Strategies of Translating Chinese Realias Into Russian Language

Olesya Pavlova
Chinese Language
Moscow City University
Moscow, Russia
wodeyoujian@mail.ru

Natalia Bogachenko
European and Oriental Languages
Sholom-Aleichem Priamurysky State University
Biobidzhazh, Russia
nataliya-bogachenko@yandex.ru

Ruslan Bazhenov
Information Systems, Mathematics and Legal Informatics
Sholom-Aleichem Priamurysky State University
Biobidzhazh, Russia
r-i-bazhenov@yandex.ru

Valentina Vashkyavichus
Chinese Language
Moscow City University
Moscow, Russia
vashkyavichusvu@mgpu.ru

Abstract—The language of the media vividly demonstrates the development of the language system, including the functioning of culture-specific concepts, namely culture-bound words or realias in modern languages. In various works on translation studies, such notions as realias and word-realias are differentiated. Linguistic realias or word-realias are lexical units, which designate unique objects and phenomena characteristic of a cultural, social and historical development of a nation and alien to other peoples, that is, they are the verbal expression of specific features of national cultures. The translation of these concepts is one of the most complicated issues in the theory of translation, because it is connected with a whole range of heterogeneous components, namely the translation aspect of the country studies, the erudition of a translator, the background knowledge of both a reader of the translation and a reader of the original. The study examines strategies and procedures of translating Chinese realias into the Russian language. The authors describe culture-bound words and the strategies of their translation from the positions of Russian, Chinese and other linguists.

Keywords—realia; linguistic realia (word-realia); culture-bound word; word-realia translation; strategies of word-realia translation

I. INTRODUCTION

When the international cooperation in the sphere of economy, politics and culture of Russia and China is strengthening, the role of language as a mediator becomes especially important. The language of mass media unites all forms of speech, and the function of the international propaganda of mass media becomes more essential at the same time. Consequently, the difficulties of translating ‘specific vocabulary’, namely culture-bound words included in various articles of modern media, are an important component in the study of language and culture, and also a problem for translators.

Nowadays, both Russian and foreign linguists pay a lot of attention to the study of ‘specific vocabulary’, however, there is still no prevailing view on this subject. Moreover, there are opposing views on the concept of ‘realia or culture bound word’, and this term is used by many authors with different meanings.

The problem of translating culture-bound words in journalistic texts is one of the most difficult tasks facing not only the reader but also the translator; this issue at the same time attracts the attention of many linguists and theorists of translation. Since this task is associated with a number of heterogeneous elements, that is the translation aspect of the country studies, the culture of the translator, the background knowledge of the reader of the translation in comparison with the usual perception and psychology of the reader of the original.

The study of realias used in the texts of modern newspapers and magazines clearly demonstrates the processes of language development. The analysis of language peculiarities of mass media reveals the problems of language functioning in the modern world, as well as its use in men’s intellectual and practical activities. Thus, the research into different strategies and procedures employed for translating Chinese realias of mass media is an important component in the study of language and culture.

It is known that in any historical period, when the cultures of two different countries meet there are unexpected difficulties in transferring the meanings of words that are not familiar to another culture. The question is how to fully understand the sacral meaning of the word, which belongs to the culture of the other ‘obscure’ country. In this regard, distinct elements can be singled out; they include, first of all, objects, and phenomena, designated by the concept of ‘realia’ [1].

The purpose of this study is to identify realias of media texts and to analyse the strategies and procedures of their translation from Chinese into Russian.
Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research (ASSEHR), volume 312

II. METHODS AND MATERIALS

The culture-bound words (more than 250 units) are selected from Confucius Institute magazines (2010-2015) and the webpages of such newspapers as Xinhua, Renmin Ribao and Guangming Ribao. Such a number of studied language units provide an opportunity to identify and analyse the main strategies of their translation from the Chinese language into the Russian language. The Chinese culture-bound words from the original journalistic texts are correlated with their Russian variants to examine their procedures of translation.

The main methods which are used to carry out this research are
- descriptive, namely the inventory of culture-bound words;
- quantitative, namely the calculation of the number of analysed lexemes in the Chinese language;
- analysis of translation strategies and procedures;
- comparative, namely the identification of similarities and differences in the translation of realias from Chinese into Russian.

III. THEORETICAL CONCEPTS OF THE RESEARCH

In the context of the problem under consideration, theoretical concepts of the definition and translation of culture-bound words into other languages are of a great significance. These concepts are formulated in the works of many scientists, e.g. A.D. Schweitzer, A.F. Guerra, I.I. Durdureanu, K. Djachy & M. Pareshishvili, S. Vlahov & S. Florin, T.I. Tkachuk, V.A. Fedorov, V.N. Komissarov, V.V. Vinogradov, and others [2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10].

The term ‘realia’ has been widely used in translation studies since the middle of the XX century after the Bulgarian researchers S. Vlahov and S. Florin published their work ‘The Untranslatable in Translation’. According to the authors, the realias are a vivid example of untranslatable elements of the text [6].

So, O.S. Akhmanova considers realias to be ‘1. ...various factors studied by foreign linguistics, such as the state system of the country, the history and culture of the people, language contacts of speakers of the language, etc. in terms of their reflection in the language. 2. Objects of material culture’ [11].

D.E. Rosental and M.A. Telenkova in their Dictionary-Reference of Linguistic Terms define culture-bound words as ‘objects of material culture that serve as the basis for the nominative meaning of the word’ [12].

L.L. Nelubin in his Explanatory Translation Dictionary gives four definitions of the term ‘realia’ 1. Words or expressions, denoting objects, concepts, situations, that do not exist in the practical experience of people speaking other languages... 4. Words, denoting national-specific features of life’. The second and third definitions are quotations from the Dictionary of Linguistic Terms by O.S. Akhmanova (definition number 1) and the Dictionary-Reference of Linguistic Terms by D.E. Rosental and M.A. Telenkova. In the abstract to his dictionary, L.L. Nelubin notes that ‘...the dictionary is a reference book, which contains 2028 dictionary entries, extradited from 224 sources’ [13].

The researchers draw our attention to the fact that the problem of translating culture-bound words does not lie in possibility or impossibility to translate realias, but the problem is how to do it [6]. The authors propose two strategies of translating such words, that is, transcription and translation. The proper translation is regarded as a creation of neologisms by means of calque, partial calque, adaptation, semantic shifting of an existing word. The approximate translation includes substitution with a generic expression or a more specific term, functional analogue, description, explanation, interpretation; contextual translation [6].

A.V. Fedorov believes that it is not right to talk about ‘translation’ of realias, because realia is an extralinguistic concept and cannot ‘be translated’; we can talk about the translation of the names of realias (culture-bound words or word-realias). A.V. Fedorov offers four ways of translating culture-bound words, namely transliteration or transcription (full or partial); creation of a new word, a compound word or a word combination; approximate translation; translation with a more specific term (hyponym) [8].

Therefore, various works on translation studies distinguish such concepts as realias and word-realias (culture-bound words). In particular, V.V. Vinogradov, considering the strategies of translating realias, talks about word-realias or culture-bound words and believes that there are five most common strategies of translating such words, that is transcription, substitution with a generic expression or a more specific term, periphrasis, approximate translation and calque [10].

Such Chinese scholars as 丛艳萍 (Cong Yanping), 钟菊生 (Niu Jusheng), 秦耀咏 (Qin Yaoyong), 孙力 (Sun Li), 孙荣栋 (Sun Rongdong) and 满薇 (Man Wei), 田晋晔 (Tian Jinye) and 刘兵 (Liu Bing), 王华 (Wang Hua), 王慧 (Wang Hui), 王黎生 (Wang Lishen), 徐天舒 (Xu Tianshu), 叶丽娜 (Ye Lina), 于家民 (Yu Jiamin) [14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25], and others have studied the problem of realias. It is worth mentioning that the majority of Chinese linguists, considering the term ‘realia’, mainly draw upon the works of famous Russian and foreign authors.

孙荣栋 (Sun Rongdong), 满薇 (Man Wei), 叶丽娜 (Ye Lina) believe that realia is a lexical unit of a language (words and set expressions) that does not have full equivalents and partial equivalents in other languages. However, the authors think that such a statement as ‘realias cannot be translated’ is incorrect and point out that any language can express different concepts. Even if there are no such peculiar words in the language system, the content of them can always be transferred into languages and specific speech situations by using a number of strategies and procedures [18, 24].

Researchers 钟菊生 (Niu Jusheng), 秦耀咏 (Qin Yaoyong) believe that realias are some words in a language that have no precise equivalents in other languages, they vividly express national identity, and appear only when comparing two specific languages and cultures. Due to this
peculiarity of culture-bound words, the translator cannot often use general principles and strategies of translation, and cannot find equivalents or analogues that are identical to original words [16, 17].

徐天天 (Xu Tianshu) considers vocabulary as the main element of the language and a culture bearer, that is the vocabulary reflects a unique national colour. As languages and cultures have a lot in common, there are precise or partial equivalents between different languages. However, as a result of differences among languages and cultures, some words of a language do not have precise equivalents in other languages; they are called realias [23].

丛艳萍 (Cong Yanping) and 王华 (Wang Hua) think that such culture-specific vocabulary is a vocabulary that refers to objects which exist in a culture and are absent in a different one. This vocabulary has vivid national characteristics. Its uniqueness is manifested both at the level of proper realias, and at the level of cultural connotations, so it is a connotative culture-specific vocabulary [14, 20].

于佳民 (Yu Jiamin) taking into account the works of Russian linguists, notes that E.M. Vereshchagin and V.G. Kostomarov, when comparing the Russian language with other languages, subdivide lexical units into equivalent (precise equivalent), partial equivalent and non-equivalent. The number of non-equivalent words and expressions for different language pairs can vary significantly. For example, when comparing Russian with Chinese, it has been found that the number of such words in the Russian language is about 9% [25].

Some linguists interpret the term ‘realia or culture-bound word’ from the point of view of the theory 词汇空缺 (cihui kongque i.e. lexical vacancy). So, 田晋晔 (Tian Jinye) and 刘兵 (Liu Bing) describing ‘lexical vacancy’ explain that some culture-bound lexical unit of a language is vacant in other languages, that is, this unit does not have an equivalent. In fact, the lexical vacancy is a phenomenon of a cultural vacancy resulting from universality and difference between different cultures [19].

王黎生 (Wang Lishen) says that the language is both a culture bearer and a direct reflection of this culture. The cultural formation of different nations, reflected at the language level, manifests itself in a variety of linguistic differences, namely a fairly rich vocabulary, denoting some specific objects, can exist in a language, but can be absent in other languages, that causes a lexical vacancy, and thus creates some difficulty of understanding and translation. This very phenomenon is called a lexical vacancy [22].

孙力 (Sun Li), talking about the lexical vacancy, believes that this phenomenon is a specific vocabulary that exists only in a language, and is absent in other languages, namely this is a linguistic non-equivalent phenomenon. This phenomenon appears as a result of economic and geographical characteristics of a nation. Thanks to them, this nation forms a specific culture, a unique religion, unique customs and even eating habits [17].

Having analysed various opinions, it can be concluded that linguistic realias or word-realias (culture-bound words) are lexical units that denote unique objects and phenomena characteristic of the cultural, social and historical development of a nation and alien to other nations, that is, they are a verbal expression of specific characteristics of national cultures.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Translation theorists and translators offer a variety of strategies and procedures of translating culture-bound words, including into the list one or another strategy and not taking into account the others.

1. Calque. Different authors describe this strategy in their own way, although the main idea of this strategy is to transfer the semantic content of culture-bound words from the source language to the target language [26]. According to S. Vlahov and S. Florin a distinctive feature of calque is the substitution of realias by means of adopting a word or creating a semantic neologism [6]. G.D. Tomakhin considers this procedure as precise or literal translation [27]. A.V. Fedorov and V.N. Komissarov talk about a creation of a new word or a compound word by using elements and morphological relations existing in the language [8, 9]. V.S. Vinogradov proposes to employ this strategy for transferring authors’ neologisms, charactonyms and scientific terminology [10]. However, in this paper we take into account only the main purpose of this strategy, namely the transference of a word in its literal meaning either lexical or structural. The translation of the following realias can illustrate the use of calque.

富二代 – rich people of the second generation (in the meaning of the offspring of rich parents, slang ‘gilded youth’);

农民工 – a rural migrant worker (in the meaning of seasonal workers, seasonal agricultural workers, peasants; contracted workers from villages);

文房四宝: 笔、墨、纸、砚 – four treasures of the study, that is a brush, ink, paper, an inkstand;

冻龄美女 – a beauty of frozen age (in the meaning of a woman who is trying to look younger than her age);

网红 (a short form of 网络红人) – to enjoy success online, popular online (in the meaning of Internet celebrity)

吃小灶 – to eat first class food (in the meaning of to be given special treatment / to be treated in a favoured way; to get benefits, privileges);

跳槽 – to change a cushy job (in the meaning of to change jobs / job-hopping).

Special attention should be paid to a mixed strategy of translation, which includes several varieties. This is due to the fact that each strategy and procedure of the transference of Chinese culture-bound words has its advantages and disadvantages. Therefore, it is necessary to use combined strategies of translation of culture-specific units. The translator should not use only one procedure, but it is better to combine them, for example transcription and descriptive translation,
Calque and explanation, or to explain or comment on each realia.

2. The group ‘calque and explanation / comment’ draws special attention. Here are some examples.

大红灯笼 – a big red lantern, which, according to Chinese tradition, is hung very high at the entrance to the house for the Yuanyao holiday and for the New Year, it is a symbol of unity and happy family;

光盘行动 – the movement of clean plates, this movement began long ago in a small and non-public organization of the city of Beijing, members of the organization belonged to different sectors of industry; their motto was ‘Today, starting with ourselves, do not leave food’, and they called this organization IN33;

铁饭碗 – an iron rice bowl or a ‘guaranteed’ piece of bread (now people say so, if they work in a good public institution, and have a secure employment and a steady income);

剪纸 – papercutting or Chinese ancient folk art – various patterns are cut out of paper with scissors, these patterns decorate homes for holidays, weddings, etc.;

住房梦 – real estate of dreams, modern young people dream to buy a comfortable, beautiful apartment to live in prosperity;

猜灯谜 – a riddle (rebus) on a coloured (painted) lantern, on the holiday of lanterns, Yuaxiao (on 15th August according to the lunar calendar); riddles/puzzles are written on lanterns to guess them (Spring lantern riddles (guessing game at the Lantern Festival, at the end of the Spring festival);

面子文化 – face culture, that is dignity, honour, reputation. An important part of the traditional Chinese culture, a unique cultural psychological phenomenon of Chinese people, namely the Chinese are especially concerned about preserving their faces, that is they value their honour and fear losing their ‘faces’ / reputation;

礼金簿 (礼帐) – cash receipts and payments book, which is used at the wedding to record monetary wedding gifts from guests.

3. Transcription and explanation (description). Transcription is a procedure of transcoding foreign words and their subsequent recording with the help of the letters of the alphabet of the receiving language without using any additional characters and without giving any additional meanings to these letters. In this case, the phonemes of the source language are replaced by the phonemes of the borrowing language, which are closer to the first ones in pronunciation. Transcription involves an introduction of an appropriate culture-bound word into the text of the translation by using graphic means of the target language with the maximum phonetic approximation to its original phonetic form allowed by these means.

It is worth noting that the abundance of transcribed words can cause an overload of the text with realias, which does not help the reader to understand the original, but makes it more difficult for him. In such cases where transcription is impossible and undesirable, a mixed translation strategy is used [1].

篆书、隶书、楷书、草书、行书 – ‘zhuanshu, lishu, kaishu, caoshu, xingshu’, styles of writing characters used in the history of the development of the Chinese language;

快板 – ‘kuabian’, Chinese traditional variation in entertainment, in the form of folk poems, ditties, recited to the blows of bamboo planks;

负翁 – ‘fuweng’, a person living in debt (on credit) / who receives a Bank loan to buy an apartment, car, etc. (The word came from Hong Kong. In 1997, there was an Asian financial crisis, which resulted in a huge economic loss for Hong Kong. That time many rich people became poor and were burdened with debts because they had bought buildings on credit. They were called ‘fuweng’);

葫芦丝 – ‘hulusi’, a Chinese traditional musical instrument (a kind of free reed wind instrument / cucurbit flute);

粽子 – ‘zongzi’, a dish made of glutinous rice wrapped in reed (bamboo) leaves, cooked to celebrate the Duanwu holiday (annually on 5th May according to the lunar calendar) on the day of commemoration of Qu Yuan, a famous poet of Warring States period;

四合院 – ‘siheyuan’, a type of traditional Chinese residence, that is four buildings are placed with facades inward on the sides of a rectangular courtyard (a courtyard house with a fully enclosed courtyard);

支付宝 – ‘zhifubao’, Alipay, online payment platform in China, which is a part of the Alibaba company;

元宵 – ‘yuaxiao’, Chinese traditional sweetness (sticky rice dumplings with filling), which is eaten on the Yuanxiao holiday (annually on 15th January according to the lunar calendar);

火锅 – ‘huoguo’ – ‘Chinese hotpot’, the Chinese method of cooking hot dishes from vegetables, meat, etc.;

水立方 – ‘shuilifang’ Water Cube, the main swimming venue of Beijing 2008 Olympic Games and one of the symbolic constructions of the Beijing Olympics (nickname of Beijing National Aquatics Centre);

微信 – ‘Weixin’, a popular mobile multifunctional application for smartphones in China (WeChat).

4. Calque and transcription. This strategy is used very rarely among all the analysed procedures of translating realias, but still deserves our attention.

中国三大传统节日: 春节、端午节、中秋节 – Three great traditional festivals in China, namely Chunjie (the Spring Festival), Duanwujiue (the Midsummer Festival), Zhongqiujiue (The Mid-Autumn Festival).
5. Approximate translation is the most common when translating culture-bound words. There are different tools within the strategy of approximate translation.

5.1. The descriptive translation consists in explicated the denotative context of lexical units of the source language by means of amplifications that reveal the essential features of the phenomenon designated by lexical units. This procedure is considered to be very cumbersome and uneconomical, so it is not always possible to use it when translating texts. Translators often combine two strategies, namely transcription or calque and descriptive translation, using for the latter a footnote or a comment. This makes it possible to combine the brevity and economy of such a strategy as transcription with the explanation of the semantics of these units, achieved through descriptive translation. At the same time, it is an indicator of a subjective factor in solving translation problems.

月光族 – a group of people who live paycheck to paycheck; people who spend all their monthly income without having a bank deposit (literally moonlight group / figuratively, slang those who spend their monthly income even before they earn their next salary);

铁交椅 – a guaranteed place of work (about an official) (literally iron arm-chair);

赴美生子 – to move to the United States and give birth to a baby. Chinese pregnant women go to the United States to give birth to a child there, so that children can receive American citizenship.

5.2. Substitution with a functional analogue. It is referred to the selection of the functional equivalent, which causes the reader of the translation the same associations as the reader of the source text. The use of this strategy implies the search for the nearest unit of the target language for the culturally-specific vocabulary of the source language. This means that for the translation of source language units, equal but not equivalent concepts will be found in the target language. When employing the strategy of approximate translation, as a rule, the neutral vocabulary is used [27]. However, according to A.D. Schweitzer, the functional analogue ‘is an element of the final utterance, causing a similar reaction in the Russian reader [1]’. Therefore, this procedure should be used carefully, because it creates the possibility of replacing an original realia with a different, local one, which can create false illusions about the fact that this realia exists in a country or region where it does not actually exist.

狐狸精 (literally fox breed / seed) – a seductress, a temptress. In Chinese traditional mythology, ‘fox-spirit’ (vixen / witch / enchantress) is a good or evil spirit;

土豪 (literally local rich man, local tyrant) – ‘a new Chinese’ (nouveau riche). It is a popular Internet expression, which denotes a very rich but uncultured person.

5.3. The strategy of substitution with a generic expression or a more specific term (hypo-hyperonymic translation) conveys a similar, but not identical concept. This strategy of translation results in the disappearance of the intended connotation of an expression or a word of the original text; the national colour is completely lost, although the translation is made as clear as possible to the reader [28].

Sometimes a generic concept which is used in translation may include several concepts and even culturally-marked units. Implying the same strategy, many authors give it different names. So, for example, V.S. Vinogradov describes it as a hypo-hyperonymic translation, A.V. Fedorov mentions only the hypernymic one (the hypernym is a word of a more specific meaning, and the hyperonym is a word of a more generic meaning) [28].

外国女 – girls outside of the decent (literally unlicensed prostitutes / girls who are nominally models and actresses but are, in fact, working as escort). The character of such girls’ job is to acquaint each other with rich clients and at the same time take ‘percentage’ or ‘payoff’ from each other.

As a result of statistical data processing, it is found that the most commonly used strategy of translating realias is calque and explanation (comment) (43%), it is followed by transcription and explanation (23%) and descriptive translation (16%). The strategies of calque (7%), substitution with a functional analogue (4%), substitution with a generic expression or a more specific term (3%), calque and transcription (0.4%) are used quite rarely.

V. CONCLUSION

The main criteria for assessing the translation of a particular realia are the transfer of semantic information and the preservation of national and historical colour of these language units. Studying the features of the translation of culture-bound words, it is necessary to remember that they are a component of background knowledge and language competence. When transferring realias, it should be taken into account that the recipient of the translation does not have necessary background knowledge, so certain transformations are required to make in the text of the translation.

The use of each strategy depends on the context, and it is necessary to choose a strategy for each situation. Therefore, it is no possible to consider any of these tools preferable without taking into account the specific situation. It is worth noting that the national specificity of the language plays a very important role in the translation process. Thus, the translation is made by taking into consideration the component analysis of language units and the existence of regular interlanguage correspondences.

It is found that not all translation transformations can be used to transfer this group of vocabulary for various reasons. The study of strategies and procedures, which help to convey linguistic realias in the text of the translation, reveals the depth of the problem of discrepancy or incomplete coincidence of the worlds in which different language communities live, and allows us to understand the national image of the world, that is necessary to ensure successful communication between nations.

The choice among the strategies and procedures of the translation of culture-bound words depends on the amount of precise and partial equivalents in the target language and is
This subject is relevant for research at any time, as it is connected with the history of society. In connection with technical progress, with the development of intercultural communication, it can be assumed that the interest in translating realias will only grow.

References


