

A Study of Cultural Symbols of Plant Images in Russian-Chinese Translation

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Abstract. In Russian and Chinese languages, some plant images are respectively given special meanings and become special cultural symbols with symbolic meanings. Due to the cultural differences between China and Russia, the phenomenon of cultural symbol vacancy naturally arises. From the cultural perspective of translation and based on Sorokin's theory of cultural vacancy, this paper studies the cultural symbols of plant images in Russian and Chinese languages, and then explores the methods of translating plant images in Russian-Chinese translation in order to guide the practice of Russian-Chinese translation.

Keywords: Russian-Chinese translation; plant image; cultural vacancy.

1. Introduction

In the process of cross-cultural communication, cultural conflicts are inevitable because of the different social environments, historical origins, folk customs, ways of thinking and aesthetic perceptions of the communicating parties. The message which is self-evident in the native language may be difficult to be understood or deviated by the communicators of other nationalities, and the root cause of this cultural conflict is cultural vacancy. Cultural vacancy means that the cultural information carried by one language has no counterpart in another language, which is the main obstacle to cross-cultural communication and translation.

2. Theory of cultural vacancy

According to Sorokin, filling the "cultural vacancy" is a key link in the realisation of cross-cultural communication and one of the main means of achieving cultural exchange and communication among different nationalities. Cultural vacancy is divided into three categories: national psychological vacancy or subject vacancy, communicative activity vacancy, and cultural space vacancy.[1] Some animals, plants, colours, numbers and other things are given special meanings in specific cultures, and they become a kind of special cultural symbols with symbolic meanings.

In cross-cultural communication, the symbolism of cultural symbols is one of the categories of cultural space vacancy, i.e. cultural symbol vacancy.[1] People in China and Russia also have different understandings and perceptions of plant images precisely because of their different geography, history, religion, culture, values and ways of thinking, and even the same plant may be given different symbolic meanings. The following will analyse the vacancy of cultural symbols in Russian-Chinese translation through some plant images.

3. Comparison of Cultural Symbols of Russian and Chinese Plant Images

3.1 Birch Tree

The birch tree has a deep significance for Russians. The birch tree is hardy and is mainly found in the Far East and Eastern Siberia. The birch tree symbolises the spirit of the Russian nation, with its tall trunk and straight posture, it is a symbol of strength. The Russians call it the national tree. It is not only a symbol of the national spirit of Russia, in many Russian literary works, the birch tree also indicates the purity of women, goodness, strength, fidelity to love.[2] The birch tree has a

special place in the hearts of the Russian people. Since ancient times, Russian writers and poets have been singing the praises of the birch tree in their poetry and prose, because for them the birch tree is a very beautiful and beneficial tree.

In Russian language and culture birch often means "girl", "fiancée" or "gentle woman". The adjective "белая (white)" or "кудрявая (curly)" is often used to modify the birch tree. Many Russian poets and writers glorified the birch tree in their works, and during the Great Patriotic War the word "birch" acquired the symbolic meaning of "motherland". In the sentence "Русские плакучие берёзы склонились у могил погибших солдат. (Russian weeping birches bow at the graves of fallen soldiers.)" the birch tree symbolises the Motherland - the Mother. She grieves for her dead heroes and children.

In Chinese language and culture, the birch tree has almost no cultural symbolism.

3.2 White Poplar

In Russian culture, the white poplar is an ominous tree. The Orthodox Russians call it accursed tree. In addition to this, the poplar is also symbolised as "timid" and "weak". In Russian, to describe a person's fear, one can use the phrase "дрожит, как осинный лист (to tremble like the leaves of a poplar)."

In China, on the other hand, the poplar tree symbolises the qualities of tenacity of life and not being afraid of the wind and rain, and Mao Dun highly praised the spirit of the poplar in his work "Poplar Salute". The poplar tree is used to glorify the noble spirit and strong will of the Chinese people to fight in unity, to be indomitable, and to persist in resisting the war to the end.

3.3 Rowan Tree

The rowan tree has a very important national emotional significance in Russia, as well as the birch, it is the "national tree" of Russia, which is very popular and has a lot of significance. Rowan trees can be found everywhere in Russia and express the love for the motherland and the homeland. This is why many poets and writers have given it the meaning of the homeland and the motherland. The rowan tree with its reddish flowers, fruits and its bright colour symbolises a beautiful girl and good love.[3] It is described and praised in many folk songs and poems. In Russian folklore, the rowan tree is compared to a "delicate, sentimental, isolated and helpless girl or woman".[4] When the rowan tree bears red fruits, the Russians say: "Зарделать рябина — макушка лета. (When the rowan tree begins to bear red fruits, it is already mid-summer.)"

In Chinese culture, on the other hand, the rowan tree has no cultural symbolism.

3.4 Camellia

When camellias bloom, white flowers bloom 25 days out of the month, and red flowers bloom on only 5 days.[5] This is why the camellia has been characterised as having a "changeable personality". The Russians believe that the camellia is beautiful but has no heart. Therefore, they compare it to women who are beautiful outside but cold inside. In addition, the cultural symbolism of the camellia in Western culture also originates from the French writer Alexandre Dumas' *The Lady of the Camellias*, which is used as a metaphor for a woman who is a womanizer or a socialite.[6]

In Chinese culture, because of its bright red colour, the camellia is often associated with martyrs and blood, which is a symbol of "heroism" and "victory". The Chinese often compare it to the camellia flower with those warriors who died bravely on the battlefield.

4. The way of translating images of plants in Russian-Chinese translation

4.1 Expressions of cultural symbolism vacancy

It is clear from the above that the vacancy of cultural symbolism of animal images in the Russian and Chinese languages in intercultural communication activities and translation is manifested in the following two aspects:

(1) The images of plants have obvious cultural symbolism only in Russian, but not in Chinese: birch tree, rowan tree.

(2) Plant images are rich in cultural symbolism in both Russian and Chinese languages, but with different meanings: white poplar, camellia.

4.2 Translation Strategies for Differences in Plant Cultural Symbols

In the process of Russian-Chinese translation, it is necessary to fully recognise the cultural symbolism vacancy of these plant images, to truly understand the cultural connotation of the two countries, and to achieve a truly reciprocal translation. In view of the phenomenon of the vacancy of cultural symbolism of animal images in China and Russia, the following three methods are suggested to fill the vacancy: the method of direct translation; the method of meaning selection; and the method of substitution.

The method of direct translation is mostly used to translate the words of plant images that have cultural symbolism only in Russian, and it is mostly found in the texts of poetry genre. The translator preserves the imagery of the work and makes the translation more aesthetic. In the author's opinion, a note should be added to the text to assist the reader in understanding the cultural symbolism of the corresponding imagery, and thus in grasping the overall meaning of the poem.

For example[7]:

Красною кистью рябина зажглась	花椒树点燃
----- Марина Цветаева	红色的珠串。
Красною кистью	树叶飘落，
Рябина зажглась.	我降生。
Падали листья.	
Я родилась.	数百口大众
Спорили сотни	争执不休。
Колоколов.	今天是周六，
День был субботний:	圣徒约翰纪念日。
Иоанн Богослов.	
Мне и доньне	直到如今
Хочется грызть	我依然喜欢
Жаркой рябины	咬一咬热烈的花椒树
Горькую кисть.	那苦涩的珠串。
	刘文飞译

The method of meaning selection means that when translators translate plant images, if the context does not need to highlight the cultural symbolism of the plant, or if the symbolism of the same plant image is completely different in different cultural contexts, the translator tries to avoid choosing figurative words that are prone to misinterpretation of the symbolism, and chooses general terms for translation. The term selection method is mostly used for the translation of plant images with different symbolic meanings in Chinese and Russian cultural backgrounds. It respects the author of the original text and does not cause misinterpretation by the readers of the translated culture.

For example[8]:

Эта комната, окнами на запад и на север, занимала чуть ли не половину всего дома. В одно окно, на золоте расчищающейся за тучами зари, видна была столетняя, вся чёрная плакучая берёза.

——И. А. Бунин. Грамматика любви

一些窗户朝西、一些窗户朝北的大客厅几乎占据了大宅的一半。一扇窗户外面有一株发黑的百年老垂桦，矗立在乌云背后那放晴后的晚霞射出的金光中。

——陈馥译

The method of substitution refers to the replacement of the plant image vocabulary in the original text with vocabulary that already exists in the culture of the language into which the translation is being made and that expresses the corresponding symbolism. The substitution method is mostly used in cases where the cultural symbolism in the two languages is different. It can ensure the realisation of the communicative purpose of the original language without damaging the overall artistic effect of the original text.

For example[9]:

Вы видели сами, вы были свидетелем в это утро: я сделал все, что мог сделать отец, — но отец кроткий и снисходительный; теперь же на сцену выйдет отец иного сорта и тогда — увидим, посмотрим: заслуженный ли старый воин одолеет интригу, или бесстыдная камелия войдет в благороднейшее семейство.

——Ф. М. Достоевский. Идиот

您自己也看到了，今儿白天的事情您是目击者。我做了一个父亲所能做的一切，但那是一个温顺、迁就的父亲。接下来登上舞台的将是大不一样的父亲，那时且看：究竟是一个久经沙场的老兵将战胜一场阴谋，还是一个不知羞耻的茶花女将进入一户清白高尚的家。

——荣如德译

5. Summary

In Russian-Chinese translation, when encountering the phenomenon of cultural vacancy of plant images, one can choose a suitable translation method among the method of direct translation, the method of meaning selection and the method of substitution according to the type of the plant image. The study of Russian-Chinese plant images and their translation methods is of great benefit in translation practice.

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