

## On Chinese-English Translation of Numbers

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*Abstract: Numbers in different languages can have the same real references, but may have different cultural connotations as well. The translation of numbers is demanding since numbers in Chinese and English have different cultural connotations, so translators need to take cultural meanings into consideration rather than merely seeking semantic equivalences. Based on the theory of domestication and foreignization, four strategies are suggested in this paper, namely, word-for-word translation, word-for-word translation with notes, translation by paraphrasing numeral phrases and translation by omitting numbers. These four strategies can help achieve faithful translation.*

*Keywords:* numbers; cultural connotation; domestication; foreignization.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Numbers in different languages may have different cultural connotations. It is interesting to note that numbers with the same conceptual meaning in English and Chinese can differ entirely in their associative meaning. For example, “二” in Chinese means double and couple. It is a symbol of lucky, reflecting the happiness of the couple. In contrast, in English, “two” usually is an unlucky number, and it once was regarded as “the origin of evil” by Pythagoras. “Two” in most English idioms means tininess and humbleness such as, “two by four” and “two a penny”. On the other hand, different numbers in English and Chinese may have the same references. For example, the phrases “三只手” and “five-fingers” are both used to refer to the pocket-pickers, though Chinese phrase is more figurative and the English one more specific. The translation of numbers is demanding since numbers in Chinese and English have different cultural connotations. This paper is to investigate how to translate the Chinese numbers into English. Based on the theory of domestication and foreignization, four strategies are suggested.

### 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Yan Fu's “three-word principle”, Lu Xun's “rather being faithful in thought than smooth in language”, Fu Lei's “likeness-in-spirit”, and Qian Zhongshu's “realm of transformation” are considered as four principal concepts in Chinese translation theory of the 20th century.

If Lu Xun's concept is thought to represent the idea of literal translation, Fu Lei and Qian Zhongshu seem to approve of free translation in literary translation. To many, Fu Lei's idea of likeness-in-spirit releases the discussion of translation from the constraints imposed by Yan Fu's three-word principles (Xu, 2003, 2: 61). According to Fu Lei, translation should be like painting, and what is aimed at is not affinity in shape but likeness in spirit. He claims that when the text in one language is changed into another language, the “realm of transformation” is to retain the whole style of the original text and avoid foreignness in the target text. In other words, the target text should be faithful to the original in spirit so that they do not read like a translation (Chen, 2000: 418).

“Literal translation” and “free translation” are introduced as the two major translation strategies adopted by Chinese translator. However, it is worth noting that these two concepts primarily approach translation at linguistic level. Therefore, it is necessary to introduce two related yet expanded concepts “domesticating translation” and “foreignizing translation”. Unlike literal translation and free translation, they are translation strategies focusing on the cultural, poetic and political aspects (Wang, 2002: 24-25).

“Domestication” and “foreignization” are the terms coined by Venuti to describe the two different translation strategies. The former refers to the translation strategy in which “a transparent, fluent, ‘invisible’ style is adopted in order to minimize the strangeness of the foreign text for target language readers”, while the latter designates the type of translation in which a target text “deliberately breaks target conventions by retaining something of the foreignness of the original” (Shuttleworth & Cowie, 1997:59).

The roots of the terms can be traced back to the German philosopher Schleiermacher's argument that there are only two different methods of translation, “either the translator leaves the author in peace, as much as possible, and moves the reader towards him; or he leaves the reader in peace, as much as possible, and moves the author towards him” (Venuti, 1995:19-20).

Eugene Nida, the representative of domestication, attaches great importance to the intended function of the target text. He argues that an effective communicative method in one culture might not have the same effect in another culture; even every word of the original is translated into the “equivalent” of the target text, they can never ensure the same function between the two texts. To him, translation is to achieve the “functional equivalence” between the two cultures concerned. Thus domesticated translations are often a result of the deliberate effort to suppress the otherness of the source text so that an equivalent effect is achieved in the target text.

On the other hand, Venuti, as a representative of foreignization, holds the view that although the target reader may lack background possibly possessed by the source reader, the decision to retain the otherness of the text is based on the expected reader's willingness to negotiate the meaning of seemingly obscure parts by drawing on their own experience. They think it is necessary to make the target reader understand the foreignness of the target culture. Moreover, they believe the target reader's intelligence and imagination are capable of comprehending the specific features of the source culture that is transplanted to enrich the target culture.

In my view, both domestication and foreignization can be employed in translation depending on the specific translation purposes and the target readership. If the translator gives priority to a better understanding for the target reader, he/she will use the domesticating approach more than the foreignizing approach. If he/she thinks it is important to make the target reader understand the foreignness of the source culture, he/she will foreignize the text rather than domesticate it. Therefore, it is important for the translator to take into consideration both linguistic and extra-linguistic factors when he/she makes a choice of translation strategy.

### **3. STRATEGIES EMPLOYED IN THE TRANSLATION OF NUMBERS**

Four strategies of translating numbers will be discussed in this section.

#### **3.1 Word-for-word translation**

Sometimes the meanings of words are identical between Chinese and English, and the word is not heavily culturally loaded. Then we can adopt the method of word-for-word translation. This approach is easily handled and makes the translated texts more concise and explicit and faithful to the original texts.

(1) “巴山蜀水凄凉地，

二十三年弃置身。”(刘禹锡《酬天乐扬州处逢席上见赠》)

“I was banished from the court to a bleak lace,

Where I spent three and twenty years in disgrace.” (Qiu, 2008:93)

#### **3.2 Word-for-word translation with notes**

Notes required in word-for-word translation can help people get relevant background information about the original text, which often is the case when the text or numbers is filled with unique Chinese culture. Since the numbers may be strongly alluded, they are hard to understand without proper notes if literally translated.

(1) “三顾频烦天下计，两朝开济老臣心。”(杜甫《蜀相》)

“Thrice the Emperor to him came for the plan to rule;

Two reigns\* the noble statesman served heart and soul.”

\*Zhuge Liang had served Emperor Liu Bei and his son Liu Chan. (Xu Yuanchong, 1988:224) Du Fu's poem includes an ancient story that Liu Bei, the emperor of the State of Shu, invites Zhuge Liang to be his adviser. Zhuge Liang accepts his invitation and helps Liu Bei and his son to govern the state. The long story cannot be expressed clearly in the translated texts considering the length of the lines. With the help of notes, the beauty of form is kept and the target reader understand and accept the two phrases “三顾” and “两朝”. In this way, more Chinese culture has been transmitted into world successfully according to Xu Yuanchong's cultural principle.

(2) “乡间四月闲人少，才了蚕桑又插田。”(翁卷《乡村四月》)

“In the villages of May\* few people are at leisure,

Since seeding transplanting closely follows silkworm raising.” Note: \*The fourth month of the lunar calendar falls around May. (Qiu, 2008:221)

Months in Chinese poetry are not identical with those in the West because in ancient China people adopt lunar calendar rather than Gregorian calendar. Usually, the former proceeds one month earlier than the latter. Therefore, “二月” (the third month of the lunar calendar) is around April and “四月” (the fourth month of the lunar calendar) is around May. The translator adopts notes to explain the phenomenon, which makes the translated texts clearer and more concise.

### 3.3 Translation by paraphrasing numeral phrases

In order to observe the rules of the target language, the method is thus employed to make proper changes on the original numbers.

(1) “千山鸟飞绝，万径人踪灭” (柳宗元《江雪》)

“A hundred mountains and no bird,

A thousand paths without a footprint.” (Xu Yuanchong, 1988:67)

“千”and “万”as a way of exaggeration are favored in Chinese poetry in order to impress the reader and leave room for them to imagine. In the example above, “千” and “万” are used to exaggerate and make the poem to be parallelism. In fact, “万” will be "ten thousand" if it is translated word by word. If so, there is a different word appearing to ruin the parallelism of the poem. Therefore, the translator adopts the method to reduce “ten hundred” and changes it to “a thousand” to keep the parallel form and the beauty of sound. At the same time, the meaning of the poem is kept.

### 3.4 Translation by omitting numbers

This method is aimed at the translation of certain numerals that are hard to translate. By ignoring or decreasing the effect of numerals, it tries to express the same spirit of the source language. At times, over-translation or under-translation is the result of this method

(1) “日落狐狸眠冢上，夜归儿女笑灯前。

人生有酒须当醉，一滴何曾到九泉。” (高翥《清明》)

“In the bleak graveyards after sunset only foxes dwell,

Back at oil lamps at eve children enjoy their time well,

Better get drunk over the wine that your own life gave,

Lest you should never taste a drop offered at your grave.” (Qiu, 2008:155)

As “九” is the extreme limit in the single numerals, “九泉” the deepest place underground and in Chinese language it refers to the place where the dead gather. Most of such culture-loaded words have to be changed into their real allusion and the numerals should be omitted just like the example in the poem above.

From the above cases studies, we can see that both domestication and foreignization can be employed in translation depending on the specific translation purposes and the target readership.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

In the process of translation, the translator should consider the different cultural connotations involved. The specific translation purposes and the target readership are the two crucial factors to be considered when deciding which to apply, domestication or foreignization. Four strategies are suggested above, namely, word-for-word translation, word-for-word translation with notes, translation by paraphrasing numeral phrases and translation by omitting numbers, can help achieve faithful translation or/and introduce the source culture to the target reader.

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