

Mistranslation and Countermeasures in Business Translation from the Perspective of Pragmatics

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Abstract: With the continuous development of China's economy, business communication between China and the West is increasing, and business translation is becoming increasingly important. However, in the process of business translation, there are some translation errors due to various factors. How to solve such mistranslation problems is a key issue that needs to be considered, which has the significance and value of in-depth research. This paper is based on the perspective of pragmatics, combined with examples of business translation, to explore mistranslation and countermeasures in business translation.

Keywords: pragmatics; business translation; mistranslation

With the continuous promotion of the national "The Belt and Road" policy, economic and trade activities between China and other countries around the world are increasingly vigorous, and business English plays an increasingly significant role in business communication activities. The rapid development of business English has also sparked a demand for business translation. Business English is closely related to serious economic activities such as securities, finance, investment, insurance, documents, contracts, etc. Therefore, business English translation requires "accuracy, rigor, standardization, and fluency". Professional and accurate wording, rigorous translation structure, and standardized and fluent writing are necessary in business English translation. Nevertheless, mistranslation often occurs in actual business translation. This paper attempts to collect and organize mistranslation in business text translation, and explore their root causes and countermeasures from a pragmatic perspective.

1. Pragmatics

Pragmatics is an emerging discipline in various branches of linguistics, focusing on the study of language meaning. Pragmatics is a specialized discipline that studies the understanding and use of language, studying specific utterances in specific contexts, and exploring how language can be understood and used through context.

Simply put, pragmatics is the study of the linguistic meaning of language in a specific context. This paper analyzes mistranslation in business translation from the perspective of pragmatics, including two aspects, namely language and social pragmatics.

2. Mistranslation of language in business translation

The language aspect of Pragmatics refers to the explicit culture carried by language, including surface forms of language such as phonetics, vocabulary, syntax, rhetoric and so on. Due to the significant differences in the surface forms of language between English and Chinese, there are also mistranslation of language in pragmatics in business translation. It will be illustrated from the following three aspects: vocabulary, syntax, and rhetoric.

2.1 Mistranslation caused by incorrect understanding of word meanings

In the study of Business English, there are many professional terms related to business, but in the actual process of business translation, the meaning of the words will change with the different contexts of foreign trade and business. Taking "negotiating documents" for an example, if we just understand the meaning from the surface, it means "谈判文件". But in Business English, it means "议付单据". For another example, the original meaning of "escape clause" should be "免责条款", but if it is mistakenly translated as "逃跑条款", the translator will expose himself to ridicule. In the practice of Business English translation, due to the lack of understanding of the language features of business texts, some frequently used words are easily mistranslated.

Example: 保存期为二至三星期的袋装饼干。

Mistranslation: Packets of biscuits with a guarantee period of two or three weeks.

Analysis: “Guarantee period” means warranty period, but it is generally used for the warranty period of machines. Here “保存期” refers to the storage period of goods that may spoil, such as food, beverages, drugs, etc. Therefore, it should be translated as “shelf life”. The original translation overlooked subtle differences in word meanings, resulting in mistranslation.

Modified translation: Packets of biscuits with a shelf life of two or three weeks.

2.2 Mistranslation caused by incorrect syntactic understanding

There are significant differences in sentence expression between English and Chinese. English focuses on the structure and form of sentences, while Chinese is different. Chinese people value the logic of language expression, so Chinese emphasizes content and meaning. In the practice of business translation, improper understanding of syntactic features, logical relationships, semantic centers, and other aspects of sentences can lead to a certain degree of mistranslation. The specific examples are as follows:

Example 1: 随函附寄我方试订单一份，请提供现货。

Mistranslation: Enclosed is our trial order list, please supply us with your current goods.

Analysis: Because of the lack of emphasis on the form in English, there is no coherence in this sentence, and translation errors appear in the version.

Modified translation: Enclosed is our trial order list, and please supply us with goods from stock.

Example 2: If the currency of export sales is different from the currency of the exporting country.....

Mistranslation: 如果外销时使用的货币与出口国货币不同.....

Analysis: This sentence seems to be prone to misunderstandings.

Modified translation: 假如出口国在出口时使用的货币与本国货币不同.....

2.3 Mistranslation caused by incorrect rhetorical understanding

Both English and Chinese have certain rhetorical devices used in language, but due to cultural differences, there are significant differences in the use of rhetorical devices between the two. For example, when using animals as a metaphor for foolishness, the Westerners use “donkey”, while the Chinese use “pig”. Chinese people use “挥金如土 (spending money like soil)”, while Westerners use “spend money like water”. There are many rhetorical devices used in advertisements, product introductions, and other texts in the business field. In business translation, misunderstandings of the original rhetorical device can also easily lead to mistranslation.

Example: He is a man that eats no fish.

Mistranslation: 他不吃鱼。

Analysis: “Eat no fish” originates from a British allusion. Queen Elizabeth had regulations on the Church of England during her reign. Believers who support the Church of England no longer follow the Roman Catholic rule of eating fish every Friday to show loyalty to the government. Therefore, believers who do not eat fish are considered “good people”. “Eat no fish” has the metaphorical reference to “people who are loyal to the government and honest”. The translation above uses literal translation, ignoring the rhetorical devices used in the original text, causing mistranslation.

Modified translation: 他是个忠实可靠的人。

3. Mistranslation in social pragmatics in business translation

Pragmatics can be used to explain the different behaviors exhibited by people in different cultural backgrounds when using language. The cultural differences caused by the influence of customs, traditions, religious beliefs and other factors can lead to errors in the process of business translation. This paper will provide examples to analyze the mistranslation in business translation from two aspects: cultural traditions and ways of thinking.

3.1 Mistranslation caused by differences in cultural traditions

China and Western countries have distinct history, cultural traditions, and expression habits. If not paid attention to during translation, it may lead to mistranslation.

Example: 请告知：什么时候发货。

Mistranslation: Please inform us when to deliver our ordered goods.

Analysis: The original text adopts the form of imperative sentences. Although the translator also used this form in translation, the translation version appears somewhat stiff. If the difference between English and Chinese correspondences is not noticed, errors may occur in pragmatic and cultural use. The principle of politeness needs to be paid attention to in correspondence translation. Gentlemanly and polite words are preferred. Using declarative sentences for translation is a better choice.

Modified translation: It will be appreciated if you would inform us when to deliver our ordered goods.

3.2 Mistranslation caused by different ways of thinking

In translation, actually not only the changes between languages require attention, but also the transformation between two ways of thinking. When expressing in Chinese, emphasis is placed on the integration of situational aspects, so there will be some humanistic connotations in expression.

Example: No problem too big. No business too small.

Mistranslation: 从不出现太大的问题，从不经营太小的生意。

Analysis: This sentence is the advertising slogan of IBM. The text structure is concise and creative, but it is easy to be misunderstood. If we use Chinese thinking to translate, the above translation will appear. However, due to the syntactic differences between English and Chinese, we have entered a semantic misunderstanding, which is actually caused by the differences in thinking between English and Chinese.

Modified translation: 没有不做的小生意，没有解决不了的大问题。

4. Countermeasures for mistranslation in business translation

4.1 Enhancing discourse awareness

In order to ensure the accuracy of translation, it is best for translators to combine the meaning of the entire article in translation. In the process of browsing business texts, we will form a discourse in our minds that is suitable for the content of the context, so that the meaning of some words in specific situations can be better determined. In order for business translation to be fully accepted, the translator must use the same language expression as the target readers in translation.

4.2 Following pragmatic rules

Pragmatic rules play a very important role in language translation, directly affecting the results of language translation. Pragmatic principles mainly include Politeness Principle, Cooperative Principle, Speech Act Theory, etc. Therefore, in order to meet the basic requirements of translation accuracy in business translation as well as comply with the unique rules and methods in the business field, our translators must strictly follow pragmatic principles.

4.3 Being Capable of cross-cultural communication

Simply put, business translation refers to cross-cultural communication, which requires translators to have basic cultural communication skills. In translation, they should accurately understand the entire text, pay attention to the equivalence of language forms and functions between different cultures, and more importantly, gain deeper understandings of cultures.

4.4 Supplementing business knowledge

It is often said that pragmatics mainly studies the meanings of sentences used in context, while translation is a highly contextual task. Therefore, it is particularly important to grasp the context in translation. It can be seen that the development of language and even translation is very rapid. English is further subdivided into technical English, business English, legal English, tourism English and so on. There are specific specialized vocabulary and requirements for professional knowledge in each field.

5. Conclusion

This paper provides an explanation of common mistranslation in business translation from a pragmatic perspective, and lists some classic examples for analysis and correction. It divides mistranslation in business translation into two categories: language and social pragmatics. It also elaborates on the above two types of mistranslation from the perspectives of word meaning, syntax, rhetoric, cultural level, and thinking mode. Based on relevant knowledge, countermeasures are proposed to avoid mistranslation. Thus it can be seen that pragmatics plays an indispensable role in business translation and even multi-domain translation. Applying pragmatics to business translation can not only improve the accuracy of translation, but also enrich its theoretical connotation.

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