

## **Cultural Mistranslation and Intercultural Communication--A Case Study of Chinese Reports on Zhai Tiantian's Incident in the U.S.A.**

Xiaochi ZHANG

School of Foreign Languages, China West Normal University,

No.1 Shi Da Lu, Nanchong, 637009, Sichuan, P. R. China.

E-mail: [zhangxc66@126.com](mailto:zhangxc66@126.com)

### **Abstract**

*Globalization enters a world in which people of different cultural backgrounds and increasingly comes to depend on one another. To understand and accept cultural differences becomes imperative to be effective in intercultural communication in global society. In this process, translation has played an important role in intercultural mass communication connecting different cultures and different nations. However, people including translators and reporters from another culture sometime misunderstood some incidents and were unbelieving what happened with the specific incident due to mistranslation which resulted in misreports from mass media. Therefore, the author will take Zhai Tiantian's incident in the U.S.A. as a case and make further analysis of the relationship between language and culture, and the function of translation in the intercultural communication. Finally, the author also discusses how to make intercultural translation better in order to promote intercultural communication between different people from different cultural backgrounds.*

**Keywords:** culture, language, mistranslation, intercultural communication, intercultural communication competence

### **1. Introduction**

Globalization enters a world in which people of different cultural backgrounds and increasingly comes to depend on one another. To understand and accept cultural differences becomes imperative to be effective in intercultural communication in global society. "Globalization indicates increasing encountering of culturally and co-culturally diverse members and increasing demands of being aware of global interdependence of people and cultures." (Chen, 2010)

Especially, most people today learn about foreign cultures by reading the international news columns of domestic newspapers or the foreign culture sections of domestic magazine, by watching documentaries, cartoons, soap operas, advertisements directly or indirectly representing foreign cultures on domestic or foreign TV, by watching imported movies, by listening to exotic music, or logging onto millions of websites where national boundaries simply disappear.

In this process, translation has played an important role in intercultural mass communication, connecting different cultures and different nations. However, people including translators and reporters from another culture sometime misunderstood some incidents and were unbelieving what happened with the specific incident due to mistranslation which resulted in misreports from mass media. Therefore, the author will take Zhai Tiantian's incident in the U.S.A. as a case and make further analysis of the relationship between language and culture, and the function of translation in the intercultural communication. Finally, the author also discusses how to make

intercultural translation better in order to promote intercultural communication between different people from different cultural backgrounds.

## **2. A Case**

Zhai Tiantian was from Xi'an in China, and had been studying physics at the Stevens Institute of Technology, in New Jersey of the United States of America since 2003. Zhai studied at Stevens Institute of Technology for a long time and was known to many teachers as a very bright, very clever student. He received bachelor and master's degree and was enrolled in the Ph.D. program studying enterprise systems, a computer-related field.

Zhai Tiantian resided in the United States for more than seven years. He had been arrested on May 16<sup>th</sup> after an argument with his professor over some academic issues. Zhai stated that the argument did not get physical and was just heated bickering; Zhai Tiantian said something along the lines of "at worst, I will risk anything on the line."

The professor then reported the incident to the school security and they picked up Zhai and turned him over to the New Jersey police. Zhai was held in Hudson County jail and was not able to raise the USD20,000 bond. On the same day, Stevens Institute of Technology canceled Zhai's student visa. On the next day, the Immigration and Naturalization Services ordered his arrest. On the third following the incident, the INS issued a deportation order.

According to indictment sheet, Zhai was facing the serious charge of making a terroristic threat. However, Schinelli said "Zhai is charged with making terroristic threats, not with being a terrorist. "Making a terroristic threat is not the same as being accused of being a terrorist. It covers a broad range of offenses and threats. We're not sure what was pushed out there that generated what's probably a hard to believe story in this country. Over (in China), it certainly seems plausible that someone might be thrown in jail because they disagreed with a professor. It's not anything that would happen over here in real life. That's obviously not how things work in an American university."(Henry, 2010)

After the incident, some Chinese media mistranslated, or misunderstand the charges, and reported that Zhai was arrest for questioning authority or clashing with a teacher, and was being charged with a terrorist.

At the same times, officials at the Stevens Institute issued a clarification, saying they were concerned the story was being misreported and that a long-running disciplinary situation has been blown out of proportion into an international incident. The Stevens officials also said that several foreign news reports indicating Zhai was arrested for questioning authorities were incorrect. (Wang and Balazovic, 2010)

## **3. Analysis**

According to the fundamental concepts of intercultural communication, differences in the significance and reliability of messages sent through language and through context are factors in almost all cross-cultural misunderstandings between people from high-context cultures (Chinese culture and most Asian cultures) and low-context cultures (American and most western cultures). The way people communicate is part of their basic cultural software, and it takes considerable effort to modify this cultural programming to adjust to communication situations that are culturally different. The first step are to understand these differences and then

to look for them in every cross-cultural communication situation. By doing this, high-context communicators can learn to use and respond to words differently and low-context communicators can learn to pay attention to context and learn to interpret meaning in terms of the context. If so, we should know the relationship between language and culture, and the relationship between translation and intercultural communication. In this way, we will have better understanding the reason why the Zhai Tiantian's incident's misreport.

### **3.1 Language and culture**

During the processing of information transmission in globalization era, translation plays an important role. Just as the name indicates, translation means transmitting the meaning of one language into another. Translation thus involves two languages, a source language and a target language, between which translation functions as a bridge connecting two kinds of culture(Lin, 2011). Before we make further analysis of the function of translation in the intercultural communication, it is necessary to have a brief look at the relationship between language and culture.

To some extent, the difficulties in translating words or phrases which reflect the social-cultural changes in the present world arise, from the fact that there is a close relationship between language and culture, and words are "symbols for dynamic and explicit features of the culture"(Nida, 1958).

"Language and culture are interdependently and inseparably related. They constitute an integral whole. Though they are by no means the same, neither of them could survive without the other (Li and Lu, 2010). While most linguists would agree that "all cognitive experience and its classification is conveyable in any existing language"(Jacobson, 1959) and it is nearly always possible to establish translation equivalence between sentences, it is often difficult to establish absolute correspondence between related words in two different languages. (Catford, 1967) Meanwhile, different countries have different cultures. "Culture is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one category of people from another."(Hofstede, 1997) Generally speaking, culture is the coherent, learned, shared view a group of people has about life's concerns that ranks what is important, instills attitudes about what things are appropriate, and prescribes behavior, given that some things have more significance than others. (Varner and Beamer, 1995).

Thus, culture and language are intertwined and shape each other. It is impossible to separate the two. Language is not a matter of neutral codes and grammatical rules. Each time we select words, form sentences, and send a message, either oral or written, we also make cultural choice. We all agree that language helps in communicating with people from different backgrounds. However, we may be less aware that cultural literacy is necessary to understand the language being used. If we select language without being aware of the cultural implications, we may at best not communicate well and at worst send the wrong message. (Xu, 2012)

Needless to say, words in themselves do not carry the meaning. The meaning comes out of the context, the cultural usage. Sometimes, different cultures use identical words that have rather different meanings. The results can be humorous, annoying, or costly depending on the circumstances. For example, once, an American university delegation visited its Chinese friendship university and discussed about some exchange program for students, professors, and administrators. Both sides agreed that would be a good idea. The Chinese negotiator from the University Foreign Affairs Office could speak quite good English. In the discussion, both of them used English. However, they used the identical word "administration" when they talked about exchanges between the administrations of the two universities. The surprise came later. For the American, administration in the

university context meant department chair, dean, provost. For the Chinese, administration meant managing staffing in the university.

### **3.2 Translation and culture**

We all know translation plays an important role, such as introducing foreign literature, transmitting media, improving ties and understanding between two peoples, then there is no doubt that the original cultural form has to be lifted to a higher position. For it may be safely assumed, it is the very language-cultural form among others that characterizes a nation and helps the target reader to distinguish the special traits of one nation from those of the other. It may be legitimately argued that if we deprive a nation of its peculiar cultural forms, the borderline between this nation and others will be blurred because culture is highly symbolic and frequently manifests itself in concrete and visible forms. (Xia, 2011) Culture, however, is more expansive. It consists of all the institutions, all the behavior, in fact all the man-made aspects of a very large group of non-homogeneous people (Cullen, 2000)

To some extent, linguistic mistakes in translation are usually very easy to be corrected, however cultural mistakes in translation, especially those that have to do with values, beliefs and concepts, require a great deal of work before they can be corrected. Thus, we may say that cultural errors in translation are the more serious “mistakes” than pure linguistic ones before native persons tend to be intolerant of those cultural mistakes as they consider them as “violations of rules of speaking”(Wolfson, 1983) and interpret them as “bad manners”(Wolfson, 1983).

For example, according to the indictment sheet, Zhai was facing the serious charge of making a terroristic threat. But, Chinese media or other foreign media mistranslated, or misunderstand the charges, and reported that Zhai was being charged with terrorism. Even if some foreign news reported that Zhai’s case was international incident and had stirred much debate.

Debbie Simon, assistant prosecutor for Hudson County, N.J., told ABC News that Zhai was not accused of being a terrorist. People sometimes confuse ‘terroristic threats’ with what we think of as terrorism. Simon said:“ the term ‘terroristic threat’ predates the creation of the ‘terrorist’ as a post 9/11, post-Munich Olympics idea. Generally, the idea comes from instilling terror in the victim. If you threaten to burn down a building, that can be a terroristic threat.” (Zhu, 2010)

Therefore, the Chinese Consulate’s Overseas Chinese Affairs consul Luo Gang, he has previously handled similar cases in which Chinese students ended up in clashes over verbal expressions of actions, “Chinese and American cultures are different, so that what the Chinese regard as acceptable speech may be regarded by Americans as threats. This is an unfortunate incident. Even though the principal intended no harm, he has done himself a great deal of harm. We don’t want to see that. (China Press USA, 2010) And “While I don’t know enough about the incident to say what happened, it’s certainly true that, in general, people speaking a second language don’t always have a complete understanding of the weight of what they’re saying,” said 30-year-old American Eveline Chao, author of the Chinese slang book *Niu Bi* and a Princeton graduate in English. “So it’s certainly possible that someone might curse in a second language and not realize how strong the curse is “, said Chao. (Wang and Balazovic,2010).

No doubt, the contact and communication with people from different cultures is an important way to learn more

about other people and their way of life, including their values, history, habits and even the substance of their personality. We should know that intercultural contact is inevitable in the world today. The communicative behaviors of different cultures frequently disturb us. People may find that such behaviors and words frequently fail to meet their normal expectations, and that translation in intercultural communication is really difficult. Thus, the author think that the importance of the intercultural awareness and intercultural communication competence of the translators and reporters who often play the decisive roles in the communication between people of different cultural backgrounds.

#### **4. Suggestions**

From the above analysis about the case, we may find that translation may not be effective and make a mistake in the intercultural effective and make a mistake in the intercultural context. The communication with people from other cultures can be stressful. As a result, translators or we ourselves may have to make mistakes, be ready to learn from them, adapt to the cultural environment and acquire effective intercultural communication competence. Therefore, the most important thing is to cultivate an intercultural awareness and promote intercultural communication competence.

Firstly, a Chinese famous scholar, Guo Moruo pointed out: "Translation is creative work. Good translation is as good as writing and may be even better than it. A writer must have experience in life, but a translator has to experience what the writer has experienced. At the same time, a translator must not only be proficient in his mother tongue but also have a very good foundation in a foreign language. Therefore, translation is not easier than writing at all." Besides a good knowledge of the two languages, translator should have a good intercultural awareness. In other words, translator should "learn to be able to recognize and treat people from different cultures as simply different persons but not better or worse people, and learn to adjust and adapt our verbal and nonverbal messages accordingly in the intercultural context."(Chen, 2012)

Secondly, translators or reporters should have a good intercultural communication competence. That is, they should become more competent in intercultural communication and possess a high degree of intercultural adroitness which is acquired from these communication skills: message skills, appropriate self-disclosure, behavioral flexibility, interaction management, and social skills. " The behavioral perspective of intercultural communication competence emphasizes the ability to act effectively to achieve the goal of multicultural interdependence and interconnectedness in the global village." (Chen, 2010). If translators or reporters had such ability, they would learn to pay attention to context and learn to translate or interpret meaning in terms of the context, and finally could learn to use and respond to words differently.

#### **5. Conclusion**

From the above the case, we can easily find that Zhai Tiantian's incident almost stirred up anger and discontent in China due to the mistranslation and misreports. The real reasons of the misreports were that the reporters and translators had lacked schematic knowledge of the target American language culture and had not had a good understanding of the relationships between language and culture. That is, in intercultural communication, the reporters and translators should have been always aware that there are differences between one language/culture and another, and then have adapted themselves to the target culture instead of adapting the target culture to themselves.

Also, the reports and translator should have had the correct attitudes towards the target American culture and never by any means have shown any their own contempt for it. In other words, another cause for the reporters and translators' "cultural errors" in the reports is that they had misinterpreted American culture as a result of their own cultural bias. For this reason, the reporters and translators are liable to report the case from the perspective of their own language or of their own culture. Thus, reporters or translators in a foreign country should not only have a good knowledge of language, but also should be cultivated to have a strong intercultural awareness and to have an effective intercultural communication competence. In this way, the reporters or translators would avoid misunderstanding, and their reports meaning would not lead to an international incident" as serious as the Zhai case.

To some extent, Zhai' case was more a problem with mistranslation. It's not difficult for us to understand that cultural differences can cause confusion about what words or even actions means. Therefore reporters or translator in intercultural communication should not only have a good ability of the target language but also a good knowledge of the target culture, and then require intercultural awareness and intercultural communication competence, they will be qualified for international faithful report and really build up a bridge between different people from different cultural background and improve mutual understanding and mutual friendship, so as to avoid unnecessary debate and anger among people from different countries.

## **REFERENCES**

- Catford, J.C. (1967). Translation and language teaching. Linguistic theories and their application. London: International Association of Publishers of Applied linguistics, 125-146.
- Chen, Guoming. (2010). A Study of Intercultural Communication Competence. Hongkong: China Review Academic Publishers,34.
- Chen, Guoming. (2010). Foundations of Intercultural Communication Competence. Hongkong: China Review Academic publishers, 133.
- Chen Jianping. (2012). Translation and Intercultural Communication. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching And Research Press, 8.
- China Press USA. (2010). The Case of Zhai Tiantian. EastSouthWestNorth, May 19, 2010.
- Cullen, B. "Practical Techniques for Teaching Culture in the EFL Classroom." The internet TESOL Journal, 6(12). Retrieved from 2000, <http://www.ac.jp/~iteslj/techniques/cullen-culture.html>
- Hofstede, G.H. (1997). Cultures and Organizations: Software of the mind. USA:McGraw Hill.
- Li, Ming and Lu, Hongmei. (2010). Language and Translation. Wuhan: Wuhan University Press, 265.
- Liu, Lihua. (2011). The Function of Translation in China in the Globalization Era Revisited. Intercultural Studies: New Frontiers. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching And Research Press, 348.
- Nida, E.A. (1975). Language Structure and Translation. CA: Stanford University Press, 234.

Varner, Iris and Beamer, Linda.(1995). *Intercultural Communication in the Global Workplace*. Boston,MA: McGraw-Hill, 2.

Xu, Lisheng. (2012). *Intercultural Communication in English (Revised Edition)*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Languages Education Press, 119.

Xia, Tingde. (2011). *Maze or Bridge: A Word on the Necessity of Compensation in Cultural Translation*. *Intercultural Studies: New Frontiers*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 335.

Wang, Zhuoqiong and Balazovic, Todd. (2010). *Lost in translation or a threat of terror?* *China Daily*, May 28, 2010.

Wolfson, N. (1983). *Rules of Speaking*. In Richards, J.C. & Schmidt, R.W. (eds.) *Language and Communication*. London: Longman, 62.

Zhu, Katherine. (2010). *Zhai Tiantian Wants New Jersey College to Apologize to Him*. *ABC New's Russell Gldman*.