Exploration of English Translation Thinking from the Perspective of Philosophy of Language

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Abstract: *In the process of English translation, the debugging of cognitive adaptability has a significant impact on the translation results. If the goal is merely to achieve "expressiveness," translators may, to some extent, overlook the debugging of cognitive adaptability, as even without it, they can effectively convey the meaning and information of the original text. However, translation is not such a straightforward process; it requires both "elegance" and "faithfulness." To ensure that the translation possesses a certain aesthetic appeal and conforms to the expressive habits, cultural forms, and value orientations of the target language, the translator's work is only considered satisfactorily completed when these aspects are taken into account. To achieve all of this, adopting a cognitive adaptability debugging approach within the framework of linguistic philosophy can be an effective strategy.*

1. Introduction

The process of English practice, in its essential sense, is a process of debugging English thinking into Chinese thinking. While many scholars argue that the essence of translation lies in the conversion of culture, the characteristics manifested in the transformation of language forms specifically show the differences in thinking patterns. Exploring the issue of cognitive adaptability from the perspective of linguistic philosophy can better reveal the thinking characteristics of Chinese and English, and these characteristics serve as the entry points for debugging thinking patterns in the process of mutual language conversion. Although the translation process that ignores the debugging of thinking patterns can to some extent solve the problem of conveying meaning, it lacks the fluency, appropriateness, accuracy, and other requirements. This not only makes it challenging for readers in the target language but also triggers a sense of cultural non-adaptation, significantly reducing the trust of target language readers in the translated work (Nayila, 2023). Therefore, for translators, it is crucial to start from the perspective of linguistic philosophy, understand the indicative features inherent in thinking patterns, delve into the cultural connotations behind these features, and thus enable the translated work to reflect more of the compatibility with the target culture while ensuring the conveyance of meaning.

2. Philosophy of Language

2.1. Origin

Philosophy serves as the foundation for all disciplines, functioning as the "apex of the pyramid" for them. The development of all disciplines requires a central guiding principle, and that guiding principle is philosophy. In the context of linguistics, this guiding principle is the philosophy of language. Language is the key that distinguishes humans from other animals; however, language is not an objectively existing entity but rather a creation of humans in the ongoing process of development and evolution. Given this, language must possess regularities, and from a practical standpoint, this is indeed the case. If one understands the basic rules of any language, even with a limited vocabulary, they can fluently use the language. The existence of regularities strongly argues for the study of language as a discipline and underscores the need for philosophical theories that can depict its essence and profound implications.

For a long time, people have been accustomed to using language to describe natural phenomena,

summarize intellectual creations, and even reveal various theories and issues in the field of philosophy. However, there has been relatively little attention given to the philosophical issues inherent in language itself. It wasn't until the early 20th century, with a shift in focus in Western philosophy, that an increasing number of philosophers began to pay attention to the philosophical issues of language that had long been familiar but forgotten. Despite discussions on the philosophy of language dating back to ancient Greece and even the medieval period in the West, it did not become a mainstream topic in the field of philosophy (Li , Wu; 2022).

2.2. Characteristics

2.2.1. Centrality of Sentences

The centrality of sentences is the primary feature of the philosophy of language, emphasizing the internal logic of language. From a philosophical perspective, individual words or characters lack inherent logical features; at most, they can be considered symbols imbued with certain meanings. Meaningful research objects arise when these symbols are combined in a logical manner, expressing some determinate or indeterminate significance. Russell once contended, "The sum of sentences is language, and sentences correspond to facts that determine the world." In Russell's view, the objective existence of the world depends on facts, and language is employed to describe these facts. The internal logic of language reflects the complexity of the objective world. German philosopher Frege introduced the context principle, suggesting that words cannot be assigned meaning without a context, whereas sentences can have meaning even when divorced from their context because a sentence itself constitutes a context. Although it carries uncertainty, the internal logic of a sentence ultimately represents a certain meaning (Wang, Wang; 2022).

2.2.2. Consistency of Subject and Object

Philosophy of language is essentially the philosophy of language, a discipline that studies language using language. Within the philosophy of language, language is both the object and the subject of study. Before the formal introduction of the philosophy of language, there existed research on language itself, particularly in fields such as translation studies and translation practice, which have been present in human society since ancient times. However, during that period, the focus of research was primarily on the application of translation, not on language itself. The culture behind language was the object of study. In modern times, with the shift in the direction of Western philosophical research, more philosophers have transitioned from cognizing the objective world to understanding the self. They began considering the internal mechanisms of the cognitive subject as the object of study, giving rise to the philosophy of language during this period (Sun, 2023).

2.3. Significance Theory in the Philosophy of Language

The significance of the philosophy of language lies in its revelation of the essence of language—a phenomenon that is both unfamiliar and familiar to humans. It helps humanity clarify the relationships between language itself, culture, thought, and the objective world, acknowledging that due to the existence of language, a one-to-one correspondence has emerged between the objective world and human culture and thought. From this perspective, one can infer that language and the elements constituting the objective world—facts—are in a one-to-one correspondence. The meaning of language is genuine; it can represent a certain objective fact. Therefore, language is meaningful. This meaning is not merely at the symbolic level but lies beneath the language symbols, intertwined with the external aspects (symbols) of language, its form and structure, and the fusion with human thoughts, cognition, and culture.

Professor Liu Miqing believes that the meaning of language lies in its relational nature, encompassing the relationship between language and objective facts, as well as the relationship between language and humans (Zhang, 2021). This indicates that the meaningfulness of language depends on the existence of its relational nature, and this relational nature possesses strong subjectivity, involving concepts, reference, language behavior, and more. Reference, in this context, refers to the correspondence between objective facts and language, where specific language is used to depict particular objective facts, thereby assigning meaning to language. Concepts, on the other hand, primarily involve describing thoughts, perspectives, emotions, etc., that individuals mutually identify with using language. Language behavior serves to reinforce the meaning of language through expressive means because language only has meaning when utilized. If language is not used, the meaning of language, as discussed in the former two aspects, becomes non-existent.

3. Expression of Cognitive Differences between English and Chinese in the Perspective of Philosophy of Language

3.1. Aspects of Abstract Thinking

English places greater emphasis on abstract thinking compared to Chinese, highlighting the abandonment of individual characteristics of things and focusing more on their essence. Conversely, Chinese tends to emphasize imagery, capturing the surface appearance of things. However, this does not imply that Chinese thinking lacks abstract thought. On the contrary, Chinese also possesses characteristics of abstract thinking, but it leans more towards finding patterns in the representation of things, forming a deep understanding of the image of the pattern, and then summarizing and comprehending the essence and laws of things. If Chinese abstract thinking is characterized by a rich sensory aspect, English abstract thinking, on the other hand, tends to manifest more rationality. It represents a reaction or description of the essential properties of things in an absolute sense, detached from forms. The results of abstract thinking in English are general concepts, while in Chinese, they are insights. In terms of the abstract effects, Chinese abstract thinking is more aesthetically pleasing, following the philosophical idea of "harmony between heaven and man." Chinese abstraction is holistic and intuitive, aiming to convey meaning through images, ultimately achieving a unity of image and concept, with the cognitive result being "meaning beyond words" and "inexpressible in words." In contrast, English abstract thinking maintains objectivity, and the connection between meaning and image does not seek a harmonious aesthetic. It consistently separates people from the cognitive objects and formalizes the process of abstract thinking in a somewhat definitive manner.

3.2. Logical Thinking Aspect

Due to the unique nature of abstract thinking, Chinese thinking in the realm of logical thinking also exhibits noticeable differences from English. Chinese thinking leans more toward intuitive experiences, as it places emphasis on describing the surface images of things. However, similar to abstract thinking, Chinese logical thinking is not solely based on intuition but also incorporates logical reasoning, built upon repeated observations and continuous accumulation. Concepts such as "waking up to" and "understanding through material things" in Chinese thinking are metaphysical reflections based on intuitive experiences (Nayila, 2023). In English, on the other hand, logical thinking tends to be more absolute, with intuition serving as a complement to logical thinking rather than coexisting symbiotically, as is the case in Chinese thinking. English thinking emphasizes reasoning, where intuition is used to enhance the rigor and correctness of the reasoning process. However, for many matters that can be reasoned beyond logical thinking, English thinking tends to employ intuitive thinking (Yang, 2016). For instance, the expression "the warm river in spring indicates that ducks are the first to know" involves intuitive observations, yet it unquestionably contains clear logical relationships and obvious philosophical implications with abstract reasoning. In English, expressions of logical relationships are often more direct and clear, such as "pass me the ball." Regardless of the grammatical construction—be it a request, command, or a more polite phrasing like "Could you pass me the ball?"—it unmistakably carries features of English thinking's formal logic.

3.3. Holistic Thinking Aspect

Chinese thinking predominantly emphasizes holistic thinking, characterized by an emphasis on intuitive understanding, where words are intended to convey meaning, and comprehension happens on a deeper level. Consequently, in Chinese expressions, phenomena like "words fail to convey the intended meaning" or "words do not align with the intended meaning" are common. It may seem like conveying one meaning, but in reality, it is expressing a deeper layer or different meaning. In Chinese expressions, the frequent use of imagery exemplifies the idea that all language expressions envelop a "meaning that can only be understood, not transmitted in words." The more literary the language, the more pronounced this implicit expression becomes. Therefore, shared understanding is crucial in Chinese thinking, and this shared characteristic determines the holistic nature of language thinking. Language users need to manage language in a holistic manner and communicate with others in a shared way beyond language. In English, holistic thinking places more emphasis on hierarchy, emphasizing the clarity and completeness of structure. The purpose of language expression in English is to clearly identify and describe things. In English, all sentence components serve as elements of language structure. Whether viewed from a constructivist or deconstructivist perspective, English's holistic nature is characterized by a strict feature that "any change in elements leads to a change in the entire

structure" (Chen, 2014).

4. Reflection of Cognitive Differences between English and Chinese in the Perspective of Philosophy of Language

4.1. Sensible Grasp of Differences in Imaginative Thinking

Imagination, in this context, refers to corresponding associations generated based on the "image" of objective things. Compared to English thinking, Chinese thinking has a richer associative color, reflecting the lateral characteristics of Chinese thinking, while English thinking tends to be more vertical. However, Chinese imaginative thinking is not similar to the old metaphysical sense in Western philosophy; instead, it is a more comprehensive way of thinking. It often expresses uncovered content comprehensively covered by language. This type of imagination requires a broad space and often contains profound truths. For instance, when expressing pain, Chinese language often uses words like "piercing the heart" or "tearing the skin" , utilizing imagination to evoke a deep understanding of pain in the reader. In English, there may not be such vivid adjectives, and if specifics about the pain need to be described, corresponding phrases or clauses would be used for concrete explanations.

As a translator, it is essential to sensibly grasp the differences in imaginative thinking between Chinese and English, especially in the translation of literary texts. Translators need to recognize the expressive power of Chinese and, while conveying the meaning of the source text, use concise language to convey the "unspoken meaning," allowing readers to appreciate the beauty of reading while understanding the meaning. This approach enables readers to fully utilize their imagination (Chen; Gao, 2016). In the process of translating Chinese into English, translators should focus on simplifying the artistic conception of Chinese. Many expressions in Chinese are macroscopic and experiential, possessing strong aesthetic appeal and imaginative power. However, readers whose native language is English often find it challenging to deeply comprehend. In such cases, translators can present the imaginative power of Chinese thinking through analytical examples, allowing English readers to better appreciate the aesthetic appeal of Chinese culture within the bounds of appropriate imagination.

4.2. Grasping the Transition between Tree-like and Bamboo-like Thinking

There is a significant difference in the holistic aspect between Chinese and English expressions. English expression is more like a large tree, with a clear distinction between the trunk and branches, while Chinese is more like bamboo, possessing strong openness. In the process of translating from English to Chinese, the translator needs to focus on grasping the "trunk" of English expression. Regardless of how complex the sentence is, the main part has a complete subject-predicate structure, and other collocations and clauses are like branches, without affecting the status of the main part. When translating into Chinese, the translator needs to transform tree-like thinking into bamboo-like thinking because Chinese is based on a character-centric open structure. Compared to English's rigorous structure, Chinese places more emphasis on semantic expression. This transformation process is relatively easier; the translator only needs to extract the "trunk" part first and then arrange the "branches" according to the expression habits of Chinese.

In the process of translating from Chinese to English, the most common failure is in the hierarchical construction of bamboo-like thinking. It is often seen that a long sentence has multiple predicate verbs with no clear hierarchy. This can lead to the failure of building the trunk of the tree-like structure, even though all the branches have been added. While such translation results may seem fluent and convey the meaning, they may be considered as "Chinglish" that does not align with English thinking. Apart from structural differences, the distinction between verb and noun forms also reflects the differences between tree-like and bamboo-like structures. In Chinese, verb and noun forms are consistent, whereas in English, gerund forms of verbs differ from nouns. This is because Chinese prioritizes meaning over form, and the sentence structure is built based on the principle of expressing semantics, with blurred boundaries between verbs and nouns. Therefore, when adjusting thinking adaptability in the structural hierarchy between Chinese and English, translators can differentiate between noun and verb forms to grasp the main structure of complex English sentences holistically. Similarly, when translating from Chinese to English, it is essential to promptly identify the core sentences in Chinese expressions and then process the verbs in other "bamboo joints" while highlighting the overall hierarchy to ensure clear semantic expression (Cui, 2010).

5. Conclusion

Exploring the issue of cognitive adaptability in English translation from the perspective of philosophy of language holds significant importance for current translation studies and practices in China. Although there have been abundant research outcomes on translating English into Chinese, there is relatively less exploration from the viewpoint of cognitive adaptability. Investigating cognitive adaptability through the lens of philosophy of language can better facilitate Chinese readers' understanding of English language and culture. It enables Chinese readers to develop cross-cultural communication thinking based on their "native language" mentality. On the other hand, for translating Chinese into English, the adjustment of cognitive adaptability is even more crucial. Currently, China is in an urgent period of cultural globalization, and effectively adapting thinking during the translation process can make the translated works more easily accepted. This, in turn, allows readers to better experience the charm of Chinese culture, contributing to the global dissemination of Chinese culture during this period of cultural globalization.

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