

On Problems of Translation of Idioms and the Corresponding Strategies from a Cultural Perspective---Take the German Version of Rice as an Example

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Abstract

This How to deal with idioms in literary translation not only is related to the quality of translation, but also affects communication and interaction among different cultures. The author selects Su Tong's masterpiece Rice and its German version, analyses the mistranslation of idioms in the book and puts forward the corresponding suggestions, in order to improve the quality of translation and promote cultural interchanges between China and Germany.

Keywords

literary translation, Rice, idioms, mistranslation.

1. Introduction

Su Tong is a famous contemporary writer in China. His works received attention very early in Germany. The translations of his works include "Raise the Red Lantern", "Wives and Concubines", "Women's Life", "Rice" and "Binu". "Rice" is Su Tong's first novel and tells the story of the hero Wu Long. He fled from the hometown of Feng Yang to the city and gradually evolved into a local bully in the city and eventually died on the return train.

The novel was translated into German by Peter Weber-Schäfer, professor of East Asian Politics at the University of Bochum in Germany. Schäfer studied Chinese in Munich in his early years and translated many Chinese contemporary writers' novels in his spare time. On the whole, Schäfer's translation is excellent. But due to the lack of understanding of some Chinese idioms, mistranslations still occur during translating.

2. Mistranslation of Idioms

2.1 Original : 他们途径灯火阑珊的商业区时步履匆匆。

Translation : Zhiyun und Wulong beschleunigten ihre Schritte, als sie ins gut beleuchtete Stadtzentrum kamen.[1][2]

Schäfer misunderstood the word "灯火阑珊". The word does not mean that the street is brightly lit. On the contrary, it conveys similar meaning to “灯火稀疏” and refers to the fact that there are few people on the street, or it is even empty and somewhat desolate. But Schäfer's expression "gut beleuchtete Stadtzentrum" (well-lit city center) means that the street is very bright. This is a completely different meaning, so here we can translate "灯火阑珊" into "verlassen"(quit).

2.2 Original: 打伞的人面面相觑，他们总是猜不透五龙的想法，所以不敢轻言。

Translation: Die Männer tauschten verschwörerische Blicke aus, wagten aber nicht, zu antworten, denn Wulong's Verhalten war unvorhersehbar.[4]

The literal meaning of "面面相觑" is: Because of fear or helplessness, people look at each other and do not know what to do. That's why they do not speak. The translator's expression "tauschten verschwörerische Blicke aus"(exchanged conspiratorial looks) clearly depicts the behavior—looking at each other. But he misunderstood the inner thoughts of the men. From the context, we know that

these men are Wulong's entourage. They are afraid of Wulong and they look at each other because they dare not speak and fear that they may say something wrong. It is obvious that they have no intrigue. Where does "verschwörerische Blicke"(conspiratorial looks) come from? And the next sentence "wagten aber nicht" (dared not) already shows the mental activities of these men. Therefore, while translating "面面相觑" we do not need to underline inner thoughts any more. The author translates this into "sahen einander an"(looking at each other). This is much conciser and also suitable in context.[3]

2.3 Original: 半夜三更你又发什么疯？

Translation: Bist du verrückt geworden? Es ist drei Uhr nachts.[5] [6].

According to the ancient Chinese calendar, "三更" refers to "子时", that is, 11 o'clock on the same day to 1 o'clock on the following day, for a total of two hours. According to the literal meaning of "三", the translator translated the word into "drei Uhr nachts" (3 am), which is obviously a mistranslation. There is a big time deviation here. This shows that the translator does not understand the concept of time in ancient China enough. In fact, many people in China do not know exactly which time "三更" specifically refers to. "半夜三更" often means "late at night", so the author translates it into "spät in der Nacht", which conveys the meaning of "late at night". This is appropriate.

2.4 Original: 绮云差点摔倒，气得直骂，什么偷鸡摸狗的鬼窟，见人就关门。

Translation: und rannte Qiyun bei seinem Versuch, ihr das Tor vor der Nase zu schließen, beinahe um, „Was ist hier für eine Teufelshöhle von Hühnerdieben und Hunderäubern? Behandelt man Besucher so?“[7][8].

"偷鸡摸狗" covers two meanings, "theft" or "improper activity". The translator translated it literally into "Hühnerdieben und Hunderäubern" (chicken thieves and dog robbers). But this deviated from the logic of the original text. German Readers will surely be puzzled, when they read this sentence. Qiyun can not get in, but why is the house of the family a devil's den of chicken thieves and dog robbers. From the context, it is known that Qiyun wants to find her sister Zhiyun in the family Lü, but the servant closes the gate quickly and Qiyun nearly falls down. That's why she wants to express: What's in the house? Which disreputable matters are there? Why can't I have a look and go inside. Therefore, the author translates the whole sentence into "Was für eine Teufelshöhle von anrüchtigen Angelegenheiten ist das?"(What a devil den of improper activities is this?). It accurately expresses the meaning of the original idiom.

From this we can see that a translator must take the context into consideration, when he translates idioms. In this way, the translation is clearer.

2.5 Original: 说的也是。冯老板颌首而笑，他淡淡地说，那你就进来把。俗话说救人一命胜造七级浮屠。

Translation: Ja, das kann ich mir vorstellen. Besitzer Feng lachte. „Komm rein“, sagte er, „Das Sprichwort sagt: Wer einem anderen das Leben rettet, ist ein siebenfacher Buddha"[9][10].

"浮屠" means tower or pagoda. "七级浮屠" means seven-floor pagoda. In Buddhism, the number of floors is usually odd number and seven is the largest. People put the bones of the saints or the Buddhist literature in the pagoda, thus the people who built the pagoda are great. But the people who saved others are greater.

The phrase "救人一命胜造七级浮屠" encourages people to save others from the threat of death. Unfortunately, the translator did not understand it and translated it into "Wer einem anderen das Leben rettet, ist ein siebenfacher Buddha"(He who saves another's life is a sevenfold Buddha). This is not related to the original. "浮屠" does not refer to Buddha and there is no term like "siebenfacher

Buddha"(sevenfold Buddha). Obviously, the translator didn't know the Buddhist culture and hasn't understood the sentence.

The author offers a better translation phrase "Wer einem anderen das Leben gerettet hat, ist besser als der Mann, der eine siebenstöckige Pagode erbaut hat."(Whoever saves another's life is better than the man who builds a seven-floor pagoda). For Chinese readers, "eine siebenstöckige Pagode"(a seven-floor pagoda) is easy to understand because national cultural knowledge exists in their cognitive experience. But the phrase has no equal effect on the readers without the background knowledge. In Germany, some people have heard about it, but the others have not.

So the phrases that come from historical fables need annotations. Here we can also express the connotation through the following annotation: "Früher benutzt man die Pagode, um Buddhistische Literatur zu sammeln oder die Gebeine der Heiligen zu begraben. Deswegen ist der Mann, der eine Pagode erbaut hat, ausgezeichnet. Aber wenn jemand eine andere Person gerettet hat, ist er viel besser."(Previously, one used the pagoda to collect Buddhist literature or bury the bones of the saints. That's why the man who builds a pagoda is excellent. But if someone saves the life of another person, he is more excellent.)

3. Conclusion

China has a history of more than 5,000 years, so it is very difficult for the translator from another country to fully understand the culture. In addition, Su Tong is a master of language. In the novel he uses a large amount of idioms with cultural peculiarities. That's why Schäfer makes mistakes in the translation. Due to the translation errors we can see that there is still a lot of work for a translator to do, in order to improve the quality of a translation.

1. A translator should master the source language very well. It does not only refer to the grammar, but also refer to the history, the culture, the politics of the country of the source language. This means that he should learn more about the background information of an idiom. Only in this way can he understand an idiom better. For example "灯火阑珊" and "面面相觑".

2. During translating, it is very important to consider the reception of the readers in the target language, it means that the translation must be in accordance with pragmatic equivalence. Therefore, a translator should place great value on the words that have cultural features. If sometimes there is no same expression in the target language that exists in the source language, he should express above all the connotation. For example "半夜三更".

3. In no case should a translation expression deviate from the context. Without a context, a word is just a word, but with a context, a word plays an important role. Therefore, a translator should always take the context into consideration and carefully analyze the context of a word. He should also be able to accurately identify a polysemy. If a word is polysemy, he can take advantage of the context to select the correct meaning. For example "偷鸡摸狗".

4. If necessary, a translator should add annotations because some words with cultural peculiarities are very difficult to understand. With an annotation, readers in the target language can better understand an idiom and the culture of the country of the source language. For example "救人一命胜造七级浮屠".

Although after the analysis the author offers many suggestions that should be considered during translation, it is in reality very difficult to realize the total equivalence between the original and the translation. But a translator should always do his best to fulfill equivalence in different situations.

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