

# Cultural Differences in Translation

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## Abstract

Translation is to use another kind of language (target language) to express the accurate and complete content which has already been expressed by one kind of language (source language). It is to use the closest natural equivalents to express the information of the source language again from the aspects of meaning and style.

Although there are many common and similar aspects existing in human beings, people living in different countries and districts have a good command of their own cultures which is totally different from others due to the influence of the histories, religions, politics and customs in their own regions. This makes translation difficult to deal with. The paper will focus on the differences of daily lives, sense of value, geographical environments, historical backgrounds and cultural untranslatability which influence translation, and the corresponding ways and skills to deal with cultural differences in translation.

**Key words:** cultural differences; translation; influence; ways and skills

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## 1 Introduction

Generally speaking, translation is expressing the meaning of source language in target language. It looks so easy but actually it is not so easy in practice because language is basically the product of a kind of culture and society which must be understood from the point of culture and society. Each language reflects its own culture, carries a variety of inner characteristics of culture and is restricted by its culture. So it is of great

importance to gain a good command of the features of the two languages through comparing the differences between two cultures and to use these features to solve any problems being encountered in the practice of translation. Nida<sup>1</sup> thinks that the most serious mistake which appears in translation is not a fail to use words or expressions properly but a fail to understand the cultural background thoroughly. In a word, many problems in translation is caused by the differences of the two languages which can also be seen in the long tour of translation.

So the most important thing is to know the cultural background of the source language and the target language, which is also the main task in translation. Failure in getting familiar with cultural background information contained in the target language and source language can cause failure in translating the materials, thus causing the serious misunderstanding between those who use different mother languages.

This paper intends to analyze Chinese and English cultural differences in five aspects: language for daily use, different sense of value, geographical environments, historical backgrounds and lexical gap and put forth several translation techniques and methods.

## 2 The Factors Leading to Difficulties in Translation

As is mentioned above, cultural differences have brought many barriers to the work of translation, but what precise factors in a culture can cause the difficulties exactly? This problem deserves our deep research because it is the key to excellent translation. So in this part, we are going to make analysis in many cultural factors that bring obstacles in the field of translation, which will let us be familiar with the aspects in cultural difference in order to have a good command of the keys to solve these problems.

## 2.1 Language for Daily Use and Translation

Because we Chinese people and English people have got different cultures which have a great impact upon our daily lives, it is very easy for us to encounter a serious of problems when doing our translation. In this part, we are going to talk about languages in daily life, personal relationships and social status and different cultural symbols in translation.

### 2.1.1 Languages in Daily Life

When seeing someone off at the airport or railway station, we Chinese people always say ‘小心点’. If we translate the Chinese word into English without paying any attention to the cultural background, we may translate the word as ‘Be careful’, which will lead to a great misunderstand of the English people for by that means they believe you are threatening them or warning them against something. Not any Englishman will consider you to be warmhearted unless he knows Chinese culture. A simple word ‘bye’ will be much better.

Here is another example. If you want to advice someone to do something, we Chinese always ‘你应该……’ or ‘你不应该……’, but if you put it directly into English without any concern about cultural difference, the sentence will be ‘you should ...’ or ‘you should not ...’ What do you think they will get? Hearing these words, they will think that you look down upon them. But if you say ‘are you sure...’, they will feel much better.

The third example is this. If you say ‘thank you’ to your listener for something good they have done for you, the Chinese listener will reply in this way, ‘Do not say that, that is what I should do’. On hearing those words, the foreigners will think that you help them just for their paying back in the future. So instead of putting it directly into English without any concern about cultural difference, if you have got some ideas about the cultural difference, you can just say, ‘you are welcome’ or ‘it is my pleasure’, and your listener will feel much better.

Therefore, if we are doing translation, we must pay enough attention to those specific language habits of people from different countries. We should change our way of expression, if it is necessary, to express the original meaning.

### 2.1.2 Personal Relationships and Social Status

We Chinese people always divide the relatives very carefully and clearly. We always put much emphasis on personal relationships and social status. We use

many words such as ‘叔叔, 伯伯, 姑父’-----the list is endless to call our fathers’ male relatives, but for English people, they just use a word “uncle” to call all the male relatives of their fathers. Furthermore, the word “cousin” can also be translated as ‘堂兄, 堂弟, 堂姐, 堂妹, 表兄, 表姐, 表妹’ and so on.

There are also many honorific and humble expressions in Chinese traditional culture such as ‘\*\*君, \*\*先生, \*公, \*老’ and ‘小人, 寡人, 鄙人’ and so on, which is hard to be translated into English for all these Chinese words can only be translated into ‘Mr.\*\*’ rather than ‘Gentleman\*\*, Senior\*\*, or Old\*\*’. In China, every students call their teacher ‘老师, 教授’ to show their great respect to their teachers while English people just call the given names of their teachers.

All of the differences are caused by the different views of Chinese and English people on human beings. English people think that human beings are the most essential and names are just for use. However, Chinese people always put much emphasis on the forms of address based on different relationships and status.

### 2.1.3 Different Cultural Symbols

Each thing has its different cultural symbols in different cultures, which can lead to many thoughts associated. In the culture of Buddhism, for example, sheep symbolizes those who are tame, while in Chinese culture, mouse is the symbol of coward people. In English, people regard bat as evil because of its strange and ugly appearance. What’s worse, it always lives in a dark corner and vampire bat can suck our human’s blood, which makes us afraid of it. Therefore, it is not surprising that ‘as crazy as a bat’ and ‘as blind as a bat’ are used in English. However, the impressions of bat are totally different between Chinese people and western people because ‘蝠 (Fu)’ has the same sound as ‘福’. In Chinese, the word ‘福’ means ‘happiness and good luck’. Therefore, bats are regarded as happiness and good luck in China. Bats always appear in many folk pictures as a kind of mascot. Red bat symbolizes great luck and happiness for ‘红蝠’ sounds the same as ‘鸿福’. In China, ‘鸿福’ is defined as ‘great happiness and great luck’, which makes Chinese people regard red bat as an auspicious symbol.

In China, dog is a kind of animal in low position of people’s mind. Many Chinese idioms concerned with dog mostly have derogatory sense such as ‘狐朋狗友’, ‘狗急跳墙’, ‘狼心狗肺’, ‘狗腿子’ and so on. However, in western countries, dogs are viewed as the most loyal friends of human beings and most English idioms about dogs have no derogatory sense

unless some idioms are influenced by other languages. For example, ‘dog-eat-dog’ means a brutal kill or competition between each other. Many English idioms are used to be compared with the manners of human beings such as ‘You are a lucky dog’, ‘Every dog has his day’, ‘sick as a dog’ or ‘dog-tired’. Contrary to the situation, Chinese people love cat while western people take cat as a metaphor of ‘women who have evil thoughts’.

## 2.2 Influences of Different Sense of Value in Translation

Sense of value refers to people’s ideology, ethics, religious beliefs, customs and other sense of doctrines to deal with the society. Generally speaking, particular cultures and core way of life appearing in the two languages can bring many obstacles to our comprehension and translation.

### 2.2.1 Sense of Value Caused by Philosophical Basis

There are mainly three kinds of philosophy named the Confucianists, the Taoists and the Chinese Buddhism that have influenced Chinese people’s way of thinking to a great extent. All of the three philosophical thoughts place much emphasis on people’s power of comprehension. It is under the influence of these kinds of philosophy that make Chinese people regard comprehension as a very important skill. They place more emphasis on comprehending meaning implied in words than western people.

Therefore, Chinese people want others to learn what they have said through other people’s thinking considerably, rather than understanding the meanings right now. Compared with western people’s thought, Chinese people’s thought is more vague.

The philosophical background of America and western countries is the firm formal logic created by Aristotle<sup>1</sup>, and rationalism spread on European Continent from the 16th Century to the 18th Century. Rationalism stresses on scientific experiments and formal proofs, which appears in language with the whole complete pattern.

Therefore, those from America and European countries always lay stress on the exact expression, rather than guessing the implied meaning and it is not surprising that it is difficult for them to understand Chinese expression containing implicit meaning.

After explaining about the theories, let’s see an example in order to gain a deeper understanding about this circumstance. How to translate ‘东边日出西边雨，道是无晴却有晴’ into English? The poet Liu YuXi<sup>1</sup>

wrote this poem to express the changeable mood people had in pursuit of love and he sighed with feeling that it is hard to maintain the love forever even for those who get married. But do you think English people can understand the implied meaning of ‘The sun rises in the east and it is rainy in the west’?

### 2.2.2 Individualism in Western Countries and Collectivism in China

The traditional Chinese sense of philosophy is that ‘Men is an integral part of nature’, which refers to the obedience and worship of human beings to the nature and harmony with the nature. However, the sense of western philosophy tends to believe that human beings are antagonistic to the nature, which means human beings and the nature are separated. They pay much attention to the power to fight with the nature. So western people lay stress on individualism, development of characteristics and personal performance.

English nation advocates individualism which is the special sense of value in western culture. Here are many examples. ‘An Englishman’s house is his castle’ means we cannot disturb or visit others without any reason or any appointment. ‘Even reckoning make long friends.’ ‘Tell money after your own father.’ These all reflect western people’s sense of individualism.

However, Chinese people cannot understand their individualism. According to our sense of value, it is every adult’s duty to take care of their parents. We take it for granted that we should bring many healthy food and daily products to our parents without any reward and of course, ‘telling money after our own fathers’ will be considered as shamelessness among Chinese people. The proverb ‘百善孝为先’ can fully express this sense of value. Besides, when we have a meal with our best friends, it is common for us to treat or be treated by our friends.

### 2.2.3 Different Religious Beliefs

People from different nations have different religious beliefs which can influence translation to a great extent. Generally speaking, most Chinese people believe in Buddhism while western people mostly believe in Christianity. These two religious beliefs are totally different. People who believe in Christianity think that God can create everything and Buddhism believers believe that Buddha can control everything in the world. Many words, expressions and proverbs are also created on the basis of different religious beliefs.

There is a Chinese proverb ‘一个和尚挑水吃，

两个和尚抬水吃，三个和尚没水吃’ which is not so easy to be translated into English perfectly mainly because westerners who believe in Christianity are not familiar with the definition of the word ‘和尚’ and any historical stories concerning about ‘和尚’. So it is hard to translate according to both the meaning and the style. If we want to express the meaning of the proverb, we can translate it as ‘One boy is a boy; two boys are half a boy; three boys are no boy,’ which, unfortunately, cannot express the style completely.

Another example is that ‘Being a teacher is being present at the creation, when the clay begins to breathe.’ If we use literal translation, we will translate it as ‘老师一直在创造中，犹如泥土开始呼吸’. That is totally wrong because Christianity believers believe that God creates human beings and human beings come from dust and clay. So in western culture, ‘Creation’ is concerned with ‘God’ and dust or clay often refers to ‘God creates human beings’. If a translator fails to understand this kind of cultural characteristics thoroughly and correctly, he will find it difficult to make the translation accurate.

If a foreigner is said to be good, one of the expressions can be ‘he eats no fish’. As a Chinese we will be really puzzled to hear that. We have no idea about the relationship between eating no fish and a man’s being good. In our mind, the meaning may be ‘那个男人不吃鱼’. But the fact is that to eat no fish is a symbol concerning about an independent religious group, to eat fish or not is the identity of two different religious groups in the history of Great Britain.

So a good translator must have a fine understanding about different kinds of religious when they are doing their translation between two different religious groups. By doing this, it will be easier to choose the right words and express the original meaning of the writer.

## 2.3 Different Geographical environments and historical backgrounds in Translation

### 2.3.1 Geographical Differences

Britain is located to the northwest of European Continent and is made up of the Great Britain Island, Northern Ireland and many small islands, which are all surrounded by sea. It used to be a leader in sailing industry. Most of the Chinese people live on continent and make their livings mainly on farming. The differences of the two cultures are formed due to the different locations, and translation can also be influenced through geographical environments. If we want to say someone who is always wasting much money, we will say ‘他挥金如土’, while English

people will say that he spends money like water. There are also many English idioms about boats and water which cannot be translated into Chinese directly such as ‘to rest on one’s oars’(暂时歇一歇), ‘to keep one’s head above the water’(奋力图存), ‘all at sea’(不知所措) -----the list is endless.

Therefore, if we want to translate the text smoothly, it’s better for us to understand these differences correctly and thoroughly.

### 2.3.2 Historical Backgrounds

As well as the different geographical environments, the historical backgrounds of China and Britain can also be reflected on the two languages. In English, Dutch is always related to derogatory sense such as ‘Dutch act’(自杀), ‘Dutch courage’(酒后之勇), ‘If it is the fact, I’m a Dutchman.’(如果这是事实, 我就不是人。) In the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, Britain and Netherlands had fought with each other fiercely for 20 years, which caused the misery loss of Britain, and led to their hate to the Dutch people.

Through the example above, we can see that knowing the historical background between two countries is very important in translation. A translation without historical backgrounds can lead to many misunderstandings.

## 2.4 Cultural Untranslatability

There are many expressions in source languages which cannot be translated into target languages because of cultural obstructions caused by cultural differences. This is called cultural untranslatability. Cultural Untranslatability exists due to the unique cultural background that causes lexical gap and inequality between the two languages.

### 2.4.1 Lexical Gap Caused by Background Information

Lexical gap means an expression in the source language cannot be translated into the target language because there are no correspondent expressions which can express the original meaning correctly due to the cultural background information of the sending language. Here are some following examples.

The Chinese allusion ‘东施效颦’ can be translated into English as ‘Tung Shih imitates His Shih.’ But will English people understand the meaning of this allusion if we translate like that? If the English word ‘Adam’s apple’ is translated into Chinese as ‘亚当的苹果’, we may wonder what is ‘亚当的苹果’? How to translate the Chinese word ‘包二奶’ into English? These all deserve our exploration in the career of translation because each expression contains a piece of

background information that is unique and cannot be found in any other language.

### 2.4.2 Inequality in Translation Between Target Language and Sending Language

Some words can lead to substantial thoughts in a language and these thoughts can hardly be comprehended by others such as the word ‘关系’ in Chinese. In English, no word which is completely equal to the word ‘关系’ can be found because the word ‘relationship’ only have abstract meanings in English. In contrast, a concrete concept of ‘关系’ can be expressed in Chinese such as ‘他关系过硬’ which means ‘he is familiar with some people in the authority and can manage to do some work other people cannot do’. In English, daffodil symbolizes spring and happiness that cannot be found in Chinese. In Chinese, jasmine symbolizes purity which cannot be found in English, either.

As can be easily seen from the above, ‘cultural translation’ is doing the work of translation under ‘the context of cultural research’ indeed. An excellent translation needs 90 percent of the command of culture and 10 percent of the language ability. Only by knowing the nature of quality, seizing the objective rules and being familiar with the difference of the two cultures can we do the translation excellently.

## 3 How to Deal with the Translation Containing Cultural Differences

### 3.1 Literal Translation

Literal translation, which is also called the source-language-oriented principle, is to translate the source language under the principle of word for word and line for line in order not to lose the meaning of the original version and sound-oriented translation is usually used in this kind of translation. This principle of translation is very popular not only in China but also in western countries. Many famous translators advocate this principle such as Zhu Fahu<sup>1</sup>, Nicolas von Wyle<sup>2</sup>, Pearl Buck<sup>3</sup> and so on.

To some extent, literal translation has its own values of existence for many fresh ways of expression can be introduced into our mother tongue. For example, if we translate ‘All roads lead to Rome’ into ‘条条大路通罗马’, we can gain a fresh way of expressing ‘行行出状元’, which is not only faithful to the original meaning but also loyal to the original culture.

Another example is that ‘Beauty lies in lover’s eyes’ can be translated into ‘情人眼里出美人’, rather than

‘情人眼里出西施’.

However, it cannot be used as the main principle in translation for many expressions translated according to this principle cannot be understood by people, such as ‘the Milky Way’, ‘the apple of my eye’ and so on. The original meaning of ‘the Milky Way’ is ‘银河’, rather than ‘牛奶路’ and ‘the apple of my eye’ is ‘珍贵物; 真爱之人, 宝贝’ rather than ‘我眼中的苹果’.

Another example is ‘He always lives ahead of his salary’, the original meaning of which is ‘他的生活开销总是超过他的收入’. We cannot translate it into ‘他总是生活在他的工资之前’, for it disobeys the logic of Chinese people.

### 3.2 Free Translation

Free translation, which is also called the target-language-oriented principle, is an alternative approach used to express the original meaning and spirit of source language, rather than trying to retell the speech according to its sentence patterns or figures. When the original meaning is very hard or even impossible for us to understand through literal translation, we can use some other words which are similar to our images to translate the texts of the source language, through which we can easily get the meaning without misunderstanding. For example, in order to fit the original meaning of the proverb ‘一个和尚挑水吃, 两个和尚抬水吃, 三个和尚没水吃’ best, we have to use free translation and make it as ‘One people will mind his own business; two people will mind their common business; three people will not mind their common business because each of them thinks the others will do.’ And, of course, ‘老师一直在创造中, 正如上帝用泥土创造人类那样’ can be the best version of ‘Being a teacher is being present at the creation, when the clay begins to breathe.’ Look at some other examples.

There is a proverb -- The cobblers must stick to his last.

This proverb implies that no one presumes to interfere in matters of which he is ignorant. If it is translated literally into ‘鞋匠应坚守自己的鞋槌’, Chinese readers cannot make clear its implied meaning. There is also a story behind this proverb. A cobbler detected a fault in the shoe latchet of one Apelles’s paintings and helped the artist rectify the fault. The cobbler next ventured to criticize the legs, but Apelles answered ‘Keep to your trade’---you understand about shoes but not about anatomy. So, free translation ‘各人应守各人业, 不懂之事休妄评’ is the same as the original in implied meaning.

There is another Chinese proverb -- 庆父不死, 鲁难未已。

If this proverb is translated literally, the readers of the target language will be at a loss for the version ‘Until Qing Fu is done away with, the crisis in the State of Lu will not be over’ is beyond their understanding. Who is Qing Fu? What does the crisis in the State of Lu mean? Qing Fu was a younger brother of Zhuang Gong( 庄公 ), the king of the Lu State in the Spring and Autumn period. After Zhuang Gong died, Qing Fu killed two kings and brought about internal disorder. According to the explanation, the original proverb should be translated freely into ‘There will always be trouble until the trouble-maker is removed’, which is more understandable.

It is also very popular in China and western countries and there are also many translators who advocate this principle of translation. But as well as the principle of literal translation, it cannot be used as the main principle of translation because sometimes the original meaning will fail to be expressed if we use another expression as an alternative.

Many expressions can easily be translated too randomly for some people mistakenly believe that free translation is just the same as random translation. Actually, free translation is totally different from random translation. Free translation, as is mentioned above, is the target-language-principle without losing the original meaning of the source language. The aim is to let the original meaning more acceptable for those who use target language. Although it is free translation, it should be translated rigidly according to the original meaning. Random translation will lose the original meaning and the target language readers will fail to learn the background information though they can understand the translated meaning.

For example, Solomon is the son of the king of the Ancient Israel whose name is David. He is famous for his intelligence. Many translators randomly translated ‘Solomon’ into ‘诸葛亮’, which is not so accurate though Zhu GeLiang was also famous for his intelligence. We should learn the historical deeds of Solomon thoroughly and show our respect to this historical figure rather than replacing the figure with another figure we are familiar with.

Another example is ‘He wanted to learn, to know, to teach’. The original meaning is ‘他想学习, 增长知识, 也愿意把自己的知识教给别人’. The version ‘他渴望博学广闻, 喜欢追根穷源, 并且好为人师’ is of course not so accurate. This translation is too free, even random, that it deviates the original meaning.

### 3.3 Author-and-Reader-Oriented Principle

Author-and-reader-oriented principle, which combines

literal and free translation together, is used only when literal translation or free translation cannot express the original meaning exactly. In *The Principle of translation*<sup>7</sup>, Tyler<sup>8</sup> insisted that a translation should give a complete transcript of the ideas of the original work; the style and manner of writing should be of the same character as that of the original; a translation should have all the ease of the original composition (Tyler, 1797, P15). The following examples can show the value of this principle of translation.

The first one is ‘Time tries friend as fire tries gold’.

This is the manifestation of both simile and personification. This proverb indicates that people will show their mettle during trials and tribulations, through which we can see clearly who are our real friends. In this proverb, literally ‘Fires tries gold’ is translated into ‘烈火见真金’, which shows the vividness of this figure of speech. ‘Times tries friend’ is translated freely into ‘日久见人心’ which is more exact in sense. So ‘烈火见真金, 日久见人心’ is a faithful rendering of the original.

Another Chinese example is ‘不到黄河心不死’.

This Chinese proverb implies that one should refuse to give up unless all hope is gone. If it is translated literally, the proverb will be ‘Unless the Yellow River is reached, ambition never dies.’ However, the target language readers can easily be confused with ‘Unless the Yellow River is reached’ because few of them know anything about the implied meaning of the Yellow River. Yellow River, as is the second longest river in China, is very deep and its current is so fast that it is very difficult to cross, so here it is likened to an impasse. In order to make it more comprehensible and acceptable, it is better to be translated freely into ‘Unless all is over’. So, ‘Unless all is over, ambition never dies’ should be employed and it does fit the original proverb best.

### 3.4 How to Deal with Cultural Untranslatability

Cultural untranslatability is mainly caused by lexical gap. Many words, especially nouns, are created by people by their own countries and other countries may even don’t know their expressions at first. However, if two countries want to communicate with each other, they have to try their best to translate the expressions they are unfamiliar with. To deal with this problem, sound-oriented principle and word-oriented principle with proper explanations can often be used. For example, we can translate ‘包二奶’ into English as ‘Bao Er Nai (the lady who develops an extramarital love with a man who has already had his wife just for money and wealth)’. English people can easily

understand the meaning through reading the annotation. It is the practical use of the sound-oriented principle. And there are many examples based on this principle.

Poseidon	波塞冬 (希腊神话中的海神)
Saint Valentine's Day	圣瓦伦廷节 (情人节, 2月14日)
Clone	克隆 (一种无性繁殖的方法)
Jazz	爵士音乐 (西方一种音乐的名称)
Sauna	桑拿浴 (芬兰式的一种蒸汽浴)

Another principle is word-oriented principle, which is the approach to translate the original word according to its literal meaning with proper explanations that can be understood by readers. For example, the sentence mentioned above --‘东边日出西边雨’-- can be translated into ‘The sun rises in the east and it is rainy in the west.’ (The poet implied that love is changeable and is hard to maintain.) This principle can also be used to translate many single words especially nomenclatures. The examples are listed as follows.

Mad-cow disease	疯牛病 (指牛海绵状脑病)
Oval Office	椭圆形办公室 (指美国白宫总统办公室)
Tree hugger	紧抱树干的人 (指极端环境保护主义者)
Fly girl	飞飞女 (指时髦撩人的年轻女子)
Sesame Street	芝麻街 (指美国儿童电视连续剧节目)

## 4 Conclusion

To summarize, cultural differences between China and western countries will have a great impact upon translation in many aspects, which brings many difficulties to the practice of translation. Everyone can do the work of translation but not everyone can be an excellent translator for translators should not only have a good command of the source language but also be familiar with many aspects of the cultural background

contained in the language. What's more, they should be skilled in some common theories and skills of translation and be familiar with a variety of reference books.

Cultural differences have brought many blocks and barriers to the work of translation. Only by learning cultural backgrounds and mastering the skills can we do the translation better and better.

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