



Difficulties and Strategies in Translating Chinese Idioms into English

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Abstract

Chinese idioms, also known as Chengyu, usually formed by four characters, are unique expressions deeply rooted in Chinese culture and carry profound cultural connotations and metaphorical meanings. This paper aims to explore the challenges encountered in translating Chinese idioms into English and propose effective strategies to overcome these difficulties. Chinese idioms are unique expressions that are deeply rooted in Chinese culture, making their translation a demanding task for English learners. The difficulty lies in the profound cultural connotations and metaphorical meanings embedded in Chinese idioms, as well as the structural and linguistic differences between the two languages. The paper analyzes these challenges and suggests strategies to enhance idiomatic translation accuracy and effectiveness. The strategies include combining literal translation with explanatory notes, employing equivalent idiomatic expressions, adapting idioms to suit the target language, changing imagery, and developing a deep knowledge of both languages and cultures. These strategies will help English learners to master the art of translating Chinese idioms effectively.

Keywords

Chinese idioms, translation difficulties, cultural connotations, metaphorical meanings, strategies

1. Introduction

Chinese idioms, also known as chengyu, are an integral part of the Chinese language and culture. They are concise expressions that encapsulate profound meanings and are widely used in daily conversations, literature, and various forms of media. Idioms play a significant role in Chinese culture, serving as a reflection of its rich history, values, and traditions. They provide insights into the cultural nuances of the Chinese people. However, translating idioms accurately from Chinese to English is a challenging task for translators due to the differences in cultural connotations, metaphorical meanings, structural and linguistic variations, as well as contextual challenges. This paper aims to explore the difficulties faced in translating Chinese idioms into English and propose strategies to overcome these challenges.

2. Challenges in Translating Chinese Idioms into English

Translating Chinese idioms into English poses several difficulties due to the vast cultural differences between the two languages.

2.1 Linguistic Differences

One of the major obstacles in translating Chinese idioms into English lies in the linguistic disparities between the two

languages. Chinese idioms often consist of four characters, while English idioms are typically shorter. This discrepancy poses difficulties in maintaining the brevity and conciseness of the original idioms during translation. Additionally, the grammatical structures and word orders of Chinese and English differ, making it challenging to retain the original meaning and impact of the idioms. Chinese and English have different sentence structures and linguistic features. Translating Chinese idioms into English while preserving the intended meaning and cultural significance can be a complex task due to these structural and linguistic differences. Literal translation involves directly translating the words and phrases of Chinese idioms into English. This strategy can preserve the structure and literal meaning of the idioms. However, it often results in awkward or nonsensical English phrases. For example, the Chinese idiom “yī jiàn shǔāng diǎo” literally means “shoot two hawks with one arrow”) is usually translated as “kill two birds with one stone” in English.

2.2 Cultural Connotations

Chinese idioms are deeply rooted in Chinese culture and carry cultural connotations that may not have direct equivalents in English. Chinese idioms often derive from classical Chinese literature, history, and philosophy, making them deeply rooted in Chinese culture. These cultural nuances make it challenging for translators to convey the true meaning of the idiom in the target language. These cultural references are often unfamiliar to English-speaking audiences, making it challenging to convey the intended meaning accurately. Translating these cultural references accurately into English requires a comprehensive understanding of both Chinese and English cultures. Translators must be adept at conveying the cultural nuances and connotations associated with Chinese idioms, which can be challenging for non-native speakers. For example, “shǒu zhū dài tù”, is a metaphor for waiting for opportunities without taking the initiative to get a license. If it is translated into “guarding a tree to wait for a rabbit”, it is difficult to achieve the meaning of the idiom itself.

2.3 Metaphorical Meanings

Chinese idioms often contain metaphorical meanings that may not be easily understood by non-native speakers. Translating these metaphors accurately requires a deep understanding of both languages and cultures. Chinese idioms often rely on metaphorical or allegorical language, making them highly context-dependent. Translating these idioms requires not only an understanding of the literal meaning but also an appreciation of the underlying metaphorical or symbolic implications. Without this understanding, the translated idiom may lose its intended impact or fail to resonate with the target audience.

For example, the idiom “bēi gōng shé yǐng”, literally meaning “cup, bow, snake, shadow”, is used to describe someone who is overly suspicious or paranoid, seeing threats or dangers where none exist. The metaphorical implication is derived from the ancient Chinese practice of using a bow and cup to catch snakes. The shadow cast by the cup can create an illusion of a snake, leading to unnecessary fear and anxiety. Translating this idiom accurately requires conveying both the literal meaning and the underlying metaphorical implication. Another example is the idiom “huà shé tiān zú”, which literally means “to draw legs on a snake.” This idiom is used to describe someone who unnecessarily adds something extra or superfluous, resulting in a negative or counterproductive outcome. The metaphorical imagery of adding legs to a snake emphasizes the idea of unnecessary embellishment, as snakes naturally do not have legs. Translating this idiom requires capturing the essence of the metaphor and conveying the idea of unnecessary actions leading to unintended consequences.

In summary, translating Chinese idioms requires not only linguistic skills but also a deep understanding of the cultural and historical background behind these expressions. It is crucial to accurately convey the metaphorical or allegorical meanings embedded in these idioms to ensure that their intended impact and resonance are preserved in the target language.

2.4 Ambiguity and Variations

Many Chinese idioms have multiple interpretations and can vary in meaning depending on the context. Translating such idioms requires careful consideration of the intended message and context to avoid ambiguity. Let's take a look at some examples to illustrate this point.

For example, the idiom “mǎ dào chéng gōng”, literally means “the horse arrives and success follows.” This idiom is used to describe a situation where success is achieved swiftly and effortlessly. For instance, imagine a student who studies diligently and is rewarded with excellent grades. Translating this idiom accurately would involve conveying the idea of achieving success quickly and smoothly. The idiom “hǔ tóu shé wěi”, literally meaning “tiger's head, snake's tail,” is used to describe a situation where something starts off strong and promising but eventually loses momentum or fails to

deliver the expected results. For example, imagine a project that begins with great enthusiasm but ends up being incomplete or unsuccessful. Translating this idiom accurately would involve capturing the idea of a strong start followed by a weak finish.

These examples demonstrate how the interpretation and translation of Chinese idioms are highly dependent on the specific context in which they are used. A translator must carefully consider the intended message and the nuances of the idioms to ensure an accurate and meaningful translation.

2.5 Contextual Challenges

Chinese idioms are often derived from historical events, literature, or philosophical concepts. Translating these idioms accurately requires an understanding of the cultural, historical, and contextual background in which they were used (Shi, 2018). One such example is the idiom "Bó Yá Jué Xián", which is derived from the story of two renowned ancient Chinese musicians, Bo Ya and Zhong Ziqi. According to legend, Bo Ya was a skilled zither player, and Zhong Ziqi was his close friend and the only person who truly understood and appreciated his music. However, Zhong Ziqi passed away suddenly, leaving Bo Ya devastated. In his grief, Bo Ya decided to break his zither strings, believing that no one else could appreciate his music as Zhong Ziqi did. The idiom "Bó Yá Jué Xián", therefore, came to represent the idea of giving up or abandoning something due to the absence of a worthy recipient or appreciator.

3. Strategies to Overcome Translation Difficulties

Scholars have proposed various strategies to tackle the difficulties encountered in translating Chinese idioms into English.

3.1 Explanatory notes

Han and Ma (2023) advocate for the use of literal translation combined with explanatory notes. This approach aims to strike a balance between conveying the literal meaning of the idiom and providing additional information to help readers understand its cultural significance. By including explanatory notes, translators can bridge the cultural gap and enhance the reader's understanding of the idiom's connotations. To bridge this gap, a translator can include explanatory notes to provide additional information and cultural background. For example, the translator could add a note explaining that the idiom refers to someone who talks or writes about military matters without having any actual experience or expertise.

One example of using literal translation combined with explanatory notes is the Chinese idiom "zhǐ shàng tán bīng", which literally means "discussing military strategy on paper." This idiom is used to describe someone who talks or writes about military tactics or strategies without having any practical experience or knowledge. When translating this idiom, a literal translation could be "discussing military strategy on paper." However, this literal translation may not effectively convey the intended meaning to English-speaking readers who are unfamiliar with the cultural context.

By combining literal translation with explanatory notes, the translator ensures that the literal meaning of the idiom is conveyed while also providing the necessary cultural context and explanation for English-speaking readers. This approach helps enhance the reader's understanding of the idiom's connotations and ensures that the intended message is effectively communicated in the translation.

3.2 Cultural Adaptation

Cultural adaptation involves modifying Chinese idioms to suit the target culture's linguistic and cultural context. When direct translation is not possible, translators can use equivalent idiomatic expressions in the target language to convey the intended meaning of the Chinese idiom. Ma, Hu, and Li (2022) suggest the use of cultural substitution, where an idiom is replaced with an equivalent English idiom that conveys a similar meaning. This strategy allows for the preservation of the idiomatic expression while making it more accessible to English-speaking readers. It makes the translated idioms more relatable and comprehensible to English-speaking audiences. Translators may replace the Chinese cultural references with equivalent English cultural references. For example, the Chinese idiom "huà shé tiān zú" (literally meaning "adding legs to a snake") may be translated as "gild the lily" in English. Another example of cultural substitution is the Chinese idiom "huà lóng diǎn jīng", which literally means "to draw the eyes on a dragon." This idiom is used to describe the final touch or crucial detail that brings a work of art or a piece of writing to life. In Chinese culture, dragons are considered powerful and auspicious creatures, and drawing their eyes is seen as the finishing touch that gives them vitality and spirit. To translate this idiom using cultural substitution, an equivalent English idiom could be "the icing on the cake."

This idiom conveys the idea of adding something extra or special to enhance an already good situation or outcome. While the cultural context and imagery are different, the English idiom captures the essence of adding a final touch to make something exceptional.

By using cultural substitution, the translator preserves the idiomatic expression and conveys a similar meaning in a way that is more familiar and accessible to English-speaking readers. This strategy helps bridge the cultural gap and allows for a better understanding and appreciation of the idiom's intended message.

3.3 Free Translation by Modifying or Creating

Free translation focuses on conveying the essence and intended meaning of the Chinese idioms rather than adhering strictly to the literal translation. Translators may use English idiomatic expressions or create new phrases that capture the spirit of the original idiom. Kang & Yang (2022) propose the use of adaptation and substitution in translation, which involves modifying the structure or wording of the idiom to make it more comprehensible and culturally relevant to the target audience.

For instance, the Chinese idiom "shǒu zhū dài tù" (literally meaning "wait by the stump for a rabbit") is often translated as "wait for a windfall" in English. Another example of adaptation as a translation strategy is the Chinese idiom "wáng yíng bǔ ló", which literally means "mend the pen after sheep are lost." This idiom is used to convey the idea of taking action to fix a problem or prevent further damage after something has already gone wrong. To adapt this idiom for an English-speaking audience, a translator could use the equivalent English expression "better late than never." This adaptation captures the essence of the original idiom by emphasizing the importance of taking action, even if it is done belatedly. The use of a familiar English expression ensures that the intended meaning is effectively communicated while making it more culturally relevant and comprehensible to the target audience.

By adopting the idiom, the translator ensures a smooth integration into the English text and maintains the core message of the original expression. This approach allows for effective communication of the idiom's meaning while considering the linguistic and cultural differences between the source and target languages.

3.4 Imagery replacement

The use of imagery replacement as a translation strategy is essential when dealing with idioms. Sometimes, a literal translation of an idiom may lead to misunderstanding or confusion in the target language. Therefore, translators must abandon the familiar imagery that Chinese people are accustomed to and instead opt for imagery that is familiar to the target language speakers, while still conveying the same meaning. Adapting the idiom allows for a smoother integration into the English text while retaining the essence of the original expression. The adaptation strategy allows for a smoother integration of the idiom into the English text while still capturing the essence of the original expression.

Xu (2022) discussed the translation of animal images and advised transferring the animals with similar images and connotations in two languages to get a better understanding of the content of the idiom. One example of substitution as a translation strategy is the Chinese idiom "hú jiǒu hǔ wēi", which literally means "a fox borrowing the might of a tiger." This idiom is used to describe someone who relies on the power or authority of others to intimidate or exert influence. To adapt this idiom for an English-speaking audience, a translator could use the equivalent English idiom "a wolf in sheep's clothing." This adaptation maintains the core metaphor of someone pretending to be something they are not in order to deceive or manipulate others. By using a well-known English idiom, the translator ensures that the intended meaning is effectively communicated while making the expression more culturally relevant and comprehensible to the target audience.

By employing the imagery replacement strategy, the translator ensures that the intended meaning of the idiom is effectively communicated while making it more culturally relevant and comprehensible to the target audience. In this way, intention replacement allows for a smoother integration of the idiom into the target language text, ensuring that the essence and intended message of the idiom are preserved in the translation.

4. Conclusion

Translating Chinese idioms into English is a complex task that requires a deep understanding of both languages and cultures. Linguistic differences and cultural nuances pose significant challenges to translators. However, by employing strategies such as literal translation with explanatory notes, free translation, Imagery replacement, and cultural adaptation, translators can overcome these difficulties and convey the essence and meaning of Chinese idioms effectively. Further research and exploration in this field will contribute to the development of more accurate and culturally appropriate

translations of Chinese idioms into English.

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