The Translation Strategies of Chinese Neologisms Based on Polysystem Theory: A Foreignization Tendency

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Abstract: Since the reform and opening up in 1978, China’s share in the world’s discourse system has been expanded with more and more Chinese neologisms springing up. Based on Itamar Even-Zohar’s polysystem theory, this paper analyzes the English translation of Chinese neologisms collected from China Daily, Xinhua and other authoritative media with the illustration of the application of foreignization and domestication in the translation of Chinese neologisms into English. Finally, through the comparative study and sample analysis, this paper finds that there is a tendency of adopting foreignization strategy to translate Chinese neologisms into English, indicating a wider application of foreignization strategy in translating Chinese neologisms in the future.

Keywords: Polysystem theory; English translation of Chinese neologisms; Foreignization; Translation strategies

1. Introduction

According to the survey of China’s State Language Work Committee, it is estimated that approximately 600 neologisms emerged every year on average in 1980s, and 300-400 new words came into being in 1990s[1]. In recent years, Chinese neologisms with Chinese characteristics have appeared at the accelerating speed, which requires more attention for standard translation of Chinese neologisms.

2. General View of Chinese Neologism Translation and Polysystem Theory

2.1 Definition and Features of Chinese Neologisms

In essence, the word “neologism” is combined by “neo” which is from Greek, and “logism” which is from Latin. “Neo” is similar to the adjective “new” and “logism” means “word, phrase and expression”. Chen Yuan, the first Chinese scholar to study neologisms, defines neologisms as the words that come into being not long ago and leave a sense of newness on people, or new sense and new usages of the old words[2]. Hence, a new word, expression or a new meaning of a word can all be concluded as neologisms. Coupled with the Chinese buzz words in China Daily from 2019 to 2021, newness, shortness and entertainment are the main three features of Chinese neologisms concluded in the thesis. First, they are relatively newer than other words today. Second, they tend to be phrases or expressions with the limited length and three-word Chinese neologisms are extremely common in our daily life. Third, neologisms are given a special trait of entertainment with everyone being able to express their ideas towards some events or phenomena in their own ways.

2.2 Adaptability of Polysystem Theory to Chinese Neologism Translation

Itamar Even-Zohar’s polysystem theory argues that semiotic phenomena or sign-governed communication patterns of human beings (such as language, literature, culture, society) should be regarded as heterogeneous, dynamic and open systems rather than simple conglomerates of disparate elements, and the behavior patterns of a particular system sometimes is related to its position.
within a superior polysystem. He also indicates that the position of translated literature in the target literary polysystem greatly influences the translator’s selection of translation strategies. When translated literature assumes the peripheral position in the target culture, translation activities will be conservative and translators tend to use the ready-made home literary models in their translation. Therefore, the domestication strategy will mainly be employed by translators. Under such circumstance, “acceptability” is the supreme criterion and as a result, the target text will not be faithful to the source text. Nevertheless, when the translated literature assumes the central position, translation activities will act as an innovative force to violate the existing literary models in the target language or target culture, and foreignization strategy will generally be employed by translators. The receptivity of the cultural system is closely related to the comprehensive strength of the country. Today, China is moving closer to center stage of world, which means Chinese is gradually influential in foreign countries. As translation is a dynamic practice related to the times, it is inappropriate to discuss about domestication and foreignization without existing translations of Chinese neologisms.

3. Application of Foreignization in the Translation of Chinese Neologisms

Foreignization is the strategy of keeping foreignness in the target text and introducing the foreign culture to readers.

3.1 Literal Translation

Literal translation is like word-for-word and sentence-for-sentence translation, rather than giving the sense of the original.

3.1.1 ST: 河长制, TT: river chief system

Actually, the Chinese neologism “河长制” was initiated in Wuxi, Jiangsu province, in 2007. After the blue-green algae sprang up in Taihu Lake, the Wuxi Municipal Government Office adopted measures to regulate environment preservation. This example just combine the words “river chief” and “system” regardless of whether the target readers can understand or not. However, this kind of literal translation just preserves the original style of this Chinese neologism.

3.1.2 ST: 厕所革命, TT: toilet revolution

It is first raised by Chinese General Secretary Xi Jinping as a pragmatic way to improve tourism. This Chinese neologism is of political characteristics, which symbolizes the new political event and phenomenon in China. Hence, adapting literal translation can make it concise and direct, adding the sense of solemnity to it.

3.2 Transliteration

Transliteration is a method to use strange or novel combinations of spellings to translate some new words presently. Transliteration is often used to show cultural differences and has been widely used by more and more translators.

3.2.1 ST: 基友, TT: G-pal

It is a popular term coined by netizens to describe intimate relationships between people of the same sex. In fact, “基” is derived from the pronunciation of the initial letter “G” of the English word “Gay”, and just as the “Pal” in “e-pal” and “pen-pal” means “companion”, so the translation of “基” into “g-pal” is an ideal way to achieve both the pronunciation and the meaning.

3.2.2 ST: 凤姐, TT: Lady Fengfeng

It is actually a woman whose unconventional words and deeds have made her popular on the Internet. If the translation of “凤姐” into “Lady Fengfeng” can make foreigners quickly think of the equally maverick-looking “Lady Gaga”, so then it will be more acceptable.


Domestication is the strategy of omitting the foreignness of the source text to make it close to the readers.

4.1 Free Translation

Free translation is a translation method of domestication, which aims to strive for naturalness in the translation rather than the form in that.

4.1.1 ST: 中关村, TT: Silicon Valley of China

It refers to the first Chinese national high and new tech development zone in the Haidian District of Beijing which is similar to the Silicon Valley in America. Hence, this kind of free translation helps the target readers to get over the cultural barriers and get a better understanding of this Chinese neologism.

4.1.2 ST: 人肉搜索, TT: cyber manhunt

“人肉” means human flesh and “搜索” means search. Actually, it cannot be directly understood as using human bodies to search for something. Instead, it is also a kind of way of researching on the Internet. Hence, when the words “cyber” and “manhunt” are combined together, the meaning of the original text can be easily understood by people.
4.2 Variation Translation

In the translation practices, variation translation is adopted to illustrate the special meanings of the source text or to make source text different from source text.

The Chinese neologism “全面教育” was translated as comprehensive education previously. However, the adjective “well-rounded” focuses more on the students’ morality and other talents except grades. Hence, “well-rounded education” is better than “comprehensive education”. This kind of variation translation keeps pace with the times and highlights the trend of educational progress.

5. Tendency of Foreignization in the Translation of Chinese Neologisms

5.1 Foreignization Tendency in Dictionaries

Zhang Jingping, a Chinese scholar, made sample analysis based on Xinhua Dictionary which showed foreignization strategy was more frequently used than domestication strategy[6]. To verify the above research conclusion, the author selects samples from The Latest Dictionary of Chinese-English Characteristic Words (7th Edition) published in 2019 to analyze the proportion of domestication and foreignization in the English translation of Chinese new words[7]. Samples are extracted from pages 1-18, 35-60 and 136-168 and Table 1 shows as follows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Number of Neologisms</th>
<th>Number of Neologisms in Foreignization Strategy</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-18</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-60</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>136-168</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The result still shows that foreignization strategy become frequently used for translators in the translation of Chinese neologisms.

5.2 Foreignization Tendency in Foreign Media

In addition to dictionaries, the media’s preference of translation strategies also exerts an impact on the English translation of Chinese neologisms. Researchers have selected identity neologisms as research object released by National Language Resources Monitoring and Research Center from 2006 to 2018, and found that the media prefer foreignizing translation on the whole[8]. In practice, the foreignizing translation of Chinese neologisms is prioritized in most cases for translating Chinese neologisms.

6. Conclusion

Chinese neologisms are rich in cultural connotations with Chinese characteristics, and their English translations can most directly spread the culture with Chinese characteristics. Cultural convergence is an irresistible trend nowadays, and people are unprecedentedly tolerant and willing to accept foreign cultures. In this context, the English translation of Chinese neologisms has an obvious tendency of adopting foreignization strategy. Hence, foreignization is prioritized in most cases for translating Chinese neologisms.

References