

ON LEARNING FOREIGN LANGUAGES

From translation to teaching methods

潘宏熟

Preface

Nowadays, it is a defect to study literature not being master of some foreign languages. No matter how remarkable Chinese is, it seems to sit in a well looking at the sky if we don't have the ability to read foreign literature. Furthermore, we cannot appreciate our own literature profoundly for the standards of beauty are set according to the objective comparison of one's subjective impressions. It is hard to draw a correct conclusion if we do not have enough data to compare as well one can be deeply versed in literature only when he reads extensively. In present days some people praise only Chinese Literature and blindly reject other foreign literature. We admit that there are many merits in Chinese Literature but not all. It is the ideal that a literature-learner, who knows well of some foreign majority that is too difficult. The only way to mend this problem is to translate them systematically and abundantly.

Translation is not easy. According to my experiences, it is harder to translate a book than to write one. A translator not only has to understand the text and its implication thoroughly, but also has to

meditates on it to choose the right words for translation. People think that learning a foreign language is being able to read. At the present there are many books with errors in translation, because the translators are too self-confident about their reading abilities. They read a foreign novel from the beginning to the end thinking that they comprehend it completely; but while translating they discover that they cannot catch the meaning or even understand it. Rapid reading leads to self-deception. So the best way to learn a foreign language is to translate—it trains our senses to understand the text wholly. Many masterpieces of literature lie in the usages of language. If one just skims without careful consideration on the language, he would not appreciate the great works of literature.

Reading foreign works is difficult, but to translate them is even more so, for a translator must use proper words to translate the text into Chinese. It is meaningless if the readers cannot comprehend what is translated. Besides mastering a foreign language, a translator must first be skillful in using his own native language.

Many translated books are specific and literary, such as novelettes in the Bilingual Section of Reader's Digest. Yet some of them are still difficult to understand, because they are translated into Chinese with an English sentence structure. Hundreds of years ago the Bible in Chinese version is some what like that, and it had great influence on the Chinese readers. The primary purpose of translation is to let readers understand and to be pleased with the works. It is a failure if the translation makes its readers feel pain and thus reluctant to continue reading.

Main Problems on the Translation Between Chinese and English

As mentioned before, translating is the most effective way to learn a foreign language—For example, training oneself to translate English into Chinese in a proper & precise way is the best method to study English. Now let's discuss the problems that we will meet with English—Chinese translation. First of all, on learning English translation is inevitable. Some people feel that it is better to use English directly without mixing it with a native language when we study English. For example, when we see the word "book" we had better not translate it to "書", because "book" has many different usages—such as "bring him to book" is "to require him to explain his conduct"; "shut the book" is "to stop a bargain" but not "close the book"; "This suits my book very much" actually means "it will be very convenient to me"; "to book a seat" is "to reserve seats at a theater, tickets for a journey, etc."; "I am booked to see him off" means "I got to see him off". Its various meaning are far from the Chinese "書". Therefore we must get rid of the influences of Chinese interpretations if we want to learn English correctly.

However being Chinese, we are born to be affected by the Chinese language and cannot use English as our mother tongue. That is the reason why we cannot avoid translating while learning English. Translation consists of translating English into Chinese and translating Chinese into English. On translating English we must understand its meaning; that helps us realize the characteristics of English. On translating Chinese we have to understand the English rules, which develops our abilities in writing English. Although translating will mix usages of one language with another. It is difficult to prevent. By means of translation we can realize the differences between two languages and the characteristics of English. Meanwhile we can clarify the confusion of two different languages and effectively use English. Translation is valuable if we can make good use of it. It is not worth mentioning if we, Chinese, know the meaning of English words yet cannot interpret them to our countrymen properly. To introduce our countrymen to the merits of a foreign country and vice versa is the purpose of learning a foreign language. Chinese as well as English will regard you at a better statue if you master English, because you can help them exchange their thoughts, feelings, and knowledges. If not so you are repulsive to the Chinese; while at same time the English will not treat you like their people either, for you are not an Englishman. These show us the importance of translating well.

On discussing translation, we should investigate the methods of translation. A good translator must master two languages at least. Chinese is easy to handle because it is our native language. What we have to study are the usage of English sentence structure and English vocabulary. If the text is not in depth translation would not be very hard.

Words are vivacious; sometimes they play a joke. A clever smile seeming has no relation to the original word. An elliptical sentence of one profession may become idioms to all sorts of people. Words that are somewhat amusing. Under the circumstances, the words have "idiomatic meaning", such as slang does. It is an obstacle for a new learner of English to understand them, while to translate them is even far more difficult. Unless we can interpret them with Chinese idioms, they will lose their impact. Before we translate a literary work, we must realize its words period, geographical, and rank background—it leads to special association and feelings, also it producing nuance. For that we have to train ourselves in reading literature masterpieces and using the right words. While reading and translating, one should form them habit of checking the dictionary. Many inferior translators are apt to make mistakes of memorizing one Chinese meaning no matter how many meanings the word has. If so, they interpret odd translation. It is a mistake to translate the word "idea" in "I have no idea", "Hit upon an idea", or "the idea of such a thing" into "觀念", because it doesn't make any sense. Many English words as well as many Chinese words have different meaning in different usages. We must make sure its implication is the prime of translation, so that it may increase our English abilities by translating.

Besides, "associative meaning" plays an important role in translation. Every language has its own elongated history, thus it is associated with its people's living conditions and produces certain emotions. For example the English words—fire, sea, castle, sport, shepherd, nightingale, rose etc. arises Englishmen's psychological reactions, but not so much to a Chinese. The same, a westener finds it hard to comprehend what the Chinese

words "風", "江", "月", "湖", "梅", "燕", "禮", "陰陽", and its kind might mean to a Chinese. The associative meaning is so profound and mysterious that we cannot discover from the dictionary but discover by means of understanding the local customs and cultural backgrounds. It is the problems of translation, because we only can interpret its meaning instead of special emotions. Furthermore, the special allusions should not be neglected. For instance, all "朱顏", "赤顏", "紅顏" may mean red face, but it is pointless to translate as it is, because "朱顏" represents youth; we call a beauty "紅顏"; "赤顏" hints embarrassment. We cannot roughly interpret them as a red face even though we keep their implication for the needs of writing or the maintainance of their styles by reason of not expressing their involvements. In fact, "朱顏" which represents youth should be translate to "a pink face", because the English idiom "in the pink of condition" and American idiom "in the pink" means vigorous, healthy. As for "紅顏", was named for a beauty, may interpret as "a rose face" because "rose" can stand for a beauty such as "the rose of Hong Kong". Last, it does not matter how we translate "赤顏", what kinds embarrassment, as "a blashed face", because we will realize its true meaning when we see it.

After analysis, we find that the biggest problem of translation is to comprehend the real implication of words. A translator can translate fluently after solving this problem.

Grammar is another problem for a beginner of English learning. Chinese grammar is more flexible than English—many participles can be omitted, positions of words and phrases are sometimes changable. The characteristics of Chinese are brief and clear—seldom having compound sentences and parenthesis, as a simple sentence consists of a subject

matter. The length of English sentence often express the writer's passions, as compared with English sentences —its complexity is outstanding—Chinese seems loose and invariable. It is laborious to read long sentences because it may change. No matter how complicated the sentence organization is, it still has grammatical constructions. It takes a couple years of constant practice of structure analyses to make a Chinese fully understand English grammar well. There are two kinds of mistakes in translation—to misunderstand the meaning of words and to confuse the grammatical structures of sentences. The first one is unavoidable, because we have to read, write and think constantly for a long time to realize the meaning thoroughly. But grammar is systematic and memorable, thus the latter is unforgivable. In addition a translator should pay special attention to the position of phrases, rhymes, and the length of sentences.

The Methods of Translation

We may divide translation into several classification literal translation, free translation and eclecticism. The advantages of these three methods are being argued by antecedents of translation. The literal translation is to interpret strictly word for word, no matter whether it is natural and fluent or not. The free translation is to give the general meaning for adapting the normality of Chinese. The loyalty to the text is the purpose of the literal translation; the fluency of expression is that of the free translation. As for eclecticism, they purpose to use the literal translation if it is acceptable, otherwise the free translation is used. Before we pick out the best way, let us first understand their ideas.

I. Literal Translation:

a. Mr. Tong Jen Chian: I think the literal

translation is to translate strickly word for word, but the free translation is to express the meaning. It seems that Literal Translation: Text = Translation; Free Translation: Text — x = Translation.

b. Mr. Mong Hsian Chen: The literal translation is loyal to the exact interpretation instead of being bound by English grammar of sentence construction.

II. Free Translation:

a. Mr. Tu Cho Chow: For readers's convenience, the free translation is the best method, but it should not miss the real meaning.

b. Mr. Yu Hsio Wu: We may use the free translation to translate some sociological books, to delete the illustrated materials not suitable to the national characteristics. It saves the readers's time to read useless materials.

III. Eclecticism

a. Mr. Yu Shan Yuan: Both Literal Translation and Free Translation are too radical, as well as the also have disadvantages. It is perfect if we use the free translation but loyal to the text at the same time.

b. Mr. Cheng Shih Yi: One translation, I propose Monism—that the difference between Literary translation and Free translation is due to the extent in place of the sorts. The best translation is idiomatically interpreted precisely to the meaning of the text.

c. Mr. Chu Chun Yi: The literal translation and the free translation are acceptable. But the literal translation should be properly accomodated for fluent expression; the free translation should avoid being too vacant to miss the implication. Translators can show his

excellence in either way.

- d. Mr. Sun Kuei Ting: Both methods are adoptable, yet a translator should prevent the restraint of literal translation and the overrunning of the free translation.

In conclusion, the majority favor the eclecticism. Besides, the division of Literal Translation and Free Translation does not actually exist. There is a saying to express the meaning, because language expresses thoughts and feelings. A good translation is to translate English into fluent Chinese that both reserve its original style and the expression of the sentence structure at the same time. It should not affect the literal translation that a translator use proper Chinese language customs to interpret the original text.

One may compare the procedure of translation with the assimilation of the new and excretion of the old in a human's body. It becomes the new elements after thorough digestion and adequate absorption of foods. Readers can wholly receive what is translated only when it is with faithful Chinese. To translate is harder than to write, because a translator must comprehend the implication of the writer and revise it with another language correctly. So some people call translation "Recreation".

The Ideal Teaching Method of Learning A Foreign Language

In order to acquire new knowledge and keep up with other countries translation work is very important. At the present time, the reading abilities of the Chinese students is too slow to reach the translating level. The most important thing of today is to improve their abilities. In addition to the improvement of the English Teaching; we must pay attention to the methods of teaching, such as selecting proper texts, material-distribut-

ing, environment-arranging, to enhance the abilities of students and the effect of English training. Unfortunately, the English teachers in Taiwan seldom do any research and think about these methods, instead they just teach as others do or according to what they please. Thus, it becomes an education without any improvement. Presently our educators commit the error of teaching foreign languages—to let adults learn foreign languages the way children do to their native language. The neglect the fact the adults and children have different backgrounds of learning. Because the adults are used to their own language voices, adopting a foreign language late in life is not an easy task.

Theoretically, the adults should use the way the children do to native tongue to learn foreign language. Because children not only have a natural instinct but also a desire to listen and pronounce sounds. Parents should make use of this instinct and desire to build a learning environment by forcing the children to use grammar of the English language, to learn effectively. The adults should use the same method. Though it is hard to reach this point according to the learning surroundings of Taiwan. Because the adults have already been influenced by the Chinese background, it's impossible to use English as the mother tongue. In my opinion, the adult learning a foreign language should be voluntary according to the scientific principles of language constructions with their mother tongue's constructions and the natural principles of language learning, that is, first, emphasize listening comprehension and conversation at first, and then improve their abilities of reading, writing and translating.

According to nature, teachers of foreign languages should be imaginative and model the classroom on real life. They teach a series of conversation in

daily-use and let students play different roles with various attitudes and tempers at various places or time. Of course many questions will arise after children's meditation, so teachers should assign grammar books as reference after class, to let students realize the problems mentioned in grammar books by himself. But now in Taiwan, the aim of English-teaching is to promot to a higher schook, the most important material in the textbook becomes a pattern practice, grammar and conjugations of verbs. Numerous by products of English teaching are sold by book stores. This practice emphasises the programmed method, practice once, twice, even three times. The teachers

force the students to memorize. The result is obvious, that is, no matter how long one learn the foreign language, he never can speak that language. Overemphasis on grammar practice can transfer children's interests and energies from real life to the boresome textbooks. It is the tragedy of foreign-language education that discards the basic purpose of languages. Finally, I cry out to abandon the belief "Grammar First"! to let students learn foreign language directly. So that they can utilize and develop their innate knowledge and natural ability to carry out the real aims of language learning.