On the Translation of Chinese Political Vocabulary in Cross-Cultural Communication

LIU Daoying[a],*

[a]School of Foreign Languages, Nantong University, Nantong, China.
*Corresponding author.

Abstract

Effective communication is more demanding as with China's rapid economic and social development, and an increasing number of people are eager to know China more, especially in political system. Therefore, it is of great significance to carry out in-depth study on how Chinese political documents and policies are effectively communicated in English within an international context. The appropriate translation of Chinese political words and documents is the first and most important step to understand Chinese politics. Although great achievements have been made in documentary translation from Chinese to English, potential problems still exist, affecting the understanding of foreign people without Chinese cultural background. The purpose of this paper is to identify an effective and appropriate translation strategy to enhance the effectiveness of political translation, especially in Chinese political words and phrases. This paper conducted an analysis of political vocabulary translation from descriptive translation perspective, and recommends a practical strategy to apply this theory into Chinese political vocabulary translation.

Key words: Political vocabulary; Descriptive translation; Strategy

INTRODUCTION

Globalization has changed the current communication system. Intercultural encounters are becoming common and frequent in the international communication. Political documents can well reflect social changes, culture as well as values. The purpose of political document translation lies in helping foreigners who cannot read and understand Chinese, but they are eager to know more about China. However, the voice of China has not been well heard as we have expected due to difficulty in political vocabulary translation. So vocabulary translation from Chinese to English is the biggest barrier in the international communication. In order to offer an opportunity for foreigners to better understand China, translation plays an extremely important role in the communication, and it serves a bridge connecting western culture and eastern culture. Due to huge differences between these two cultures, lots of misunderstanding and conflicts could arise in the communication, and many stereotypes are still rooted without appropriate translation. Language is a reflection of a culture, and there are lots of Chinese political words and phrases which are not able to be found with parallel ones in English. When there is no parallel vocabularies between Chinese and English, it will be the greatest challenge for translators to convey the ideas smoothly. This could cause even more negative consequences in the international communication. In this paper, descriptive translation strategy is proposed to overcome these dilemmas to help people from other countries understand China better in the international communication.

1. DESCRIPTIVE TRANSLATION STUDIES

Translation is usually viewed as a communicative "bridge" between the source language and the target language in the process of international communication. Translation, as a communicative purpose, largely relies on translation norm to help information transition and interaction among speakers, translators and audiences both from the source language and the target language.

Therefore, it is of extreme importance to establish a norm in a range of social sciences, from law and ethics to social psychology and international relations (Hjort, 1992). In translation, a norm is also required to be established in order to improve communication on both sides, but there is no unanimity as to this translation norm. Toury (2001) defines this norm as criteria according to which actual instances of behavior and a translation is evaluated based on the additional condition that selection among them be non-random. Translation in political context involves communication between two parties, and the translator has to follow a certain rule in the process of translation when encountered with words which don't exist in English. Toury proposes that the acquisition of a set of norms for determining the suitability of that kind of behavior, and for maneuvering between all the factors which may constrain it, is therefore a prerequisite for becoming a translator within a cultural environment (2001, p.53). Toury (1995a) approached translation norms from the perspective of a translator's decision making. He considers translation norms as performance instructions and distinguished different categories of translation norms at different stages of translation process. Toury proposes to move on to the formation of general laws of translational behaviors as the following:

> To put it differently: The cumulative findings of descriptive studies should make it possible to formulate a series of coherent laws which would state the inherent relations between all the variables found to be relevant to translation. (1995b, p.16)

Toury's descriptive translation studies play a significant role in cross-cultural translation. The purpose of this paper is to explore how this theory can be applied in the Chinese political vocabulary translation. Levy (2011) argues that the relations between the source language and the target language texts can be shifted through descriptive translation strategy in order to achieve communication. Holmes (2000) once believes that the innovative or conservative position of translation within one cultural system is largely determined by its relations with other cultural systems, and this can be achieved through descriptive translation strategy. The previous researches show descriptive translation studies can help establish cross-culture communication between two language systems, even they have huge differences between each other. The purpose of this study is to explore how descriptive translation studies can be applied in the translation of political vocabulary from Chinese to English.

2. CHARACTERIZATION OF CHINESE POLITICAL VOCABULARY

Political language is one of the special languages used in the international communication, and it is closely related to its cultural roots. Lexical use in political texts has certain characteristic features which differentiate it from other types of texts, and they remain unique with politicians and politics. Political words and phrases are basic linguistic units to form sentences and paragraphs and construct communicative texts. They are involved in political issues and documents used formally both in written and spoken forms. It is one of the most important ways to obtain information about Chinese policies through newspapers, TV programs as well as conferences.

Accuracy is the first and foremost characteristics of political words. It refers to precision or exactness in language expressions, and it is usually considered to be the top rule to determine word selection. Political genres are formal and fixed, so political translation requires the greatest carefulness and accuracy. Words and phrases in the political texts aim at quick and effective delivery of facts, ideas and arguments in ways they are supposed to be the most effect. So political vocabulary cannot be considered to be ambiguous and misleading, and they should be firm and clear. For maximum effects, the translators are required to make great efforts to keep balance of speakers and audiences in the process of transition from the source language to the target language.

Conventionality refers to conformity with customary practice or general agreement about how people behave in certain circumstances. Politicians prefer words based on fixed analogical rules and expressions which have the same meaning and indication. So word selection is conventionalized or preformulated in the political discourse. Politicians would like to use those words or phrases which have the exact same meaning in different political occasions. It is the conventionality that does not allow communication to break down in the translation. The principle of conventionality in political language limits the translators' possibility of expression in the process of transferring the source language to the target language. In the Chinese political vocabulary translation, words in the political discourse usually are translated to specific expressions which are widely acceptable within politicians while it seems that this translation does not really fit in with English grammar. For example, one Chinese political phrase "Sange Daibiao" is translated as "three represents" based on the principle of conventionality, but it is really hard for people to understand, especially those from western cultural backgrounds. One of the best ways to translate this phrase is using descriptive translation strategy. It is usually translated and described as "Three Represents, the Party must always represent the requirements for developing China's advanced productive forces, the orientation of China's advanced culture and the fundamental interests of overwhelming majority of Chinese people". If "Sange Daibiao" is literally translated as "three represents", and it still confuses the audiences. So additional description and explanation are required to make up more information in the process of translation. With descriptive translation strategy, the political vocabulary has extended from its original literal meanings, and provides more background information for those from different cultures.

Distinctiveness is also one of the features of Chinese political words and expressions. Distinctiveness refers to the quality of being unique. There are no English parallel words in the process of Chinese vocabulary translation, and it is hard to conduct literal translation for international communication. For example, "Yiguo Liangzhi" in the Chinese politics literally means "One country, Two systems". This is a constitutional principle formulated for the reunification of China during the early 1980s. It indicates Hongkong and Macau can retain their own political and economic systems while the rest of China uses a different political and economic system. "Sige Xiandaihua" is literally translated as "Four Modernizations". "Four Modernizations" refers to rejuvenating China's economy from four aspects as agriculture, industry, national defense and science and technology. They are goals set in the early 1960s and enacted in the late 1970s. "Sannong Wenti: Nongcun, Nongye, Nongmin" is literally translated as "Three Rural Issues: Agriculture, Countryside and Farmer". This policy refers to three issues relating to rural development in China. All these political words have unique distinctiveness, and there are no any equivalent words in English political discourse. Klaudy (2003) coined a term called communicative equivalence and this can be the best form of equivalence that can help the translator transfer from the source language to the target language within political texts and documents. Communicative equivalence is created to connect Chinese political words and its English explanations due to no literal equivalence in translation.

3. TRANSLATION STRATEGIES OF CHINESE POLITICAL VOCABULARY

According to descriptive translation studies, focus lies in what to translate and how to translate in the Chinese political vocabulary translation. Yan (1981) proposes the triple translation criteria of "Faithfulness, Fluency and Elegance" to achieve an ideal translation. Faithfulness requires that the translation in the target language should be faithful to the original text in the source language. Fluency is the requirement of intelligibility of the target language text, and the translation should fit in with the grammar rules of the target language. Elegance requires translation should be esthetical. *In his Evolution and Ethics*, one part is described as:

> (having) fused and gathered the marvelous principles of the whole text in my mind, lower brush to write the words, and, if the rendering is a good one, it will suffice to cover the meaning. If the principles behind the terms in the source text are very profound and hard to explain, then the context is used to reveal the meaning (p.xi).

In the process of political vocabulary translation, faithfulness is the first criteria to be considered due to lack of equivalence between the source language and the target language. In this process of translation, descriptive translation studies can provide a theoretical framework for language transition, and it is the best way to explain or reveal the meaning of Chinese political vocabulary in communication.

According to the norms of descriptive translation studies, translators are recommended to learn to select appropriate political words in translation. Word selection is one of the biggest challenges in political translation due to complication and distinctiveness of political words. Herbert (2000) emphasizes that there is nothing out there in the real world that would conceptually suit these political expressions, there is no equivalent term or word in the everyday language. Political words must be translated within a certain specific context. Reiss (1995) considers that equivalence in translation depends on the type of text. Words and phrases, texts in one source language can be equivalent in different levels with its target language. For example, "Barong Bachi" is one of the most acceptable social values in China, and it was raised as a set of moral concepts for citizens. No words can be found to have the same meaning in English, in order to promote this value descriptive translation strategy is introduced in this translation due to its distinctiveness. "Barong Bachi" is literally translated as "Eight Honors, Eight Disgraces". But this translation is still complex for the audiences who don't have knowledge of Chinese politics. With descriptive translation strategy, this phrase can be translated as "Eight Dos, Eight Don'ts". This set of moral concepts can be listed as the following: the honor of loving the motherland, the disgrace of endangering the motherland; the honor of serving the people, the disgrace of turning away from the people; the honor of upholding science, the disgrace of ignorance and illiteracy; the honor of industrious labor, the disgrace of indolence; the honor of togetherness and cooperation, the disgrace of profiting at the expense of others; the honor of honesty and keeping one's word, the disgrace of abandoning morality for profit; the honor of discipline and obedience, the disgrace of lawlessness and disorder; the honor of striving arduously, the disgrace of wallowing in luxury". So in the Chinese political vocabulary translation, descriptive translation strategy is one of the best ways to solve this problem.

Translation still needs to keep Chinese distinctiveness in the process of political vocabulary translation from Chinese to English based on descriptive translation studies. In the newly released political documents, a variety of political words are coined to fit in with new situations. Verbs are more used in Chinese to link words to construct a coherent phrase than pronouns, prepositions and conjunctions. Translators must make sure the structure of political words can be easily understood and accepted by the audiences for a target language. The description of political words and phrases is one of the most important strategies to manifest its political intentions. Krisztina (2014) suggests to conduct comparative study of political words between the source

language and the target language to understand how the respective political system work and to place the text correctly in the receptive culture. This can promote better understanding on how political words are constructed between the source language and the target language. Thus it also can help people know more about the mechanism of Chinese political verb selection. For example, "Baochi Chixu De Diqu Fanrong Yu Wending" is one of the most frequently used political words in the media, and it is literally translated as "To maintain the regional long-term prosperity and stability". Verbs are often used in the Chinese political words and phrases to manifest its political purposes. But when this phrase is to be translated into English, audience awareness is of the most important concerns in translation. So this political phrase is usually translated as "Maintenance of regional long-term prosperity and stability" in order to reach its maximum effectiveness. The verb in this phrase is suggested to change into a noun in the political phrase. Chinese political words like "Santong" cannot be literally translated as "Three Direct Links" and "Sanbuzou" as "Three-step Walk". These words have strong Chinese cultural and political distinctiveness. There are no parallel words and phrases in the target language. Translators are suggested to translate these phrases with descriptive translation strategy while keeping Chinese distinctiveness. "Santong" is usually translated as "Direct links of mail, transport and trade", and "Sanbuzou" as "Three-step strategy for modernization".

Based on descriptive translation studies, balance should be well kept in the political vocabulary translation. Chinese political words are required to retain its distinctive features while they are also required to fit in with its target language styles. For example, "Yifa Zhiguo" is often translated into English with "Yide Zhiguo" because these two Chinese political phrases usually are put together to construct a meaningful context. They are translated as "The rule of Law and The rule of Virtue" based on descriptive translation strategy. Two political phrases like "Yige Zhongxin" and "Liangge Jibendian" are often translated "One Central Task (Focusing on Economic Development), Two Basic Points (Sticking to Four Cardinal Principles and Policy of Reforming and Opening up)". Either of phrases does not make sense in the political vocabulary translation, and they have to keep their own distinctiveness as well as English style.

CONCLUSION

Translation is a complicated means of communication. The translation of political texts aims at publicizing policies and guidelines, introducing China to the outside world and also helping the foreign people understand China. Consequently, it is vital to translate the political words appropriately and accurately, especially

those political words with Chinese characteristics. Transition from Chinese to English is not only a change from one language to another language, and it is also a transition of two different cultures and values. Ignoring the norms of descriptive translation could lead to misunderstanding, even mutual distrust.

This paper tends to emphasize the importance of selecting appropriate political words, and translating those words with Chinese distinctiveness based on descriptive translation strategy. This translation strategy can well establish a bridge connecting two different languages and cultures, and solve potential problems posed in the political vocabulary translation.

This research also focuses on a practical political translation strategy from the perspective of descriptive translation studies, and contributes to the effectiveness of Chinese political translation. However, this study is limited to cultural translation in the process of political vocabulary translation. The future study will explore the effectiveness of political vocabulary translation based on descriptive translation studies from cultural perspective.

REFERENCES

Aarosi-Mardirosz, K. (2014). Problems related to the translation of political texts. *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae Philologica*, 6(2), 159-180.

Hart, H. L. (2000). *Meghatározás és elmélet a jogtudományban*. [Definition and Theory in the Science of Law]. In Szabó M., Varga Cs. (Eds.), Jog és nyelv[Law and Language], 98-132.Budapest: PPKE

Hjort, A. M. (1990). Translation and the consequences of scepticism. In S. Bassnett &A. Lefevere (Eds.), *Translation, history and culture* (pp.38-45). London, England: Pinter.

Hjort, A. M. (Ed.). (1992). *Rules and conventions: Literature, philosophy, social theory. Baltimore*, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Holmes, J. S. (2000). *The name and nature of translation studies*. In L. Venuti (Ed.). The Translation Studies Reader. New York: Routledge.

Klaudy, K. (2003). *Languages in translation: Lectures on the theory, teaching and practice of translation*. Budapest: Scholastica.

Levy, J. (2011). *The are of translation*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Reiss, K. (1995). Text type translation and translation assessment. In A. Chesterman (Ed.), *Reading in translation theory* (pp.58-96). Helsinki: FinnLectura.

Toury, G. (1980). *In search of a theory of translation*. Tel Aviv, Israel: Porter Institute.

Toury, G. (1995a). *Descriptive translation studies and beyond*. Amsterdam, Netherlands: John Benjamins.

Toury, G. (1995b). *Descriptive translation studies and beyond*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.

Yan, F. (1981). *On evolution*. Bejing: The Commercial Press.