

Language Conflicts and Impacts On Informationalization and Globalization

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All men speak the same language — They build tower of Babel — The Lord confounds their language and scatters them over all the earth.

[*Bible*, Genesis: 11]

Abstract

We are in the time of globalization and informationalization, in which the dominant and common language is English. Following the general application of information technology (IT), especially of personal computers (PCs) and the internet, the English language and its culture have penetrated into almost all fields of Chinese society and have speeded up the process of development of China. However, on the other hand, our study found that there are still clear differences or even conflicts between these two languages, especially in cases of translation. Some of them might be attributed to individual qualifications and the proficiency of the translators, but more often than not, the problems are results rooted in the nature of language itself. Therefore, what we read from a translated version may not be the 'true' images or 'original' voices of its foreign counterparts. And the following cases in our study will interpret this.

Key Words: Language gap, Informationalization, Globalization

1. Who is Li Bai?

Li Bai [李白, or Li Po, Li Tai-Po] (AD 701–762) is one of the most famous poets of the Tang Dynasty (AD 618–907) of China. Some of his poems are essential readings for all Chinese students and of course, have been translated into many languages including English. However, as the translators lived in different countries, in different times, and held different viewpoints, there are many versions of Li Bai's poems. For example, *Jing Ye Si* is one of the most popular works of Li Bai, which can be written in the *pinyin* (Phoneticized Chinese) as follows:

Chuang qian ming yue guang [床前月光],
yi shi di shang shuang [疑是地上霜].
Ju tou wang ming yue [举头望明月],
di tou si gu xiang [低头思故乡].

However, in the translations of English, we can find at least nine versions of this poem in which three are made by Chinese translators and six by foreign scholars:

- (1) In the Still of the Night (Tr. Xu Zhongjie)^[1]
*I descry bright moonlight in front of my bed.
I suspect it to be hoary frost on the floor.
I watch the bright moon, as I tilt back my head.
I yearn, while stooping, for my homeland more.*
- (2) A Tranquil Night (Tr. Xu Yuanchong)^[2]
*Abed, I see a silver light.
I wonder if it's frost aground.
Looking up, I find the moon bright.
Bowling, in homesickness I'm drowned.*
- (3) Nostalgia (Tr. Weng Xianliang)^[3]
*A splash of white on my bedroom floor. Hoarfrost?
I raise my eyes to the moon, the same moon.
As scenes long past come to mind,
My eyes fall again on the splash of white,
And my heart aches for home.*
- (4) In the Quiet Night (Tr. Witter Bynner)^[4]
*So bright a gleam on the foot of my bed —
Could there have been a frost already?
Lifting my head to look,
I found that it was moonlight
Sinking back again,
I thought suddenly of home.*
- (5) Night Thoughts (Tr. Herbert A. Giles)^[5]
*I wake, and moonbeams play around my bed.
Glittering like hoar-frost to my wondering eyes.
Up towards the glorious moon I raise my head.
Then lay me down and thoughts of home arise.*
- (6) On a Quiet Night (Tr. S. Obata)
*I saw the moonlight before my couch,
And wondered if it were not the frost on the ground;
I raised my head and looked out on the mountain moon.
I bowed my head and thought of my far-off home.*
- (7) The Moon Shines Everywhere (Tr. W. J. B. Fletcher)
*Seeing the moon before my couch so bright,
I thought hoar frost had fallen from the night,
On her clear face I gaze with lifted eyes:
Then hide them full of Youth's sweet memories.*

- (8) Night Thoughts (Tr. Amy Lowell)^[6]
*In front of my bed the moonlight is very bright.
 I wonder if that can be frost on the floor?
 I list up my head and look at the full moon, the dazzling moon.
 I drop my head, and think of the home of old days.*
- (9) Thoughts in a Tranquil Night (Tr. L. Cranmer-Byng)^[7]
*Athwart the bed,
 I watch the moonbeams cast a trail.
 So bright, so cold, so frail,
 That for a space it gleams
 Like hoar-frost on the margin of my dreams.
 I raise my head,
 The splendid moon I see:
 Then droop my head,
 And sink to dreams of thee —
 My father land, of thee!*

Although some of the above translators have already passed away, scholars and translators are continuing discussions about whose version is better or closer to Li Bai's original poem. And for the English readers, who is Li Bai, or what is 'original' Li Bai, or what is the 'real' meaning of his poem, remains a puzzle without an authoritatively reliable solution (We think Giles's translation is the best in the above versions).

Meanwhile, when Chinese students tried to translate the above English, word by word, into Chinese, they certainly produced various versions of Chinese poems. But, unfortunately, not one is that of Li Bai's poem.

2. How Many Shakespeares in the World?

Li Bai is not the only case. William Shakespeare (1564–1616), one of the greatest English playwrights, with numerous readers around the world, also exemplifies how difficult it is to do translations and the resulting cultural exchanges. Moreover, probably unlike other countries, the process of the translation of Shakespeare coincides with the historical period of socio-cultural revolution and modernization and the openness of China.

According to Chinese scholars' research, the first Chinese version of Shakespeare's plays was published in 1842, the ending year of the first Opium War (1839–42) between China and Great Britain. Understandably, the number of readers were very few at that time not only because most Chinese people could not read but also because the translators used the language of Manchu, then the ruling class of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911).

The Han language version of Shakespeare's plays was published in 1903, two years after the Yihetuan (Boxers) revolt and the foreign troops intervention into China (1900–01). What is interesting is the translator, Lin Shu (Lin Qinnan, 1852–1924), a master of Chinese literature, was unable to read English. The secret of his success was teamwork: first, his friend, who had studied in England, interpreted the **Tales from Shakespeare** written by Charles Lamb (1775–1834) and his sister Mary Ann Lamb (1775–1864); and after that Lin wrote it down in a beautiful classical style Chinese.

Following the popularization of vernacular Chinese and English education in the 1920s,

more and more of Shakespeare's plays have been translated and staged in China. Up to now, there are at least five complete works of Shakespeare which have been published: The first Chinese edition (six volumes), containing thirty one plays of Shakespeare, was translated by Zhu Shenghao (1912–1944), a very young talented and diligent translator; it was published after his death during the period of the Second World War (1939–45). Mainly based on Zhu's translations, the second edition (twelve volumes) of Shakespeare's works was published in 1954 after the founding of the new China in 1949. And the third edition (eleven volumes) was published in 1978 after the end of the so-called the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), and this version had the honor of winning the first China National Publication Award.

Since China's economic reform and openness to the outside world in the 1980s, the thirst and enthusiasm for the classical foreign literature, especially English works, became unprecedentedly high in China, and the newest well recognized simplified Chinese edition (the fourth edition) was published in 1995.

On the other hand, the complete traditional Chinese edition (forty volumes) of Shakespeare's works was published in 1967 in Taiwan. The translator was Liang Shiqiu (1903–1987), another famous writer and scholar in modern Chinese history. What is surprising is that Liang himself had devoted more than thirty years to the translation, from 1930 to 1967, demonstrating not only a strong will as a translator, but also the deepest love of his for Shakespeare as a reader. Liang's translation with English texts has been introduced into mainland China in recent years.

Of course, there might have been no significant changes in Shakespeare's works in English during the past centuries, but, there were, and probably will be, many different translators and versions of his works in China. In this sense, Shakespeare has had, and will continually have, many rebirths in the most populous country in the world.

Besides Zhu and Liang, almost every Chinese teacher, writer, commentator, or student has his/her personal perspective on Shakespeare and heroes or heroines of his plays. Therefore, for the Chinese people, it is not overstated if we say that there are many Shakespeares presented ^[8].

If we look around the world, it is certain that there are several hundreds of Shakespeares who speak different languages to different peoples; and meanwhile Shakespeare has been interpreted by different peoples using different languages from different viewpoints. Shakespeare has become one of the greatest symbols of globalization and informationalization.

On the other hand, almost all works of great foreign writers have been translated into Chinese more than once. The greater reputation and influence an author enjoys, the more versions and interpretations of his works there can be. Even if the list is limited to politics and economics, we can find nearly uncountable names of great writers of all times; human beings such as Confucius, Jesus Christ, Adam Smith, Thomas Robert Malthus, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, John Maynard Keynes, and so on. As a result, the greatest writers and thinkers are seemingly also the biggest, the longest and the fieriest sources of discussions, inspirations and accusations due to translation and global informationalization.

To begin with, the contradictions and arguments about a writer or a thinker were put forward by his fellow countryman at home; then, following the versions of other languages, similar disputes have spread into foreign lands. Unlike the disputes in his homeland, the arguments occurring in a foreign land were much more fiery in many cases, because the quarrels are not restricted to the readers only, but also happened among the translators, and between the translators and the readers. Therefore, the mutual understandings and misunderstandings became global at the same time. In fact, communication and "informationaliza-

tion” have two edges: one is to narrow the gaps or to eliminate ignorance between peoples; the other is to create new gaps or to widen the previous ones among peoples.

It may be safe to criticize the translators, for they contributed to the international exchanges of literature and opinions as well as the misunderstandings and quarrels. In other words, the translators imposed their own positions and tendencies and preferences onto the images of the original writers. Even very neutral translators without bias could easily make mistakes when they tried to burn a mark on their translations, of works written by other peoples. Of course, sometimes the problems were inevitable in the linguistic terms, because when one language was interpreted by another language, some kinds of supplements or omissions, transformations or corrections, are reasonably accepted. Translation, like a painting or a photo, is an action of reconstruction and inevitably differs more or less from the original one.

3. Can We be Good at A Target Language?

It is unfair to criticize translators. The misunderstandings exist not only in translations of famous writers but also in the Standard English textbooks used by teachers and students in non-English speaking countries.

To prove this, we conducted a case-study of an English textbook in China. That textbook is **New Concept English**, a very popular four-volume textbook written by L. G. Alexander and published by Longman House in 1967. In the early 1980s, it was introduced into China as a textbook for self-study learners and university students. Since then, sales of this textbook have exceeded millions and educated a whole generation of Chinese youth in terms of English.

Following the first complete Chinese translation published in 1985, the second and the third Chinese versions were published in 1993 and 1997, respectively^[9].

To see the differences of languages, we examined these three Chinese translations of **Developing Skills**, namely the third volume of the textbook. We found there are as many as several hundred differences in translations, not only in the texts themselves but in the titles as well. Of course, as with most professional translators and experienced teachers, their translations can doubtlessly be regarded as excellent Chinese reproductions and the differences between them are clear results of different styles or choices of words.

In some cases, for example, one version is much closer to the original English, while the other editions are much more easily understandable to the Chinese readers. Some different word usages show that one translator seemingly prefers elegant Chinese interpretations, while the other likes more common sayings. It seemed that instead of one textbook **New Concept English**, there are at least three formal textbooks in China and it is difficult to judge which translation should be ‘better’ than others.

4. Where is the Source of the Problems?

The final and basic source of the gaps and misunderstandings in communication is in the language itself. In our daily life, language is only one of the methods of communication. Other means, such as gestures, attitudes, tones, manners, or expression of the eyes also play a significant role. Even silence, namely not speaking, has more powerful strength than many voluble speeches in some cases. In this sense, words may not be the most accurate method of communication.

On the other hand, a word, as a basic unit of language, is not as simple and clear as many

expected. For example, the English word 'love' can definitely be translated into 'ai' (the fourth tone) in Chinese. Therefore, 'I love you' in English can be certainly translated as 'wo (I) ai (love) ni (you)' in Chinese, the sentence order is similar between the two languages.

In this way, 'love' equals 'ai', and this equivalence might be taken as a rule. Wherever we see 'love' in English, its Chinese counterpart of 'ai' could be picked for translation, which can clearly be seen in the cases of machinery translations.

However, this is merely an illusion and a source of misunderstandings: Because the word 'love' in English has far more meanings and explanations than 'ai' in Chinese. According to the **Concise Oxford English Dictionary (Ninth Edition)**, 'love' has nine meanings as a noun and four meanings as a verb. In comparison, in the **Xinhua Cidian (New Chinese Dictionary)**, a medium sized dictionary in China, 'ai' (爱) has only three meanings. A more important difference is that 'love' may mean 'sexual passion' and 'sexual relations', but 'ai' can not. In fact, without informationalization and globalization, an ordinary Chinese might never have link up 'ai' with sexual behavior because there has been no phrase such as 'zuo ai' (make love) in Chinese language usage until recently. Instead, 'ai' has generally been used in spiritual terms since ancient times. More clearly, in Chinese traditions, sexual behaviors are described by other specific words; and 'ai' is usually regarded as a kind of feeling or a sense, which can mainly be perceived by the heart.

Similar cases can be observed in translations of Chinese. For example, 'da' (the fourth tone, 大) in Chinese can, under various situations, be translated into 'big', 'large', 'great', 'huge', 'colossal', 'vast', 'important', or 'fundamental', and so on, in English.

5. Conclusions

The popularization of English education and translation in China in the last decades have provided Chinese people with a very efficient and powerful method to learn from the outside world. Now even ordinary Chinese can easily utter some English words such as *Windows XP*, *Excel*, *Word* or *USB*. In addition, the electronic English-Chinese dictionaries, on-line English courses, computer-aided English learning and testing systems have made great progress in the past years.

However, some misunderstandings and distortions still remain, and most of them have resulted from the "natural gap" between different cultures and languages. This gap might become larger if we ignore or put too much emphasis on information technology or machinery translations.

After researching some differences between Chinese and English, we may be able to draw some general conclusions as follows:

First, communication by translation (or with IT or machines) surely has positive effects on narrowing the distance of the peoples on the earth; however, the natural gap of different cultures and languages, a source of misunderstandings, may remain for a long time. Moreover, any attempt to eliminate this natural gap has been, and probably will be, definitely fruitless. Without this gap, the diversity of languages and cultures could not exist.

Therefore, the second conclusion is that, whatever efforts we may make, what we can understand from a translation or even from our own language is merely a maximum of sixty or seventy percent of the meaning of a speaker; the other parts of the sentences will be a

combination of the “proper or flexible reform” which equals approximately twenty or thirty percent and the “free explanations” or imaginations, which equals about ten percent. In comparison with daily dialogue and plain English, the percentage of reform or reorganization will become larger in the “*polished or elaborated English*” of poems, novels, films, social science documents, diplomatic statements, and political manifestos.

Finally, in many cases where communicating cultures, what we read in a native speaker’s words are probably, in fact, not exactly his original meaning, but only a relatively rough opinion or intention of his, whereby misunderstandings or even conflicts can appear. In this sense, when we try to fully understand a person, what we have to do is not only to hear his words and speeches one time, but also and most importantly to see his actions and behaviors at all times.

Of course, similar results can be found in languages other than the ones we studied in this paper, Chinese and English. Such a “natural gap” in languages and cultures has become one of the most serious challenges to informationalization and globalization, and we still have a long way to go before narrowing this gap. Meanwhile, it seems that the future of English language in a new world must become simpler and plainer, if we wish to rebuild the Tower of Babel as mentioned in the *Bible*. This time, this tower will become a cooperative, harmonious, and peaceful world in this new millennium. Can we do it?

References

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- [5] Herbert Giles (1845–1935), British linguist and professor, who modified a Mandarin Chinese Romanization system and was a diplomat to China (1867–92). See en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herbert_giles.
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Note: the original Li Bai’s poem was, in fact, not that popular one which was cited in this paper. It was:

床前看月光，疑是地上霜；
举头望山月，低头思故乡。

Therefore, only one of the translations introduced in this paper, namely, (6) On a Quiet Night (Tr. S. Obata) was correct, because he (she?) used words such as “I saw,” and “mountain moon”.

But, why almost all Chinese say “床前明月光……举头望明月”？ One reason we have heard is that the ‘唐诗三百首’ was published by the Han intellectuals in the Qing Dynasty, who changed the original of Li Bai’s words and wanted the “明”(Ming) so the younger Han national students could recall the lost Ming Dynasty.