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On Cultural Models and Cross-cultural Translation
——From a Cognitive Perspective

认知角度的文化模型与跨文化翻译研究

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Synopsis

In the background of the twenty-first century, people speaking different languages are more frequently communicating with each other than ever before. Although people understand the literal meanings of words, misunderstandings may often arise because of cultural differences. What can a translator do to promote understanding between cultures? Under such circumstances, translation is not merely a linguistic activity, but essentially a cross-cultural communication. This thesis focuses on how a traditional translator plays the new role of a cultural mediator to bridge the gap between cultures from the cognitive point of view.

With different understandings and various perspectives in minds, sociologists and anthropologists have proposed different versions of definitions. Since the thesis observes the problem from the cognitive perspective, culture is seen as a shared mental model or map of the world belonging to a social group. What's more, culture is influenced by a lot of factors, such as the natural environment, climate, space, people's values and beliefs, etc., and the bulk of which is hidden and out of people's awareness, represented by the Iceberg Theory. Therefore, these factors prevent people from smoothly understanding other culture.

A cultural mediator should first be clear about language users' cognitive mechanism in their own language before he can propose solutions. According to the philosophy of cognitive linguistics, people's conceptualization of the world is based on their experience, through which an intermediate level of conceptual structure is built up between language and the world, with language seen as a part of the conceptual structure. Meanings are elements of the conceptual structure in the heads of language users, and they exist through reference to a conceptualization of the world based on two basic theories:

categorization and prototype theories. Both categories and prototypes are context and culture dependent. Each context is related to other contexts and become network-like cognitive representations called cognitive models. Cognitive models are organized in chunks, or are schematized and stored as long-term memory in the brains of language users. Every schema is composed of a number of slots. When a language reader comes across a category, the corresponding slot in the long-term memory will be stimulated and become alive in his mind. When enough slots of the cognitive model are stimulated, the cognitive model comes to the reader's mind. This is the cognitive process of a cognitive model, which can take place in the top-down or bottom-up direction.

Then this thesis discusses the relationship between language and culture. Since people in different cultures have distinct experiences, they have formed different cognitive models, which are called cultural models. They are also reflected in the language. Therefore, meaning is culture-bound. Since the form of a language will be molded by that culture, is it possible for people speaking different languages to understand each other? Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is picked up, and it is concluded that although language does not determine thought, however, since language is a part of conceptual structure, different languages create obstacles, which constrain people from smoothly communicating with each other. What's more, the source language writer adopts the strategy of cultural default for the purpose of efficient and economical communication, because he shares similar cultural background knowledge with his intended readers. However, what is transparent to source language readers in the form of cultural default is often opaque to target language readers, because they are lack of necessary background cultural knowledge to comprehend the cultural models. This phenomenon essentially explains why difficulties crop up when target language readers read a

translated text. Before concrete translating strategies are introduced, a comparison of the similarities and differences of cultural models between Chinese and English is made. They are categorized into three types: A-A, A-B, A-Zero, which means that some cultural models may overlap completely, some partly, while others are totally distinct.

After a cultural mediator is clear about the cognitive process and the reason why obstacles arise, he can propose the translating strategies of cultural models. Because people have a lot in common in their experience and the acquisition feature of culture, cultural models are translatable. Since neither the domesticating nor the foreignizing method can competently shoulder the duty of cross-cultural translation, the cultural approach is introduced, in which a cultural mediator should try to build up source cultural models on target languages readers' minds. In order to do this, the cultural mediator should make the cultural models explicit by retaining the forms as much as possible and providing needed footnotes as background knowledge to clear away target language readers' understanding difficulties, and as a result, source cultural models are built up in the readers' minds. This will promote understanding and communication between cultures, which will take the readers' time and efforts for a period of time

Key Words: Cultural Models ; Cultural Default ; Cross-cultural Translation

摘 要

在二十一世纪背景下，人们之间的交往比以往更加频繁。虽然人们理解外语的字面意义，但因文化差异经常造成误解。在此情况下，翻译不但是语言活动，而且也是跨文化交流。本论文从认知的角度研究翻译者如何扮演文化中介者的角色促进跨文化交流。

由于不同的理解和研究视角，社会学家和人类学家对文化做了多种定义。本论文从认知的视角研究跨文化交流，所以文化被视为社会群体共有的认知模型，称文化模型。文化受多种因素的影响，而且大部分因素处在“冰山理论”的水面下，阻碍文化交流。

文化中介者首先应了解语言使用者的认知机制。认知语言学认为人的概念化建立在经验的基础上。通过经验在语言和客观世界间建立一个中间层面，即概念结构。意义是概念结构的各个成分。通过范畴化和原型在大脑中建立意义。范畴和原型依语境和文化而定。相关语境构成网状结构组成认知模型。认知模型通过图式化，以长期记忆储存在大脑中，每个图式由一定数目的空位组成。当人看到一个范畴，长期记忆中的相应空位将被激活。当足够的空位被激活时，该认知模型就被激活。这就是认知模型的认知过程，它既可通过自上而下，也可通过自下而上的方式进行。

本论文接着讨论了语言和文化的关系。既然不同文化的人经验各异，他们有不同的文化模型，并体现在语言中。因此，语言意义依文化模型而定，那么，不同文化的人能否互相理解？虽然萨丕尔-沃尔夫的假说具有片面性，但文化差异确实阻碍人们顺利沟通。而且，原语作者采取文化缺省策略以提高沟通效率，这阻碍了译语读者理解译文。这一现象解释了交流障碍的根源。中西文化模型被分为三种类型以利于讨论具体的翻译策

略。

最后讨论的是文化模型的翻译策略。人们经验的共通性以及文化的可习得性决定了文化模型的可译性。归化和异化策略都不能准确传递文化模型。本论文文化中介者应该采用文化翻译法，即在译语读者中建立原语的文化模型，尽量保留文化模型的形式，必要时辅以脚注或解释来扫清理解的障碍。通过一定的时间和努力，就和在译语读者中建立原语文化模型，促进跨文化交流。

关键词：文化模型；文化缺省；跨文化翻译

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Chapter One Introduction

1.1 A Story

Last year, I was the teaching coordinator of a foreign teacher from England. Since one of my colleagues was a crazy English lover, he asked me to take him to visit that young Cambridge graduate so that he could practice oral English on him. That time we talked about females' career in both countries. I said that Chinese universities have almost become diploma mills, with so many graduates poured out of the school gates every year, which puts great pressure on their prospect of finding jobs. Females' job prospect appears much more gloomy, since they have to encounter more limitations in the job market. That foreign teacher nodded and continued to say that their situation was due to the ingrained value system in China, which also hinders them from climbing up the social ladder, since they will sooner or later touch the glass ceiling. He said the situation in the U.K. is quite another story. In his country, women at work are riding a glass escalator rather than facing a glass ceiling. Companies are in favor of women because nowadays employment patterns and work styles have changed and what matters most for employers is flexibility, adaptability, and communication skills, which are inherent in women. I smiled and concluded that they were lucky dogs.

I accidentally noticed that my colleague looked rather confused. We stopped and looked at him. He asked, "What is a glass ceiling? Why do you call them lucky dogs? How awful!" Yes, I forgot to tell you that his English level is just so-so. I literally interpreted "a glass ceiling" into Chinese "玻璃天花板". It was obvious that he still could not follow me. "Why do women have to touch the glass ceiling?" I realized that this expression was foreign to him,

since it was originated from the English world. Then I explained to him that the popular term “ the glass ceiling” refers to the invisible barrier supposed to prevent the advance of women in the workforce. Since glass is transparent, you almost do not notice its existence if you do not attempt to break through it, but if you do, you will encounter the invisible yet strong barrier and thus suffer failure. Language is creative, and the metaphor of “a glass escalator” is an idea derived from the expression. My colleague heaved a sigh of relieve and said, “Maybe Chinese women in the future will break down the glass ceiling.” He was so clever and creative that he had grasped the essence of the metaphor. In the same way, I put the expression “ a lucky dog” across to him.

1.2 The New Role of a Translator- a Cultural Mediator

I was then considering the subject of my thesis. The above-mentioned story triggered me to ponder over the role of a translator, especially in the background of the twenty-first century, when the whole world is shrinking and has almost become a global village. One can fly to the other side of the world within one day, and can have a taste of what is happening in the whole world in a minute, simply by pointing and clicking on the Internet. What’s more, people speaking different languages are more frequently communicating with each other than ever before. Since English is, and in the foreseeable future, will be the most widely spoken language in the world, it is tightly embraced by Chinese people of all ages as well. According to the current financial minister of the U.K., Gordon Brown, there will be more Chinese people who can speak more or less English than English native speakers in the coming twenty years. He said that nowadays about 300 million Chinese can speak English ([http:// news.xinhuanet.com/edu](http://news.xinhuanet.com/edu)). My colleague is one among them. They have a certain level of language proficiency, however, they are not culture-literate. Although they can understand the literal meaning of words, or the language

used in communication may be faultless, misunderstanding may arise because of cultural differences. The same words or expressions may not mean the same thing to different people. Because of cultural differences, a serious question may cause a good laugh; a sincere and kind statement may cause displeasure or anger. Because of cultural differences, jokes by a foreign speaker may be received with blank faces. What's the role of a translator? What can they do to bridge the gap between cultures?

With the globalization of English and the use of computers, the traditional translators will need to change from being seen as inefficient human dictionaries helping people for mutual understanding to being seen as “cultural mediators.” The idea was first put forward by George Steiner, who claimed that “The translator is a bilingual mediating agent between monolingual communication participants in two communities.” (George Steiner, 1975: 45). His statement is focused on linguistic mediation. However, the term cultural-mediator was first introduced in Stephen Bochner's (1981) *The Mediating Person and Cultural Identity* (David Katan, 2004: 12). Being a cultural mediator, a translator does not simply engage in exact translation of words, rather expressions and ideas, he or she is a specialist in negotiating understanding between cultures. In the story, my colleague knows the denotative meaning of “a glass ceiling”, he can even render it into Chinese “玻璃天花板”, but he is still confused since he does not know the connotative meaning of this expression and how it is originated. However, a translator is expected and supposed to not only have excellent language proficiency, but also understand the cultures towards which he is translating. So I should have been aware of the difficulty my colleague was confronting with, and should have explained the connotative meaning of the expression and background information to him. Only by doing this can I convey the term to him. In a word, a translator should tackle the problems by communicating the ideas in terms

that are meaningful to the target readers. R. Taft defines the role of a cultural mediator in Stephen Bochner's volume *The Mediating Person and Cultural Identity* as follows:

A cultural mediator is a person who facilitates communication, understanding, and action between persons who differ with respect to language and culture. The role of the mediator is performed by interpreting the expressions, intentions, perceptions and expectations of each cultural group to the other, that is, by establishing and balancing the communication between them. In order to serve as a link in this sense, the mediator must be able to participate to some extent in both cultures. Thus a mediator must be to some extent bilingual. (R. Taft, 1981: 53)

In a word, the mediator needs not only “two skills in one skull” but “in order to play the role of mediator, an individual has to be flexible in switching his cultural orientation”(ibid.). This idea echoes with Lin Yutang's words, a master in both Chinese and English languages, who described himself as a man with two feet stepping on eastern and western cultures.

1.3 A Comparison Between a Translator and a Cultural Mediator

Traditional translators focus on linguistic level, which is how to smoothly render a text from one language into another. Their translation works, whatever genre it is, is measured by the criterion of fluency, since most publishers, readers, and reviewers are in favor of fluent translation works. Lawrence Venuti gives a review of the situation in his *The Translators Invisibility*, who says that the appearance of the translation is not in fact a translation, but the “original”. The illusion of transparency is an effect of fluent discourse, of the translator's effort to insure easy readability by adhering to the current usage, maintaining continuous syntax, fixing a precise meaning

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