

Equivalence at Word Level: A Study of the Translation of Chinese Neologism

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Abstract: In recent years, Chinese neologisms have become a significant force in the expansion of the English lexicon. The Global Language Monitor (2006) reported that 20% of the 20,000 new words added to English in a single year came from Chinese, highlighting China's influence on the global linguistic landscape. Chinese neologisms such as "Shanzhai," "Tuhao," and "leftover woman" have been featured in international media outlets like The New York Times and The Economist, emphasizing their rising cultural significance. Despite their growing presence, the translation of these terms remains a challenging area in linguistics, as most dictionaries lag behind the rapid pace of linguistic evolution. This paper explores the translation strategies for Chinese neologisms, acknowledging the cultural and sociological implications of these emerging words.

Keywords: Chinese neologisms; Translation; Linguistic evolution; Cultural significance; Language development; Buzzwords

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1. Introduction

In 2006, the California-based Global Language Monitor (GLM) reported that approximately 20,000 new words were added to the English language within a single year, with 20% of them originating from Chinese (Global Language Monitor, 2006). Since 1994, Chinese has become the largest contributor to the expansion of English vocabulary (Chinglish, 2008). While some of these Chinese-influenced words are still seen as novelties in English-speaking countries, the translation of emerging Chinese terms has become a key driver in the development of global language.

The growth of Chinese neologisms has been remarkable in recent years. The third edition of the Chinese-English dictionary (Wu, 2010) published in 2010 included 15,000 new entries, featuring terms like "宅男宅女" (otaku), "房奴" (mortgage slaves), "婚奴" (marriage slaves), and "山寨版" (knock-off version). These neologisms have even reached international audiences, with terms such as "Shanzhai culture" (山寨文化), "Tuhao" (土豪), and "leftover woman" (剩女) being featured in prominent publications like The New York Times and The Economist. The BBC also dedicated a special channel to explain the term "Tuhao" and its evolution in contemporary Chinese society (BBC Trending, 2013). According to a survey conducted by the Chinese Ministry of Education, 93.3% of Chinese internet users believe that buzzwords, particularly those circulating on the internet, are often more effective in daily communication than traditional vocabulary (Language Situation in China, 2009).

The topic of neologisms is not new to linguistics. In 1984, renowned Chinese linguist Shuxiang Lv recognized

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the importance of studying newly-emerging words. In his work *Cihai Xinbian*, he noted that neologisms have often been underappreciated due to long-standing prejudices against informal sources, such as everyday language or newspapers (Lv, 1984).

Despite the growing interest in Chinese neologisms, their translation remains a significant challenge. Most Chinese-English dictionaries have been slow to incorporate these new words, often failing to keep pace with the rapid evolution of language (Wu, 1998). The translation of these neologisms poses considerable difficulties for linguists and translators, with scholars like Newmark (1988) and Biers and Bassnett (1995) highlighting the lack of developed strategies in this area, leaving ample room for further research.

2. Definition and Classification of Neologism

This chapter aims to introduce the definition and categorization of neologisms. Within this context, the methodology for classifying neologisms primarily draws upon the theoretical framework espoused by Newmark(1988) ,who basically categorizes neologisms into eleven types and provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the complexities of neologism and its translation.

(1) Definition of neologism

The word “néologisme” in French was tentatively introduced to English in 1770s, which is evolved from ancient Greek, where “néo-” stands for “new” and “lógos” denotes “speech” or “utterance” (Younge, 1861). According to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* (Hornby, 2000), neologism refers to a new word, new expression or an old word with new meaning. Likewise, in *The Textbook of Translation*, Newmark (1988) divides the neologism into two types in a broader sense: one is newly emerging words, and another is the existent lexical units with a new sense. Additionally, from a non-linguistic perspective, Simpson (2007) views the neologisms as the indicator for the changes in their community, from which they can present a meaningful aspect in 21st life. What he firmly believes is that the new words are not only a playful extension of a particular vocabulary, but more importantly, they have a deeper connection with the transition of a society.

(2) Classification of neologism

Newmark (1988) specifically categorizes neologisms into eleven types: Old words with new senses, new coinages, derived words, abbreviations, collocations, eponyms, phrasal words, transferred words, acronyms and pseudo-neologisms, internationalism. A brief description and explanation below for each type of the neologism is based on the framework contributed by Newmark (1988):

1) Old words with new senses: usually refers to the non-technical words in most of the cases. The new sense can be given by the development or transformation in the community. For example, footprint, refers to the mark left by a foot or shoe on the ground. But now it often used to denote the impact left by human activities to this planet (Santhi, 2011). Normally, this type of neologism is translated either by an existing word in TL or by a concise descriptive or functional term, depending on whether the notion already exists in the target language.

2) New coinages: can be produced by literary writers or goods producers, usually do not share the same life circle (some may end up in a dictionary but some may get vanished or culturally outdated). Lin (2013) broadens Newmark's definition of newly coined words beyond the literary or business level. He perceives the new coinages as anything with respect to the new inventions, technologies, idea or perceptions, which are coined by plural changes in society, politics, economy or technology. In addition, Sayadi(2011) suggests that new coinages is not equals to a brand new word; she points out that a new word is either derived from various morphemes or has more or less relation to the old words in terms of phonology and synesthetic images.

3) Derived words: produced by the addition of affixes. For example, “teleconference” is derived from conference with “tele” as its prefix. Most of the English neologisms are derived from ancient Greek and Latin morphemes (Newmark, 1988). The translation of derived word usually entails a process of consultation with a standardized glossary to determine whether there is an existed translation version with accreditation.

4) Collocations: often refers to the nouns compound or adjective plus noun. The neologisms in collocations are particularly common in the social sciences and in computer language. For example, lead time, money laundry, netbook, e-book, etc. As for the newly computer language in collocation, transliteration or transference is not suitable except for the professional readership. More importantly, translating collocations in the field of computer language has less flexibility than in social science.

5) Eponyms: mainly come from a concrete or abstract proper name, usually denotes either the inventors' name or their ideas and qualities, which is highly contingent on the popularity or acceptability. For example, “Fosbury flop” is an athletic technique for high-jumping, which was invented by Dick Fosbury, an American athlete, who won the gold medal in the 1968 Olympics and brought this technique to the world's attention. Fosbury flop in this case can be classified as eponym as it titled by the inventor's name.

6) Phrasal words: especially refers to those English words which converting from verbs to nouns, such as built-in, check-out, word-out, trade-off, etc.

7) Transferred words: or to be called as ‘loan words’, rarely depend on the context and are more likely produced by the media. For example, Kung Fu is a case in point for the imported words from China exemplified by Newmark.

8) Acronyms: frequently created for brevity or euphony, usually coined in the Latin language family.

9) Pseudo-neologism: defined as a generic word that stands in for a specific word. Abbreviation is a common case of pseudo-neologisms. For example, the abbreviation for “no-mobile-phone phobia” - “nomophobia”, referring to the anxiety about being out of mobile phone contact; “afaik” is the abbreviation for “as far as I know”, mostly used in e-mail or in texting, etc.

10) Internationalism: The international words which are recognized and accepted in and between many countries.

From semantic perspective, Guerra (2016) develops another categorization for neologism from 12 modern dictionaries of neologisms in six different languages: Spanish, English, French, Galician, Italian and Catalan. In his investigation, Guerra (2016) reveals seven important thematic domains that are representative in all the dictionary entries, including technology, business, health, lifestyle, people& society, music and politics.

- ① Science and technology: megaflop, apilamiento, gammacámara
- ② Health and medicine: campylobacter, qinghaosu
- ③ People and society: Baker day, toyboy, hippy
- ④ Business world: black economy, glocal, libretón
- ⑤ Lifestyle, leisure and sport: board sailing, faction, road movie
- ⑥ Music: backward masking

(3) Neologism and translation

Followed by the growing intercommunication among different languages in the context of globalization and exponential increase in the internet users, Chinese has remarkably contributed to the language development and enrichment. Words such as guanxi(关系), Fengshui(风水), Dimsum (点心), Kowtow (磕头), Hutong (胡同), Hukou (户口), Goji berry (枸杞), Wuxia (武侠) have already entered in the English dictionary through

transliteration for a long time (Yu,2010).

Previous studies from Xu&Tian (2016) and Yu (2010) indicate that neologism plays a vital role in demonstrating the development in China from social changes to cultural awareness, and also, transliteration is being increasingly employed in translating Chinese neologism to English. Yu (2010) discusses the neologism translation from an intercultural communication aspect. He views that the neologism translation can roughly find an equivalence on account that words are often culturally and socially bound.

In terms of translation method, Xu&Tian(2016), suggests that transference or transliteration is frequently adopted when translating the neologisms to preserve a Chinese flavor. On the other hand, Yu (2010) believes that the transliteration alone can hardly reach equivalence, but transliteration plus explanation will be a more sensible approach to reach the equivalence than other approaches.

3. Equivalence and Equivalence at Word Level

This chapter is dedicated to an in-depth examination of the preeminent theories within the realm of translation studies, with a particular focus on the Equivalence Theory. Discussion based on this balanced theoretical framework attempts to address the issue of lexical equivalence in neologisms from Chinese to English.

(1) Equivalence

Equivalence is a central concern in translation studies, which can be seen as a yardstick used to measure the relationship of sameness or similarity between a translation and its original text, and it perhaps is the most divisive topic in any field of translation theories (Palumbo, 2009). In the light of Halverson's viewpoint, different emphasis given to a discussion of equivalence can be considered as one of the lines of demarcation between two general translational modes (1997). It remains to be discussed from three aspects if two texts are assumed to reach equivalence: (1) at what level equivalence is achieved; (2) how similarity is defined and to what degree it attains; (3) with respect to what specific qualities two texts can be said to be similar (Palumbo, 2009).

Nida (1969) straightly distinguishes translational equivalence from mathematic equivalence: equivalence at mathematical level refers to $A = A$, while translational equivalence essentially is seeking for the same function between two texts. Additionally, in some cases he mentioned where sensible alteration can be rendered in the translation process to achieve a higher level of equivalence. In comparison, Pym (2010) turns back to economics to review the concept of equivalence. He disagrees with Nida's idea about the productive function for target text while perceiving that equivalence depends only on what is offered in the exchange situation instead, and it only can be achieved within a specific locus and in a transitory manner. For Pym, the economic definition of equivalence, based on the primacy of exchanging value, on the other hand, enables us to concentrate on the value as something manifested through the translation in contact with different cultures.

Both of the two perspectives given by Nida and Pym are insightful in seeking for the essence of equivalence. Nida uses equivalence to define the translation, whilst Pym uses translation to define equivalence. Although starting from reversed positions, yet they all contribute to finding an applicable criterion based on the notion that equivalence is possible to achieve or texts are basically translatable across different languages.

(2) Real equivalence and equivalence effect

Nida (1964) consistently states that the message received by the target reader is strategically significant, and the reception involves both the levels of comprehension and appreciation. From his point of view, real equivalence refers to the accommodation of both form and content. There is no absolute but a relative equivalence in a translation, which echoes with the statement from House (2009), who maintains that there

is no essentially identical replacement or function in any translation, and the real equivalence can only be achieved within a particular range. The maximum and minimal level of equivalence come up with Nida (1964) is supposed to describe how well the reader or receptor is able to comprehend the original text. In order to achieve the real equivalence, Nida lists five conditions for the sensible adjustment to the original texts in a translation:

- 1) when a literal translation would cause serious misunderstanding;
- 2) when a literal translation makes no sense of the content that the author intends to make sense;
- 3) when a literal translation would be extremely difficult to understand;
- 4) when the translation setting is profoundly different from the original setting;
- 5) when a translation is made to accompany nonlinguistic codes;

In the above situations, a paraphrase or explanation is necessary to clarify the meaning to achieve equivalence. Overall, the greater the linguistic distinctions between the ST and TT, the more adjustments need to be manipulated (Nida, 1964).

The essence of equivalent effect in translation refers to the effect produced by a translation text to the readers should be as close as possible to the effect produced by the original work on its receptors (Nida, 1964).

Due to the fact that all translation involves the linguistic as well as the cultural adaptation, equivalent effect can be applied to any type of translation (Jin, 1989). Newmark (1988) sees the equivalent effect as a desirable outcome and essentially significant yardstick for any type of translation.

(3) Equivalence at word level

Culler (1976) puts a note on the equivalence issue at word level in translation. He admits that the word translation between two languages is not as simple as transferring a terminology since the same word may infer different cultural connotations and manifestations, leading to a profoundly challenging problem in any types of translation.

In a similar vein, Mona Baker (2011) believes that there is no one-to-one relationship between two words and elements of meaning across different languages. She takes a Japanese word -“Yasukattara” as an instance, which is converted to a sentence -“if it is cheap” in English and three verbs- “parsa a maquina” in French. Likewise, several elements of meaning can be preserved within one word, such as “disbelieve” refers to a combination of two kinds of meaning -“dis” and “believe”. In other words, two senses are involved in order to express the same notion even when we translate a single word. In this respect, Baker suggests that the understanding of both the semantic and lexical fields are essential in dealing with the non-equivalent word of a translation.

Newmark (1988) also mentions about the non-equivalent word of a translation. But he clearly states that non-equivalent cannot be equated with the notion of “untranslatable” since most of the words can be decoded by componential analysis, which is breaking the original information down to several meanings.

This research will concentrate on the equivalence at word level, and apply the equivalence theory to the practical neologism translation.

4. Literal Translation and Free Translation

The two divergent translation methods remain to be a disputed dichotomy for over a century and will continue to dominate the debate one way or another (Palumbo, 2009). Free translation, also called “intralingual translation” (Newmark 1988, pp 45), usually refers to translation in a sense-for-sense manner, and it also can be

taken as a paraphrase that may produce a much longer TT than the original text. As pointed out by Robinson (1998), free translation is considered to be opposed to, in a given period, what faithful translation is and it is often regarded as a method that will emphasize the meaning transfer irrespective of the source text's structure. In contrast, literal translation is normally associated with the rendition that remains close to the form of the original.

As a result of seeking for word-for-word correspondent, literal translation often comes along with some unnaturalness embarrassment (Palumbo, 2009). For example, the literal translation of Chinese neologism-“裸婚” is naked marriage, but in fact, 裸婚 bears no relation to “being naked”, instead, the idea it contains is getting married without any additional requirements (Will you choose a ‘naked’ marriage? (2014).

Newmark (1988) relates the two opposite methods with the unit of translation. Specially speaking, the shorter the unit, the more literal the translation. Conversely, the longer the unit, the freer the result. Newmark (1988) delivers that the literal translation is the foundation for both communicative and semantic translation and only the “bad translator” (Newmark, 1988, P76) would spare no effort to deviate from translating in a word-for-word manner. In addition, literal translation should always be preferred where viable in order to secure the equivalent effect.

Although Newmark relates free translation to a “prolix and pretentious” version (1988, p41), yet in the study of neologism translation, Yu (2010) unfolded that literal translation can only cover the surface meaning of a word and sometimes may lead to the confusion while free translation, especially the meaning-based translation is more capable of bringing out different layers of meaning within a new word. For example, if literally translated 灰色收入 into “grey income”, that would be misleading and arbitrary. In comparison, the version rendered by meaning-based free translation, “income from moonlighting”, can be more sensible and acceptable than the former version. In a similar vein, according to Yu (2010), the free translation version –“a stable lifetime job regardless of performance” conveys more information than literally translating 铁饭碗 into “iron rice bowl” (Yu, 2010).

5. Domestication and Foreignization

Domestication and foreignization were originally introduced into modern Translation Studies by Lawrence Venuti in 1990s, who believes that the traditional practice centered on producing a fluent translation by way of domestication not only belittles the translator's role in the cultural communication but also deceives the target reader by rendering the unreal but idiomatic texts. To find a way out, Foreignization is an unbiased alternative he provides to move away from the ethnocentrism and to make the translational effort visible or recognizable. For example, according to Yu (2010), “iron rice bowl” is a foreignizing solution to translate 铁饭碗 in Chinese while –“a stable lifetime job regardless of performance” adopts a strategy of domestication.

For Venuti (1995), the purpose for domestication is to produce a transparent and fluent style in the target language (Palumbo, 2009), which is regarded to the readjustment from the aspect of both linguistic and stylistic transfer chosen for foreign texts. This in turn influences the selection of texts to be translated since the employment of domesticating approach is largely contingent on both the content and type of the texts.

Foreignization, on the other hand, entails a conspicuous form in rendition, or in other words, sometimes would tend to be irreconcilable with the domesticate texts or abandon the fluency that would blur the distinction between the ST and TT. Venuti (1991) sees fluency as an ideal but suppressive strategy in diluting the otherness from the ST. Comparatively, foreignization can be treated and valued as a form of resistant approach against the prevailing ethnocentric modes in translation studies. Overall, these two concepts are considered as contingent on the specific historical and cultural setting in which a translation has been rendered (Venuti, 1995).

Venuti is a radical advocator for foreignization, who openly claims that the purpose for foreignization is to develop a genre of translation theory and mode to resist the dominance of the target language. He opposes the notion that the target readers should accept the behavioral mode in the source language for processing the source message, while Nida seems to stand at the contrary pole with respect to his equivalence theory (Shureteh, 2015), who in favor of putting the target reader into the first place and considers that the behavioral mode in the source language should be acclimated into the target readers' cultural field to make the rendition justifiably natural (Nida & Taber, 1993).

However, Venuti's statement and his opt for foreignization is solely in accordance with his investigation on literary translation (Pym, 2010). Based on Venuti's theoretical framework, Ulrych (2000) dislodges domestication and foreignization from the literary works and applies them to the film translation. He implies that the balance between authenticity and approachability is possible to attain at the same time. And in searching for such balance becomes an attested method especially in non-literary translation. In other words, domestication and foreignization can somehow not stay as polarity in some cases.

In Yu's study, he suggests that domestication can be hard to attain in translating neologisms because of the different cultural connotation or even non-existed notion in the target culture, which may easily lead to a false equivalence. Whilst the foreignization plus footnote can avoid this problem. Take 城管, a job title as an example, whose responsibility is cleaning up the illegal vendors on the street, actually has no correspondent position in other countries. In such a case, the SL simply has no equivalent in a translation, and therefore a domesticated solution may seem far-fetched and misleading. Whether the translator prefers domestication or foreignization with respect to neologism translation from Chinese to English provides a research question for further studies.

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