

## THE UNTRANSLATABILITY IN TRANSLATION PEDAGOGY APPLIED IN SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHING

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*Abstract:*

Translation pedagogy plays an extremely important role in foreign language education but equally should be aware of its limitations and distinguishes from translation methodology in translation field. The purpose of this paper is to point out the unexpected consequence by applying translation method in explaining Chinese characters, words(phrases), sentences, chapters and cultures, in International Chinese Teaching class. And the appropriate attitude towards translation in foreign language teaching.

*Key words:* translation pedagogy; second language; International Chinese Education; untranslatability.

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### 1. Untranslatability in Translation Theory

Untranslatability refers to some items or phrases, or concepts that from original text which are no equivalence to the target language. J.C. Catford (1965) distinguishes two types of untranslatability:

(1) *Linguistic Untranslatability:* occurs when there is no lexical or syntactical substitute in the TL for an SL item.

(2) *Cultural Untranslatability:* is due to the absence in the TL culture of a relevant situational feature for the SL text.

Translation is always the common methodology converting from target language to mother language. In 19<sup>th</sup> century, teachers used the translation-based approach in Second Language Teaching which is called Grammar-translation Method.

It is viewed as the most ancient and traditional method of teaching Ancient Greek and Latin. In grammar-translation classes, students learn grammatical rules and then apply those rules by translating sentences between the target language and the native language. Advanced students may be required to translate whole texts word-for-word. It enables students' reading and translation literature written form and to further students' general intellectual development. Meanwhile, it has been criticized for its ignorance of listening and speaking.

The issue discussed in the paper is about the untranslatability in grammar-translation method in Chinese as second language class, which will be demonstrated from linguistic aspects and cultural aspects.

### 2. Linguistic untranslatability in second language class

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Chinese written system is unique ideo-graphic character lasting 3,000 years, and is still active and living in the modern world. Stable word-stock, flexible plasticity and lavish cultural background achieve Chinese language's specific from other languages.

### 2.1 Words untranslatability

It is so well-know about “道”. It is the philosophy of understanding the world; it is also a way to keep the harmony of the nature and human, and the rules of changing. In Merriam-Webster Dictionary, it explains Tao is “*the unconditional and unknowable source and guiding principle of all reality as conceived by Taoists; the process of nature by which all things change and which to be followed for a life of harmony.*” So, there is no equivalent word from any other language can be explained. If it is not capitalized, it means differently. What is more, Chinese has abundant quantifiers to measure the items which are relatively insufficient in English, like a cat(一只猫), a horse(一匹马), a lion(一头狮子). Another case. “对” and “双” both mean “a pair of, a couple of”. But 一对瓶 possess absolute higher art value and economic value. Besides, interjection words, onomatopoeic words, even some verbs are not explained in English, like “把”, “被”.

### 2.2 Phrases untranslatability

Phrase untranslatability is quite obvious, like CIS. Aixelá defined CSI in his paper: “*Those textually actualized items whose function and connotations in a source text involve a translation problem in their transference to a target text, whenever this problem is a product of the nonexistence of the referred item or of its different intertextual status in the cultural system of the readers of the target text.*”<sup>1</sup> He commented CSIs are those words usually manifestations of a surface nature, outside the structure of the text. In Yali's paper, the author defined the term into Characteristic-items. “*Chinese Characteristic-items refers to the general feature of the Chinese words and expressions that have no equivalents or have different associative meanings in the Anglophone culture due to the differences between the Anglophone and Chinese cultures.*”<sup>2</sup> Like Chinese historical words “秀才xiuca”, “红卫兵Hong guadian”; art words like “太极Taichi”, “麻将Majong”; Chinese names, Chinese architecture, Chinese cuisine and etc. “关系guanxi” is a simple word in elementary level while its translation is not easy as “relationship”. In Oxford Dictionary, it explains “(in China) *the system of social networks and the relationships between people that are helpful and useful in business.*” In Collins Dictionary, it even raises its importance “*in which personal relationships are considered more important than laws and written agreements*”. Besides, “分” and “寸” are length measurement in Chinese, but “分寸” means “harmonious”; “乌龙茶Oolong Tea” shares distinct meaning from “乌龙”.

Furthermore, some Chinese idioms and proverbs are obstacles in translation. “风花雪月” translated into “wind and flower, snow and moon” fails to deliver romantic artistic conception.

### 2.3 Sentences or segment untranslatability

To ancient Chinese, poetry translation is the conundrum to all translators. The lexicon, syntax, rhythm, flat, alliteration, antithesis, illustrations; the pursuit of three beauties: beauty in sound, beauty in form and beauty in meaning, all require accurate comprehension and adequate representations. In modern Chinese, it prefers to use separate sentence in short form to render various levels of semantic. Division is quite popular in Chinese translation, like ‘、’ in Chinese, is comma in English.

<sup>1</sup> Javier Franco Aixelá, “Culture-specific Items in Translation”, p58.

<sup>2</sup> Analysis on Translation of Chinese Characteristic-item in English Newsmagazines, Yin Yali

Multi-clause is a normal phenomenon in English and superimposed by each other by using 'and'. In fact, there is no exact equivalence for 'and' in Chinese. The cohesion in Chinese is not indicated by conjunction words, but on the logical coherence between clauses and context. Take “你怎么了” from elementary Chinese as an example. It is proved from teaching experience, students who are from English-speaking background perform a little exclusively in applying when the translation “what is wrong with you” sounds offensive in their mother language.

### 3. Cultural untranslatability

The cultural untranslatability in this part more about the psychology, cogitation and behaviors. Filial piety is Chinese traditional virtues and recommends the most essential part in Confucian ethics. It is commonly observed in the East Asian cultural sphere which English speaker might not understand the behaviors and sacrifice made by posterity. 'Junzi' in Chinese traditional philosophy describes a morally ideal person, which is kind of blurring in translation. If the students could not appreciate high morals, knowledgeable, lofty and humble, they would not understand Chinese people answer “哪里，哪里” when receiving compliment from others.

### 4. Methodology

Untranslatability is relative while translatability is absolute. So to the second language educators, translation perfection comes after expressive conveying the spirit of the original. To accept the untranslatability, accept the lack of a equivalence, and try to build up an appropriate atmosphere, crossing the gap of culture, eliminate students' fear of target language and deliver excellently in both content and language, it all second language educator should be aware of.

### **References:**

- [1]. Javier Franco Aixelá, “Culture-specific Items in Translation”, p58.
- [2]. *Analysis on Translation of Chinese Characteristic-item in English Newsmagazines*, Yin Yali