

Enhanced Phraseological Idiomaticity in Translational and Non-Translational Texts: A Corpus-Based Study of Chinese Four-Character Idioms

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Abstract

My first aim in adopting a corpus-based approach to the study of Chinese idioms in translational and non-translational texts is to investigate the use of four-character expressions as they are such a prominent phraseological and stylistic feature in Mandarin Chinese throughout the ages. This study grows out of my Ph.D. research project at Imperial College which has been defined so far as a corpus-based study of four-character idiomatic expressions (FCEXs) in two contemporary Chinese versions of Cervantes' Don Quijote. What follows are the first findings of a comparative study of the Chinese sub-corpus texts of CSCHDQ – a parallel corpus of Don Quijote containing the original text in Castilian and its two modern Chinese versions (1978 & 1995) – and the referential corpora Lancaster Corpus of Mandarin Chinese (LCMC). It would appear at first sight that the use of FCEXs in Chinese translational texts is remarkably more important than in non-translational texts: while the ratio of FCEXs to word types in Liu's and Yang's translations of Don Quijote are 5.93 and 3.99 per cent, respectively, the relevant figure in LCMC only represents some 2.75 per cent. These quantitative differences between Chinese translational and non-translational texts could be pointing to a variety of ways in which authors or translators could avail themselves of these linguistic devices to enhance phraseological idiomaticity and to define their own stylistic approach to the target text. This is a very interesting and revealing finding regarding the originality of the target language, since in a traditional point of view translations are seen as invariably lacking of creativity and independence from the source texts as exemplified by the common use of terms like normalization, explicitation or simplification in describing translational works in the literature. For the purpose of a more comparative basis for analysis, two additional referential corpora have been added: Chinese Chronological Translational Corpora (CCTC) and its counterpart Chinese Chronological Non-Translational Corpora (CCNTC), with each corpus containing five sets of sub-corpus of Chinese literal texts produced in the 50s, 60s, 70s, 80s and from 90s to the present. It may help reveal objective factors that could be involved in the personal choice of FCEXs by Chinese writers or translators in the context of the diachronic development of the Chinese language itself or the phraseological characteristics of each historical period.

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