

CAPÍTULO 38. SOME CULTURAL FACTORS ON ENGLISH-CHINESE AND CHINESE-ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF BRAND NAMES

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SUMMARY

Language is a part and a carrier of culture that reflects culture. It plays a very important role in culture. However, language is very much influenced and shaped by culture. Brand names are also strongly influenced by culture. A brand name may possess certain cultural connotation, which suggests aesthetics standard of a certain culture so as to ignite the consumers' buying desire. This essay testifies some cultural influence on English-Chinese and Chinese-English brand names from perspectives of religion, myths, literary works and folklores, names of people and places, animals, colours and numbers.

1. LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Usunier (2000) notes that language is an essential part of culture: it is regarded as a reflection of culture. It is the basic input of any culture-based communication process, because everyday life is mostly a matter of interaction through communication in a culturally homogeneous community. It plays a very important role in culture. The Chinese language is very different from Indo-European languages. It has the following specific linguistic features, which directly influence Chinese translation of brand names.

The Chinese language has two systems: one is phonetic system, which is pinyin and the other one is writing system, which is Chinese character. Chinese people read Chinese characters directly as English people read English alphabetic letters. Each Chinese character is one morpheme. Chinese word formation is based on compounding structure. Most of words are combined together with two or more morphemes and these morphemes are monosyllabic, that is each morpheme has only one syllable. All morphemes have tones and most morphemes are meaningful,

“... for example, bei “north”, jing “capital”. Both bei and jing are bound morphemes. When we combine them, we form a well-known word Beijing, the capital of People’s Republic of China. The word is made up of two morphemes and two syllables. The name of Shanghai is another example for it is the combination of shang “above” and hai “sea”, so the meaning of Shanghai is above the sea. Over 70 percent of the modern

Chinese words are such kind of two morpheme words. (Chan and Huang, 2001: 106)”

In the business world, “*a writing system that represents languages is a key tool for expressing a corporate and brand identity in the form of corporate and brand names in conjunction with logos*” (Schmitt and Simonson, 1997: 260). Chinese writing consists of signs or ideographs, composed of strokes. Unlike the western alphabetic writing system, which is phonological, Chinese provides a different ideograph for every word. Based on Usunier’s study (2000), there are 50,000 ideographs in Chinese. These characters are pronounced differently according to the dialect spoken (Mandarin, Cantonese, etc.), and there are a large number of homonyms. Thus there are many possibilities for the transposition of alphabetic brand names into Chinese characters. The advantage of this kind of transposition is to find similar sounds of Chinese characters to replace the original brands. However, choosing homonyms may bring different images or meanings of original brands to Chinese consumers because different characters carry different meanings. From the complex of Chinese linguistic features, we can see Chinese translation of foreign names must be influenced by sounds and meanings.

Social Values also affect the preferences of brand naming and consumers’ behaviour. Different value orientations will lead to variations in preferences of products and brands. Values of both consumers and marketers are defined by their culture. Usunier (2000: 75) stated:

“In individualistic cultures, one’s identity is in the person, people are ‘I’-conscious, express private opinions, and self-actualisation is important. In collectivistic cultures, people are ‘we’-conscious, their identity is based on the social system to which they belong, and avoiding loss of face is important. Most Asian countries are collectivistic culture.”

Chinese people belong to collective culture and they are concerned about their neighbours’ judgment and social assessment. Harmony with nature plays a strong role in Chinese life, which is Confucian-influenced value. The Chinese people pay much more attention to the relation with the group than people in individualistic cultures.

2. TRANSLATION OF BRAND NAMES AND CULTURE

A good brand is indeed embroidered with cultural connotations because it can represent fashion, lifestyle and culture. Advertising content analysts agree cultural values are added through advertising messages “as

powerful forces shaping consumers' motivations, lifestyles, and product choices" (Cheng and Schweitzer, 1996: 28, also see Tse et al., 1989). It is obvious that there are cultural meanings in brands, and sometimes people do consume the meanings. For example, the reason why Chinese consumers are receptive to foreign brands is because cultural meanings are added to the brand value, like those for Scotch whiskey, German beer, Cuban cigars, French wine and American jeans due to the images based on countries-of-origin, and Mercedes-Benz and Audi for the reputation of quality.

A good brand and its translation may influence several generations because of its cultural connotations. For example, the Coca-Cola drink has been with us for more than a hundred years but it still maintains its vitality and is well received by young people in almost every country in the world. For many years Coca-Cola has been one of the most popular brand names in the world not only because it is the name of a drink, but also it became American culture. In the 1930's, it was translated into 可口可乐 (kě kǒu kě lè, 'tasty and happy/enjoyable') in Chinese, which is an improvement on the previous version 可口可腊 (kě kǒu kě là, 'a mouthful of wax'). The later Chinese version merged ingeniously the characteristics of this drink into an image of fantasy, which is so impressive that every Chinese people thinks of American culture immediately when seeing it. Moreover, when the Coca-Cola Company had the intention of creating a new image, numerous people protested against the move. The intention was a failure due to the profound influence of Coca-Cola on people's mind spanning several generations. And as far as the people in the United States and many other countries are concerned, they have been unconsciously exposed to this influence since childhood, mixed up with the culture, tradition, and custom of their own country.

Larson (1984: 33) claims, "Every translator desires to be faithful to the original. To do this, he must communicate not only the same information, but he must also attempt to evoke the same emotional response as the original text." Larson (1984: 425) further states:

"In many ways, the emotional tone of a passage is the key to real communication effectiveness. The author may wish to create a feeling of urgency, persuasiveness, tentativeness, exuberance, or despondency. Whatever the tone of the source text, built into it by choices of tense, mood, voice and choice of the main action verbs, it is important that this same emotion be communicated in the translation. For an effective transfer of the tone of the text, the translator must be well acquainted with both the source and receptor language and culture."

As noted by Pan and Schmitt (1995), brand names as linguistic labels are subjected to structural differences between language systems as well as

socio-cultural differences alluded to in a name. As such, there may be subtle, but important cross-cultural differences on brand name perceptions.

3. CULTURAL FACTORS

Li Zhenyi (1999: 249) notes, “Branding is a process of communication of cultural meanings”. So the translation of brand names is culturally bound and has to be culturally conducted. Each language has its own specific words and expressions as a result of its unique cultural background, such as its geographic environment, history, customs and habits, social values, and beliefs. All these are cultural factors to be taken into account in brand name translation. Some cultural factors are commented as below.

3.1. MYTHS AND FOLKLORES

From the cultural view, English brand names often come from Greek and Roman myths as Apollo, Mars, Nike, Taurus, Mercury, Ajax etc. When such English brand names are turned into Chinese, it is important to try to find names that are suitable to Chinese culture.

The American Ford Company employs Mercury (墨丘利, mò qiū lì, in Chinese transliterated version) as a brand of its new car and Ajax is a very famous brand of a detergent and its Chinese transliterated version is 阿贾克斯 (ā jiā kè sī). Certain stories from mythology are so common that English-speaking people can recite them offhand.

Apollo (太阳神, tài yáng shén, ‘god of the sun’), the brand of a drink, is adopted from Greek mythology, the God of the Sun who is a strong and handsome man with vigour of vitality. Olympus (奥林帕斯, ào lín pà sī), the residence of all gods in Greek mythology, is used as a brand for a Japanese camera. The brand of sports Nike (耐克, nài kè, ‘overcoming difficulties persistently’) is a goddess of Victory in Greek myth. All these images have no equivalents in Chinese mythical prototypes. Transliteration cannot embody their original meanings because the Chinese are not familiar with them. The only way translators can do is to break through the barriers between cultures. Hence a blending of liberal translation and transliteration becomes a better choice. Although transliteration is getting quite popular, Chinese consumers may not get the meaning implied in the original brand names.

Actually religions can also be displayed on some brand names. According to Ju’s quotation (1999: 272),

“Young Yun Kim, University Professor of Communication at Governors State University, says, ‘traditional cultures throughout Asian countries including India, Tibet, Japan,

China, Korea, and Southeast Asia have been profoundly influenced by such religious and philosophical systems as Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, and Zen. On the other hand, the Western European nations have historically followed the Greek and the Judaeo-Christian traditions.”

As we know, Christianity is the keystone of western culture and its main religion. In western countries, with Christianity as the dominant religion, one naturally expects to find a large number of references in the Bible to brand names. Some images in the allusions are often used in brand names, such as Angel, Adam, Eve, Solomon, St. Andrew, St. Bruno, St. Julian, St. Gregory, etc.

3.2. FAMOUS LITERARY WORKS

Some foreign brand names are derived from classic works of literature. For example, there is a brand of a cigar named Romeo from Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. Another example is Pickwick (皮克威克, pí kè wēi kè), the brand of a ballpoint pen, derives from Charles Dickens' the Pickwick Papers. Shangri-La (香格里拉, xiāng gé lǐ lā), the brand of a chain hotel group, refers to a place name in Tibet in James Hilton's the Lost Horizon, which signifies a heaven of peace and happiness. As a translator, it is not easy to transfer the message in the original like these sources because they are not very well known in China. No matter which method is taken, translators need to put foreign brand names into suitable Chinese.

3.3. NAMES OF FAMOUS PEOPLE AND PLACES

Many foreign brand names originate from historical celebrities. “The brand of an automobile Cadillac (卡迪拉克, kā dí lā kè) is named after the French colonial founder in North America, and the governor of Detroit. With a musical rhythm and exotic sound to Chinese people, the brand Chevrolet (雪佛莱, xuě fú lái) is in memory of Louis Chevrolet, a Swiss engineer who was a super racer at the beginning of the last century. Brand names like York, Windsor, Wolsey, Lincoln, Lacoste, etc. are taken as the same reason” (He, 1997: 45). Some places are employed as foreign brand names, too, such as:

- Champagne--- a place in the north of France;
- Avon--- Shakespeare's hometown;
- Marlboro---a city in the east of Massachusetts;
- Mecca---a city in the west of Saudi Arabia;
- Perrier--- a city in the south of France;
- Pall Mall---a street in London that is famous for clubs;

Salem--- a seaport in the northeast of Massachusetts.

3.4. ANIMALS

Different customs should be considered when translating brand names. For example, people often associate certain qualities with certain animals. The qualities of certain animals often arouse certain reactions or emotions, although there is little or no scientific ground for such association. “The qualities that are associated, or the emotions that are aroused, are not always the same with different peoples (Deng: 1995, 56)”. Many Chinese brand names are the names of animals and plants. Crane, dragon, phoenix, rabbit, panda, bee, petrel, magpie, bat, mandarin duck, pine, cypress, plum blossom, orchid, chrysanthemum, and so on, are Chinese favourites, but they may cause different associations to English-speaking people. Dragon is such an example. The dragon in English and 龙 (lóng, ‘dragon’) in Chinese are both imaginary animals but have very different connotations. To the Chinese, 龙 (lóng, ‘dragon’) is a sacred animal regarded as the ancestor of the Chinese nation. That is why the Chinese call themselves descendants of dragon (龙的传人 lóng de chuán rén) and Chinese feudal emperors were often referred to as son of dragon (真龙天子 zhēn lóng tiān zǐ), wearing dragon’s imperial robe (龙袍 lóng páo) and living in palaces decorated with dragons. To westerners, the dragon is an evil monster which can spit fire and who sometimes possesses three to nine heads.

The bird crane is a symbol for longevity in Chinese culture, but to western minds, the crane does not arouse any such association. To Chinese, the bat is a symbol of good fortune. The reason for such association is because the creature’s name is pronounced same as the Chinese character 福 (fú) that means happiness and wealth. But the bat is usually associated with negative qualities in the West. It often evokes the image of a sinister, blood-sucking creature on account of the vampire bat. For an instance, the expression ‘to have bats in one’s belfry’ means to be mad. Chen Dezhang states (1999: 361),

“Americans do not use animals as trademarks or brand names, but most of them cherish a special love for animals. And as almost all animals are carbonised in the United States (like those in Disneyland), the distinction between the image of ‘good’ animals and ‘bad’ animals has become very vague, so all the goods with animals as trade marks or brand names sells well in the United States.”

This is good news for marketers and translators so that those brand names with animals can be promoted without any cultural obstacles in the United States.

3.5. COLOURS AND NUMBERS

As De Mooij (1998: 55-56) quoted:

“Colour can have a particular strong cultural meaning. Black is the colour of mourning in the Western world. In China, white symbolizes mourning. Gold has a strong symbolic meaning for the Chinese, but not combined with black. In Asia, numbers have significance unknown to Western cultures.”

Numbers can be particularly meaningful in China. For example, numbers 5, 6, 8, 9 and especially even numbers are Chinese favourites because the sound of number 5 (wǔ) in Chinese is similar to a Chinese character 福 (fú, ‘happiness’); 6 implies ‘smooth and unhindered’; the sound of number 8 is similar to Chinese character 发 (fā, ‘enrichment’) and the sound of number 9 is a homophone of another Chinese character 久 (jiǔ, ‘eternity’). The rendition of the brand Buds (an ice cream), 八喜 (bā xǐ, ‘eight happiness’), taken by the sound of the word Buds, is a good example. Another popular example is the 555 cigarette brand in China as there are three fives indicating “much happiness” in its connotation. The Chinese believe that numbers represent the direction and orientation affecting an individual. Chinese numerals are classified as either yin (feminine) or yang (masculine) (Ang, 1997). In English-speaking countries, the number 7 is a lucky number (Boyd, 1985), which is believed to bring happiness and auspiciousness. A number of brand names contain number 7, such as Mild Seven (柔和七星, róu hé qī xīng, “mild seven stars”), 7-Up (七喜, qī xǐ, ‘seven happiness’), 7-Eleven (711), etc.

Some colours and numbers of brand names may also pose as cultural taboos in marketing and translation. Yellow is not popular in Japan; the Thais are not fond of red; Belgians and Egyptians hate blue; purple is not much liked by Americans; the French favour blue but dislike dark green; white signifies purity and dark stands for death in the west, while the Chinese likes red best and dislikes white colour as white symbolizes mourning. The number 13 is unacceptable in the West because it is considered unlucky. In Japan, the number 4 becomes a forbidden number because of its similar pronunciation with the word 死 (sǐ, ‘to die’), just as in China.

4. CONCLUSION

So many facts prove that the translation of brand names is a complex job. Whether a version can overcome the cultural barrier successfully or not will affect the promotion of a product in the target market. Cultural factors deserve much attention in the rendition of brand names besides methodologies

and skills. According to Newmark (1988: 46), “where language is used as a symbol, it is treated communicatively.” It is not always possible to state which method is better to translate a certain brand. However, in the rendition of brand names, the receivers’ reaction should be considered foremost. Newmark’s theory (1988:39) on communicative translation has been the preferred method used by translators since

“Communicative translation addresses itself solely to the target reader, who does not anticipate difficulties or obscurities, and would expect a generous transfer of foreign elements into his own culture as well as his language where necessary”.

If the translator thinks the image of the brand is important and is likely to be familiar to the receivers, transcription can be a preferred choice. The brand IBM is a good model. If the message in the brand is unlikely to be familiar to the receivers, what the translator should do is to find a cultural equivalent in the target language, such as Apollo for 太阳神 (tài yáng shén, ‘god of the sun’). If it is hard to find the cultural equivalent, creative liberal translation becomes a better practice. For instance, Ariel is put into 碧浪 (bì làng, ‘viridescent wave’).

In a word, cultural factors in the translation of brand names need special attention. It is impossible to give a panorama of all the details here. However, we are fortunate to have access to a great number of contributions concerning translation and culture.

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