by this term.

3.3. Language culture-loaded terms

Language is the carrier of culture. Chinese and Western languages belong to two entirely different linguistic systems, which leads to different ways in which language expresses culture. Language and culture are complementary and inseparable; it is precisely because of the existence of language that culture can be inherited and developed. Compared with other cultures, linguistic culture is the most fundamental type of culture. The vocabulary that carries linguistic culture reflects the different characteristics of different languages. There are significant differences between Chinese and English in phonetics, orthography, grammar, semantics, and pragmatics. Chinese is a logographic writing system, and many words are not limited to their literal meanings but contain rich connotations. In terms of form, Chinese also has complex linguistic forms, which make translation relatively more challenging.

Example 3

ST [8]: 顾太太便想着，鸿才刚才虽然是对她表示欢迎，可是亲戚向来是"远香近臭"，住长了恐怕又是一回事了。

TT [9]: Hongtsai had welcomed her nicely thus far, but Mrs. Gu knew that a relative often seems "lovely from a distance, unlovely up close." If she stayed, there could be a complete change in his attitude.

The Chinese proverb "远香近臭" is a language culture-loaded term that vividly illustrates a principle: when people are close, conflicts are more likely to arise, whereas distance tends to highlight the good qualities of the other person. However, English-speaking countries do not fully agree with the notion that "distance creates beauty." They tend to favor close and intimate interactions between people. Therefore, the translator has partially adjusted the cultural schema of the original language and rendered it as "lovely from a distance, unlovely up close." This translation not only perfectly conveys the meaning of the original term but also effectively preserves the phonetic beauty and parallelism of the original proverb.

3.4. Social culture-loaded terms

Sociocultural loaded terms encompass various aspects of intangible culture and are the most complex among the five types of culture-loaded terms. Different societies have distinct customs, historical backgrounds, lifestyles, and ideologies. People living in different societies possess different cultural backgrounds. Sociocultural loaded terms are closely related to a society's politics, economy, culture, religion, education, customs, and lifestyle. They are also closely associated with the organizational structure of society, social activities, behavioral norms, social titles, moral constraints, social values, historical processes, and developmental stages.

Example 4

ST [8]: 后来和那人走开了，就没有再出来做了。她蜕变成一个二路交际花，这样比较实惠些，但是身价更不如前了。

TT [9]: When that relationship had ended, Manlu recast herself as a second-tier escort, a more respectable occupation, closer to decency, but with a reduced income.

The term "交际花" is a sociocultural loaded term. According to the definition in the Xinhua Dictionary, it refers to a woman who is active in various social occasions and has a certain degree of fame (with a connotation of contempt). It is used to describe a woman who is manipulative, scheming, and charming. The expression in Chinese is more euphemistic, and essentially, this term is a euphemism for female sex workers. However, in English language and culture, "交际花" is usually translated as "social butterfly" or "courtesan," both of which refer to women who are skilled in social interactions and carry no pejorative connotations. This creates a conflict in cultural schemas. The translator employs a direct translation method and finds a corresponding euphemistic expression in English—"escort," thus achieving harmony between the two cultures.

3.5. Religious culture-loaded terms

The religious beliefs of a nation are an important part of its culture. As a form of social ideology, religion has a significant impact on many aspects of people's lives. Due to differences in religious beliefs, the cultural vocabulary related to religion in language systems will also vary. Religious culture-loaded terms, as the name suggests, are words associated with the religious beliefs, religious culture, and religious consciousness of different countries and ethnic groups. Most Westerners adhere to Christianity, and terms such as "God," "Jesus," "Bible," and "church" reflect their religious culture.

Example 5

ST [8]: 事实上是那边也照样有祭祖这一个节目，因为父亲这一个姨太太跟了他年份也不少了，生儿育女，人丁比这边还要兴旺些。

TT [9]: The problem was that festivities were being held at the other place too. This concubine had been with his father for many years. She'd borne him several children, and her house was livelier, filled with family.

"祭祖" is a religious culture-loaded term, referring to the act of paying respects to and worshiping ancestors. It is a solemn and significant activity. In China, people typically perform ancestral worship during four traditional festivals: the Lunar New Year's Eve (除夕), the Qingming Festival (清明节), the Double Ninth Festival (重阳节), and the Ghost Festival (中元节). However, in the cultures of English-speaking countries, there is no such religious custom.

In this case, the translator has adopted the method of omission, translating "祭祖" as "festivities." This approach fails to convey the actual meaning of "祭祖," which may affect the target language readers' understanding of the storyline. Terms containing religious cultural elements are a focal point in translation work, yet it is challenging for translators to find corresponding expressions in other cultures. Therefore, when

translating words rich in religious cultural factors, translators need to be flexible and versatile, employing a combination of different translation strategies to maximize the compensation for the missing cultural information and reduce the difficulty of understanding the translation.

4. Conclusion

Culture-loaded terms represent significant cultural information and connotations of a country or region. The choice of appropriate translation strategies and methods for translating culture-loaded terms can greatly influence foreign readers' understanding of Chinese culture. These terms carry the culture of a nation, and cultural soft power is also an important component of a country's comprehensive national strength. Memetics provides a new research perspective for translation strategies of culture-loaded terms. Proper translation of culture-loaded terms will help spread the excellent traditional Chinese culture and enhance China's cultural influence internationally.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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