

Original Paper

A Study on the Translation of Four-Character Structure Based on Communicative Translation Theory: Taking the Art of Silk Pattern as an Example

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Abstract

There are many four-character structures in Chinese, which are widely used. Its translation should follow specific rules and also contain many techniques. Taking The Art of Silk Pattern as an example, this article is based on the communicative translation theory, categorizing the four-character structures and exploring the translation strategies to achieve the translation goals. The author hopes to provide a reference for the subsequent translation of the four-character structure.

Keywords

Four-character Structure, Silk, Communicative Translation Theory

Silk is one of the landmarks of Chinese civilization and the material carrier of China's agricultural civilization. Promoting Chinese silk culture can attract attention from domestic and international sources to Chinese clothing culture, strengthen its protection, inheritance, and development, and enhance China's cultural soft power. Therefore, the English translation activities of silk-themed texts are significant for the exchange and dissemination of Chinese culture and the inheritance and development of clothing culture. The four-character structure is a significant feature of the Chinese language, characterized by symmetrical design, concise form and rich cultural information about China. *The Art of Silk Pattern* records the origin and characteristics of Chinese silk patterns and the background and typical patterns from the pre-Qin to the Republic of China period. It has strong professionalism, accuracy, and logicity. The four-character structure in this book not only demonstrates the charm of the Chinese language and culture but also reflects China's profound cultural heritage. This article takes the four-character structure as the research object to explore its English translation strategies and methods under different correspondences.

1. The Characteristics of the Four-Character Structure

Chinese people have been fond of using the four-character structure from ancient times. The four-character structure has been a long-standing expression method, from the Book of Songs to classical books of various dynasties. The four-character structure is a unique language phenomenon in Chinese, consisting of four characters and a fixed syllable language unit. On the one hand, it includes four-character idioms with fixed structure, coordinated rhyme, and conventional meanings. On the other hand, it also includes four-character phrases that are flexibly collocated and highly condensed based on a specific context. As a treasure in the Chinese nation's vast and profound language and culture, the four-character structure can be active in modern language, with its own characteristics and advantages.

1.1 Neat Structure

As is well known, Chinese characters, ancient architecture, calligraphy, and painting, which represent Chinese culture, all reflect their symmetry. Chinese people value balance in their aesthetic perception, their mindsets emphasize overall unity, and their writing emphasizes the beauty of words. Therefore, the well-structured four-character structure commonly appears in songs, poetry and prose. The article is unified in form, with a beautiful rhythm and extraordinary charm. In terms of form, the four-character structure is composed of four characters with stable or parallel structural relationships, highlighting the balance among words.

1.2 Harmonious Rhythm

Chinese attaches great importance to the sound and rhyme of language, using tone, timbre, and melody to increase the rhythm and musical sense of the language. When read, it is rhythmic, catchy, and easy to resonate with readers. As a treasure of the Chinese nation, the four-character structure is harmonious in tone, sonorous and pleasant to the ear. The four-character structure's sound, rhyme, and tone are symmetrical and harmonious, with solid musicality.

1.3 Clear Meaning

Chinese people like to use concise language and often summarize words. The four-character structure highly summarizes a particular philosophy, allusion, anecdote, myth or fable story with four characters, making it concise and comprehensive. Communication between people is achieved through the medium of language. Communication aims to make one's ideas understood and agreed upon by others. Language must be appropriate and acceptable to the other party to achieve this goal. According to communicative translation theory, the expression should be clear and centered around the information the other party needs. What is more, the amount of information should be manageable.

2. Overview of Communicative Translation Theory

Communicative translation theory was first introduced by Peter Newmark in 1981 in his book *Approaches to Translation*. He introduced both the concepts of "communicative translation" and "semantic translation" together. At that time, there was a lot of debate in translation circles about free

translation and literal translation. But both sides of the debate were too idealistic about their positions because they neglected to consider the purpose of translation, the characteristics of readers, and the type of text. Newmark offers his own view on the debate over whether translators should be faithful to the original text or the translation, arguing that such a debate has always been a theme in translation practice and that such a debate can be reconciled with semantic translation and communicative translation. Newmark defined that “Communicative translation attempts to produce on its readers an effect as close as possible to that obtained on the readers of the original” (Newmark, 2001). He also said that “Theoretically, communicative translation allows the translator no more freedom than semantic translation. In fact, it does, since the translator is serving a putative large and not well-denned readership, whilst in semantic translation, he is following a single well-defined authority, i.e., the author of the SL text” (Newmark, 2001)

Communicative translation focuses on the target language readers and emphasizes the transmission of information in order to achieve a fluent translation. This is reflected in the following three aspects.

First of all, based on the readers of the target language, “communicative translation requires ‘tailor-made’ for a certain type of reader to achieve a specific function” (Newmark, 2001). “Communicative translation serves the purpose and readers, and its translation focuses on the content of the original text, which is reflected in the online process and results of the translation, and is more inclined to the culture of the target language, and its translation focuses on fluency, conciseness, clarity, directness and conventionality” (Munday, 2007). This shows that communicative translation pays more attention to the degree of understanding and response of the target and the reader, and emphasizes the effect of the original message transmission.

Secondly, from the translator’s perspective, the translator needs to fully consider the receptiveness as well as the comprehension of the target language readers. “In the theory of communicative translation, the translator has more freedom to interpret the original text, adjust the style, eliminate ambiguities, and even correct the errors of the author of the original text. At the same time, the translator can regulate the form of translation, improve the logic of translation, and realize the communicative function of translation” (Newmark, 2001)

Finally, in terms of the expressive effect of the translation, “communicative translation, on the other hand, pays more attention to the expressive effect” (Yang, 1998). “In communicative translation, the translator can get rid of the shackles of the original language structure and give full play to the advantages of the translated language, which has the right to adjust the logical relations of the original text, make the ambiguous concepts clear, delete the rereading and redundancy, and standardize the unique language” (Lin, 1987). Therefore, when using communicative translation theory, the translator needs to pay more attention to the presentation and expression effects of the translated text.

3. Case Analysis

In translation practice, if these four-character structures can be translated appropriately, it not only increases the fluency of the translation but also leaves a more profound impression on readers.

3.1 Free Translation

Free translation refers to the translation method of retaining the content of the source language rather than the original form. Not many language expressions are completely equivalent between Chinese and English, and some commonly used metaphorical images in Chinese are not commonly used in English. In many cases, the ethnic and cultural characteristics of Chinese idioms are difficult to reproduce in the translated language through literal translation. Therefore, the free translation is also the most commonly used translation method for the four-character structure.

ST1: 刺绣艺术所表现的题材为民间熟悉的传统纹样, 每个纹样都有一定的称呼, 反映人丁兴旺、生产发展的有“瓜迭绵绵”、“五谷丰登”等。

TT1: The embroidery art usually represents traditional subjects with familiar pattern designs, each with a certain title. For example, there are designs to symbolize family population prosperity or good harvest, such as “Fruitful Vine Implicating a Large Family Line” and “Abundant Crops Showing Prosperity”.

It refers to a good harvest in that year. Although five is a numeral, it cannot be translated directly. The five cereals can be generally called crops. Abundant crops refer to the scene of a bountiful harvest, where the grain harvest is good, so wealth also follows closely. Communicative translation theory requires translators to accurately convey the meaning of the original text during translation. Prosperity can not only describe the scene of harvest, but also reflect the joy of farmers' hard work and accumulated income.

3.2 Addition

By adding annotations, faithfully express the cultural connotations of the four-character structure. The four-character structure has a long history, and if literal translation is adopted, these expressions are complicated for Western readers to understand because they need corresponding cultural background knowledge. If the free translation is adopted, its cultural connotations cannot be faithfully expressed. Therefore, the expression of such a four-character structure can be processed by adding annotations so that Western readers can better understand Chinese culture and corresponding background knowledge.

ST2: 贵族多着深衣长袍。

TT2: The nobles were mostly dressed in “shenyi” (clothing that covers the whole body) and robes.

“Shenyi” (clothing that covers the whole body) and robes is a four-character structure with a parallel structure, consisting of two phrases: “shenyi” (clothing that covers the whole body) and robes. Translators need to understand the ancient silk clothing culture. “Shenyi” (clothing that covers the whole body) belongs to Han clothing. They use the clothing to wrap the body, cut it separately, and sew it up and down. Its characteristic is to keep the body hidden and make people look elegant. Robes were a type of clothing commonly worn by ancient people. The translation adopts the method of transliteration and annotation. If transliterated directly, it may make foreign readers feel

incomprehensible. Therefore, annotations are added when translating, and readers can easily understand the meaning based on the illustrations they see in the book, thereby further understanding Chinese silk culture.

3.3 Omission

Significant differences exist in the characteristics and expressions of words between Chinese and English. Chinese is euphemistic and implicit, while English is concise, direct, and easy to understand. In addition, many of the four-character structures in Chinese have repetitive meanings, meaning that the first two characters have the same or similar meanings to the last two. Therefore, in translation practice, translators adopt a simplified approach to avoid redundancy as much as possible.

ST3: 从纹样题材看, 花卉类植物纹样所占的比重有增无减, 形式内容丰富。

TT3: In terms of the subjects, the proportion of flower and plant patterns has increased, with more diversified designs in form and content.

Based on communicative translation theory, the translation should be fluent and aligned with the reader's expression habits. Translators can avoid deliberately pursuing the formal similarity between the translation and the original text. This phrase refers to "only increase without decrease," the translator only translates it as "increase." No repetitive use of words, breaking free from the constraints of the original four-character structure, reducing the complexity of vocabulary, and achieving the communicative effect of translation.

4. Conclusion

English and Chinese have different forms of expression, with English emphasizing explicit correspondence, expressing meaning through form, and emphasizing hypotaxis; Chinese emphasizes parataxis and has strong implicit coherence, mainly expressing corresponding semantic information and grammatical functions through context and internal language relationships. Through the analysis of the above four-character structures, the English translation of four-character structures should not be limited to one translation method. However, it should adopt more diverse methods to translate more in line with English language habits. In English-Chinese translation, fully utilizing the language advantages of Chinese and accurately using the four-character structure can make the translation both vivid and expressive. At the same time, it is essential to avoid mechanically copying and pretending, as this not only loses the original style but also dramatically weakens the color of the translation.

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