

The Chinese-English Translation of “Four-character Pattern” from the Perspective of Functional Equivalence Theory

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Abstract: The four-character pattern is a unique form of Chinese language, whose definition is a word or phrase consisting of four syllables, including four-syllable simple words, compound words, idioms, fixed phrases and free phrases. These words are usually concise, expressive and rich in variations. However, there are no such corresponding expressions in English, which causes a great obstacle to the Chinese-English translation. In translation activities, the translation of idioms is often considered significant, which symbolizes the transmission and expression of culture. However, the four-character patterns in Chinese are simple in form, consisting of only four characters, but they have rich cultural connotations. Because of their complex and diverse structures and hidden meanings, English translations of these are often prone to cause problems such as unclear expressions, missing semantics, and loss of meaning. It is difficult to make simple word-for-word translations based on their literal meanings. Also, the common direct translations have long failed to meet the needs of English translations of idioms, which has become a major problem in translation activities.

Keywords: functional equivalence theory, translation strategies, four-character pattern

1. Introduction

The four-character pattern is one of the important expressions of the Chinese idiom. It is refined by the Chinese people in their long-term production and social life and has strong national and cultural characteristics. It is one of the most popular forms of language expressions. The four-character pattern consists of idioms, proverbs, sayings, and allegorical sayings. On the one hand, Chinese expressions tend to imply the logical relationship between the components, focus on implicit coherence, and use the meaning to serve the form, which is a semantic language that emphasizes the thoughts. The Chinese language employs few or even no connecting devices, discarding unnecessary subordinate components, freeing itself from formal constraints and leaving only pure ideas. The four-character pattern in Chinese is particularly distinctive in this feature, and their expressions are usually simple and flexible. English, on the other hand, is characterized by a high degree of morphological integration, a focus on structural integrity, focusing on structural integrity, revealing meaning by form, paying particular attention to explicit logical articulation and adhering to formal structure. This discrepancy demonstrates the non-equivalence between two languages, arousing the author's

curiosity to discover an appropriate way to help a four-character pattern understandable to Westerners. When applying functional equivalence theory, the author will concentrate on lexical equivalence since the topic discusses more from the vocabulary perspective.

2. Theoretical Framework: Functional Equivalence Theory

Eugene A. Nida regards translation as “the reproduction of information in the original language from semantics to style in the translated language with the closest natural equivalence [1].” In order to make a standard for the source and target languages in translation and to reduce the differences, according to the nature of translation, Nida proposed the famous “dynamic equivalence” translation theory, that is to say, “functional equivalence,” from the linguistic point of view. When is called “functional equivalence,” it means that the translation is not just a rigid correspondence on the surface of the text, but a functional equivalence between the two languages, and Nida believes that the translation should serve the receiver and make the receiver of the translation understand the message of the original text with maximum accuracy.

In his 1964 book *Toward a Science of Translating* [2], he proposed that translation is not only an art and a skill but also a science. “Properly speaking, there is no such thing as perfect equivalence, and therefore in translation, we should seek the most approximate possible equivalence [2].” The theory of “functional equivalence” was developed by Nida based on his study of Bible translation. He first introduced the terminology “dynamic equivalence.” It refers to the “closest natural equivalent” in the received language, from semantic to stylistic, or in Nida’s own words, “the closest and most natural equivalence to the source language message [3],” which includes three levels of meaning: “(1) reciprocal, mainly for the source language information; (2) natural, mainly for the recipient language; (3) closest, taking the highest approximation as a benchmark and combining the first two orientations.”

Based on this, Eugene A. Nida proposes four main levels of dynamic equivalence in translation practice, namely lexical equivalence, syntactic equivalence, chapter equivalence, and stylistic equivalence. At the same time, Nida further points out that “the functional equivalence of translation should be completely natural in the expression of the translation, trying to adapt the recipient to the relevant way of behavior in its own cultural context [1].” Nida considers that the term “dynamic” may be easily misunderstood to refer to only an “influence,” thus misinterpreting the theory, and out of emphasizing more explicitly his “functional view,” Nida replaces “dynamic equivalence” with “functional equivalence,” and the word “functional” regards translation as a form of communication, focusing on what the translator does, so it is more reasonable than the previous word “dynamic” [3]. Accordingly, he further proposes a definition of “functional equivalence,” namely, “the reader of the translated text can essentially understand and appreciate the translated text in the same way that the reader of the original text understands and appreciates the original text [3].” The specific form of creation needs to be flexibly grasped by the translator according to the context and his or her accumulated knowledge of the two languages, and in a way, this “flexibility” is also an echo of “dynamics” [4].

Moreover, Nida recommended that the “equivalence” should be understood in terms of a range of adequacy, which are from minimal to maximal effectiveness, and anything less than former degree should be unacceptable, and the latter implies a high degree of language-culture response [5].

Traditional translation is based on experience and does not rise to theory, while Nida’s theory of reciprocity not only enriches the content of reciprocity, including form, content, semantics, information, style, reader reflection, rhetoric, etc., but also develops the corresponding translation theory based on linguistics, communication theory, information theory and social semiotics to guide translation practice, also further enhances it through the cycle from practice to theory then back to practice .

3. The Definition and Linguistic Features of the Four-character Pattern

3.1. The Definition of Four-character Pattern

The “four-character pattern” is a meaningful linguistic unit composed of four characters, a unique linguistic form of Chinese. In Gao Jian’s theory of linguistics, the four-character pattern is listed as one of the important linguistic personalities of Chinese and is the essence of the Chinese language and culture. He makes it clear that in modern Chinese, the four-character structure appears more frequently and often serves to depict characteristics, determine attributes, indicate attitudes, exhort, portray images, and describe scenes. In addition, the frequency of the four-character structure is one of the important signs of the style of writing [6]. The use of the four-character pattern can make an article concise and vivid. It can also enhance the momentum of the article, turning it into a progressive, rich in literary style and increasing the expressive and infectious power of the language. Nevertheless, the four-character pattern is still widely used in various literary genres for its unique expressive characteristics.

Lu Zhiwei, a famous linguist in China, first proposed the concept of a four-character pattern in his article “The Concurrent Four-character Pattern of Chinese Language.” His division was very broad, considering that the combination of four characters is a four-character pattern, which can be a word or a phrase. Lu Shuxiang classified four-character patterns as phrases. In 1987, Ma Guofan discussed the external form, connotation, causes of formation, types of composition, and the current situation of the four-character pattern in his article *On the Four-character Pattern*. He argues that in terms of external form, the four-character frame is “a ‘linguistic unit’ composed of four syllables” [7]. He also roughly divides the four-character pattern into six categories, including words and word extensions, tighter phrases, looser phrases, industry sets, idioms, and derivations of idioms. A four-character word is generally composed of four morphemes in two parts, one before and one after. Structurally, a four-character word consists of a free phrase and a fixed phrase. The free phrase refers to the ordinary four-character phrase, which is a temporary combination of four-character phrases according to the contextual needs, and the ordinary four-character phrase is not fixed in form and can be freely combined according to the contextual needs. Fixed phrases refer to the Chinese idiom four-character pattern (i.e. four-character idioms); the four-character pattern is composed of idioms that are rigidly structured and cannot be split at will. Idioms are an important part of social language and culture, and are the essence of the language. According to the explanation of the Modern Chinese Dictionary, “Idioms are stereotyped phrases that people have long been accustomed to, simple in form but pithy in meaning.” “In terms of grammatical relationships, the two parts before and after in a phrase can be subject-predicate, verb-object, attributive or parallel [8].”

3.2. Linguistic Features of Four-character Pattern

“The four-character pattern is a distinctive form of language vocabulary and an important part of the Chinese vocabulary [7].” It is a special lexical phenomenon formed in the long-term development and use of Chinese language, and it has such a strong vitality because it bears the characteristics of “concise and condensed words, symmetrical and rigorous structure, harmonious and pleasant tone, and rich as well as imaginative meaning. At the same time, it also shows the powerful expressive power of the language with its vivid, colorful and rhetorical characteristics, and thus also has the reputation of being the ‘living fossil’ of ancient Chinese writing.” In short, the outstanding features of Chinese four-character words are: “simple and concise content, neat and tidy form, smooth and pleasant voice, vivid expression effect [8].”

4. Case Analysis

4.1. Omission

Many four-character patterns in Chinese are meaning-repeated structures, signifying that the first two words and the next two words in a four-character structure are identical or similar in meaning. “The parallel structure in the four-character pattern includes nouns plus noun phrases, adjectives plus adjective phrases, and verbs plus verb phrases, with the same part of speech and similar meanings before and after. The overlapping use of near-sense words reflects the beauty of structural balance” [9]. However, semantic repetition should be avoided as much as possible in English. Therefore, when doing C-E translation, we should analyze the original text from the information aspect, omit the similar words, focus on conveying the core information, and remove the redundant ones so as to turn “complicated” into “simple” and achieve the functional equivalence between the original text and the target text, also make the target text better understood and accepted by foreign readers.

Example 1

Source Text: 坚持以问题为导向，以抓铁有痕、踏石有印的作风狠抓落实 [10]。

Target Text: We should adhere to the problem oriented, making sure all the works be done well.

Analysis: In this sentence, if we want the translation to be correctly understood by readers and to realize the information function of the translation, we must first comprehend the exact meaning of “抓铁有痕、踏石有印”(clutch a piece of iron and you should leave your handprint on it; step onto the stone and you should leave your footprint on it). The literal meaning of the phrase “抓铁有痕”(clutch a piece of iron and you should leave your handprint on it) is that a person can leave deep marks even if he grasps a piece of steel. It is often used as a positive word, with “蜻蜓点水”(flit on something without going deeply) as its antonym. Now it is generally used to describe a person’s solid work, no matter what work he or she does, the person can leave their own excellent work performance. Here is the folklore of “踏石”(step onto the stone): During the Dragon Boat Festival in Xing’an State, Shaanxi Province, the local officials led the bureaucrats to watch the competition, called “踏石”(step onto the stone). We must guarantee that the implementation of work is practicable, not just slapdash. Therefore, to omit the redundant information in the latter part of the original text, the translation turns out to be “making sure all the works be done well”. Nida holds the belief that reciprocity is not only the transmission of information, but also the expression of language, which is reflected by the simplification of the semantic repetition of four-character pattern.

Example 2

ST: 北京作为世界旅游名城，有着极为丰富的旅游资源：雄伟壮丽的天安门，金碧辉煌、气象万千的故宫，气势雄伟的万里长城，湖光山色、曲栏回廊的颐和园，建筑精巧、独具艺术风格的天坛，烟波浩淼、黛色风光的北海公园，以及建筑宏大的明代帝王陵寝——十三陵……这些举世无双、驰名中外的古代建筑，历来是旅游者的竞游之地。[11]

TT: Beijing, being one of the world’s great cities, is full of tourist attractions. Among these are the magnificent Tiananmen Gate, the majestic Palace Museum, the imposing Great Wall, the scenic Summer Palace, the ingenious Temple of Heaven, the splendid Beihai Park and the carefully laid-out Ming Tombs. Unrivaled and of world renown, these ancient structures remain attractions to both domestic and foreign travelers.

Analysis: The original expression is filled with graceful dictions, being vocal, emotional and extremely infectious. If the English translation indiscriminately imitates the original form, it is bound to be bloated and unrealistic. The actual content needed for the expression of the translation can only be founded from the whole chapter of the original text according to the characteristics of the English

tourism genre, freeing from the form of the original text. For example, the latter part of the phrases such as “雄伟壮丽”, “金碧辉煌”, “湖光山色”(magnificent, majestic, scenic) is complement and emphasis the former part. When translating those four-character patterns, the writer only takes part of its meaning to avoid encumbrance. The target text presents “magnificent, majestic and scenic” respectively.

4.2. Domestication

In the actual process of C-E translation, it is obviously impossible and undesirable to pursue word-for-word equivalence. Many Chinese idioms contain abundant cultural deposits, for instance, “草船借箭”(borrowing your enemies’ arrows), “黛玉葬花”(Daiyu’s burial of flowers), “报仇雪耻(to take revenge and erase humiliation)” in four classic novels of Chinese literature. It is difficult for western readers to fully understand those four-character patterns without gaining in-depth knowledge about ancient Chinese culture. To carry forward the traditional Chinese culture and make China’s voice heard on the global stage, translations shoulder essential responsibilities. For the sake of cultural diffusion, domestication is the sensible way when doing C-E translation.

Example 3

ST: 日则通行，也则同止同息，真是言和意顺，似漆如胶。

TT: Sharing each other's company every minute of the day and sleeping in the same room at night, they developed an understanding so intense that it was almost as if they had grown into a single person [12]. (translated by David Hawkes)

Analysis: In this sentence, the words “言和意顺”(agree with each other) and “似漆如胶”(cleave together as firmly and inseparably as glue and lacquer) should be paid special attention. In quantities of literature works, rhetoric devices are frequently employed, adding ornate colors to plain words. In Chinese dictionary, “言和意顺” means “言语和顺，情意相谐”(gentle words and harmonic relationship) and “似漆如胶” means “情投意合，难舍难分”(find each other congenial and be loath to separate). These two words cannot only describe couples but also friends or confidants, denoting that their relationship is too close to be divided. When translating “似漆如胶,” it appears to be a problem that although receivers can roughly comprehend that a person is compared to “lacquer” and “glue,” they are unintelligible to connect the items with its special features, which is bonding or conglutinating. Therefore, given domestication, the translator makes it “grow into a single person.”

5. Conclusion

The pace of cultural exchange between the East and the West is getting faster and faster, so the application scenarios of Eugene. A. Nida’s functional equivalence theory become broader and broader. The commonest is literature translation. Others such as translation of instruction books, government work reports, advertisements and subtitles of movies or TV dramas.

Today, the Chinese language has become a universal language that embraces everything and keeps pace with the times. Modern Chinese is constantly compatible with the characteristics of other languages, which means that “what is national is global, and what is global is also national.” Under this general trend, the four-character pattern, which preserves and reflects the characteristics of the Chinese language, continues to go global and take on a new luster. As a translator, it is our duty to deliver to the world the four-character pattern that carries the historical and cultural characteristics of our country [13]. For the English translation of four-character patterns, translators need to fully consider the cultural differences between Chinese and English, choose the appropriate translation method, stand on the height of writing to break the barrier of the source language and produce an

authentic translation based on a correct and sufficient understanding of the text. It's inadvisable to directly translate the four-character pattern according to its literal meaning, but pay attention to the flexible use of appropriate translation methods such as omission, domestication and so on. The English translation of Chinese four-character patterns should fill the cultural gaps while respecting the diversity between Chinese and Western cultures [14].

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