By Kaimin Shi / Honggang Zhang

Contrasting analysis of German and Chinese idioms and translation strategies from the perspective of Skopos theory

1.   Introduction

Every idiom has a profound, historical origin as well as a societal background. Therefore, however, it is often difficult to correctly understand idioms in a foreign language and, furthermore, to aptly translate them into the target language.

Which translation strategies and methods are most appropriate for the translation of Chinese and German idioms?

To answer this question, we conduct a contrasting analysis of German and Chinese idioms.[1] The aim of the analysis is, on the one hand, to identify levels and types of equivalence and, on the other, to discuss and recommend translation strategies and methods for the translation of idioms from the perspective of Skopos theory.

2.   A comparison of Chinese and German idioms

2.1   Comparison of typical features

Burger (2015) highlights the three fundamental features of phrasemes, i.e. polylexicality, stability and idiomaticity. Idiomaticity is the most important differentiating feature for idioms.

Chinese idioms generally exhibit the following characteristics: 1) polynominality, 2) stability, 3) integrity of meaning and 4) generalisation and compression. Further notable and potential characteristics of Chinese idioms include: idiomaticity and cultural specificity.

In comparison to German idioms, however, *idiomaticity* is not a necessary criterion for Chinese idioms.

2.2   Comparison of types of equivalence

The following types and levels of equivalence can be identified on the basis of a contrastive comparison:

1) Full equivalence
Example: Öl ins Feuer gießen – 火上浇油 [huǒ shàng jiāo yóu]

2) Virtual full equivalence
Example: eine Stecknadel im *Heuhaufen* suchen – 大海捞针 [dà hǎi lāo zhēn] (eine Nadel *im Meer* suchen)

3) Partial equivalence
Example: sich Asche aufs Haupt streuen – 负荆请罪 [fù jīng qǐng zuì]

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[1]   The authors compared, classified and analyzed more than 8,000 German idioms from the dictionary "Moderne deutsche Idiomatik" (Friedrich 1997) and more than 10,000 Chinese idioms from the idiomatic dictionary 《中国成语大辞典》(Das Universallexikon für die chinesische Idiomatik) (王涛等 1987).

4) Seeming equivalence

Example: das Blut kocht jm. in den Adern

Incorrect translation: 热血沸腾 [rè xuè fèi téng] (von großer Begeisterung erfüllt)
Correct translation: 怒火中烧 [nù huǒ zhōng shāo]

5) Zero equivalence

Examples: (1) Chinese: 卧薪尝胆 [wò xīn cháng dǎn] (2) German: Farbe bekennen

3. Principles of translation and translation strategies

3.1 Principles of translation and theoretical foundations

3.1.1 Principles of translation

Ideally, the key principle for the translation of idioms is to aspire to full accordance in all areas of the source text and, should this not be possible, to then attempt to produce a translation that is as close as possible to the function and effect of the source text. In this respect, we also believe that the translation of idioms should be "as faithful as possible, as free as necessary".

3.1.2 Background in translation theory

A. Equivalence theory according to Koller (2011)

Ideally, all levels of equivalence should be achieved during translation. However, due to well-known reasons, this is often difficult or even impossible.

B. Skopos theory according to Reiß/Vermeer (1991)

Skopos theory differs greatly from the call for equivalence as postulated by Koller. Reiß and Vermeer consider equivalence a special type of adequacy in the sense of functional consistency between the SL text and the TL text. This theory is based on the effect of the source text on the recipient.

As it is often impossible to achieve full equivalence in the translation of the majority of idioms, the translation strategy should be determined on the basis of Skopos theory.

3.2 Translation strategies and methods

Translation strategies primarily pertain to cultural orientation and reflect the translator's cultural perspective or values.

In Skopos theory, the Skopos rule is considered the most important rule. Every translation has a specific purpose and the purpose therefore defines the translation strategy.

In our opinion, different strategies should be chosen depending on the purpose of the translation and the degrees of accordance and disparity. The most important assessment criterion is whether or not the optimum effect has been achieved for the recipients.

3.2.1 Translating without context

Translators who translate idioms without context, e.g. for a dictionary, have much more freedom and far fewer restrictions than if they were translating idioms in a text. In this case, we recommend the following translation strategies and methods.

3.2.1.1 Mutual borrowing

This type of borrowing applies for fully equivalent idioms.

Example: Öl ins Feuer gießen – 火上浇油 [huǒ shàng jiāo yóu]

3.2.1.2 Alienation and naturalisation

We recommend the following methods for alienation and naturalisation:

A. Methods: Literal translation and borrowing

First, idioms are translated literally (alienation) and then by borrowing the equivalent from the TL (naturalisation). The borrowing should be related to the naturalisation. This method can be applied for the translation of virtually fully equivalent and partially equivalent idioms.

a) Virtually fully equivalent idioms

Example: 割席断交 [gē xí duàn jiāo] a) LT: ending a relationship by cutting up a mat b) Borrowing: mit jm. das Tischtuch zerschneiden;

b) Partially equivalent idioms

Example: 如胶似漆 [rú jiāo sì qī] a) LT: as inseparable as glue and varnish b) Borrowing: wie Pech und Schwefel zusammenhalten;

B. Method: The alienating translation (with naturalisation)

This method applies to idioms that are neither culturally specific nor have an equivalent in the target language. These types of idioms are translated by their literal meaning. The literal translation also enables the reader to understand the phraseological meaning.

Example: 百战百胜 [bǎi zhàn bǎi shèng] a) LT: hundred battles, hundred victories b) German translation: unbesiegbar;

C. Method: The alienating translation with explanation and naturalising translation

This method applies to idioms that are largely influenced by culture and have a specific genesis. In dictionaries, it is possible to first translate them literally or by means of alienation, then to briefly describe their genesis and, finally, to translate them accurately.

3.2.2 Translating with context

Translators who translate idioms with context must consider the specific context, syntax, coherence and stylistic suitability of the respective text passage etc.

Based on our translation principles, we recommend the following strategies and approaches:

Strategies: mutual borrowing, naturalisation, alienation

Methods: borrowing, accurate translation, literal translation

3.2.2.1 Mutual borrowing

Method: Borrowing

Borrowing can be applied to fully equivalent German and Chinese idioms and where appropriate for the style of the respective text passage.

3.2.2.2   Naturalisation

Methods: Literal translation and borrowing

Naturalisation can normally be applied in the following cases:

a) virtually fully equivalent idioms;
b) idioms that exist in the TL but cannot be used due to the specific context and the particular register;
c) culturally specific idioms and when no equivalent exists in the TL;
d) translation of Chinese idioms (for the purpose of description and narration) with the help of unidiomatic German expressions;
e) translation of unidiomatic German expressions with the help of Chinese idioms.

3.2.2.3   Alienation

The translation is oriented towards the source in the case of alienating translation.

Alienating translation is suited to the following idioms:

a) German and Chinese idioms that can be easily understood by the TL recipients thanks to literal translation;
b) Chinese idioms that have identical phraseological and literal meanings.

Method: Literal translation

4.   Final remarks

We present the following conclusions on the basis of our contrasting analysis of Chinese and German idioms:

The criteria required to classify idioms are not entirely identical in German and Chinese.

In many cases, German and Chinese expressions are treated differently in terms of lexicalisation, phraseology or idiomaticity.

It's possible to classify five types and levels of equivalence by identifying the degree of equivalence.

We suggest translation strategies and methods for the correct translation of Chinese and German idioms based on Reiß and Vermeer's Skopos theory and depending on the purpose and task of the translation as well as the types of equivalence.

References

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