

Cultural Differences and Translation Strategies of English and Chinese Kinship Terms

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ABSTRACT

In the context of globalization, the study of cultural differences between English and Chinese kinship terms holds significant importance for cross-cultural communication. Chinese kinship terms are characterized by their "precision." They strictly categorize familial relationships through dimensions such as paternal/maternal lines, paternal cousins/maternal cousins, and seniority. This reflects the social order and family-oriented values of a patriarchal society. In contrast, English kinship terms exhibit "generality," using broad terms like "uncle" and "cousin" to simplify familial relationships. This mirrors a tradition of individualism and an orientation towards social efficiency. The underlying causes of these cultural differences stem from historical traditions and social structures. On the one hand, the Chinese kinship system is rooted in the feudal clan system, which emphasizes collective family values. On the other hand, the English system is influenced by the individualism of ancient Greek and Roman traditions, which prioritize the relationship between the individual and society. In translation practice, it is essential to consider these cultural differences and their underlying causes. Different translation strategies should be employed to balance cultural adaptation and preservation. Literal translation is suitable for accurately converting basic kinship terms. Free translation can reconstruct meanings to fill cultural gaps. Domestication aims to enhance the readability of the target text by aligning it with the target culture. Foreignization, on the other hand, retains the characteristics of the source language to promote the dissemination of its culture. The study also emphasizes that the choice of translation strategies should be based on the purpose of translation, the background of the target audience, and the type of text. This approach helps to achieve a balance between cultural adaptation and preservation, thereby promoting in-depth and effective cross-cultural dialogue.

Keywords: English and Chinese kinship terms; cultural differences; translation strategies; literal translation; free translation; domestication; foreignization; intercultural communication

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I. Introduction

As globalization continues to accelerate, language, as the core medium of cultural exchange, has become increasingly significant in terms of its differences and the strategies employed for translation. English and Chinese, in particular, exhibit marked and unique cultural differences in their systems of address, especially in kinship terms. These differences are not only evident in the surface structure of the languages but also profoundly reflect fundamental divergences in family concepts, social structures, and value orientations between Chinese and Western cultures.

A thorough analysis of the cultural differences in English and Chinese kinship terms and the exploration of translation strategies that meet the needs of intercultural communication are of great theoretical and practical significance for promoting cultural mutual understanding and achieving accurate information transfer. This paper will discuss the specific manifestations of cultural differences, the underlying causes of these differences, and the selection of appropriate translation strategies from three dimensions, in order to provide references for the translation practice of English and Chinese kinship terms.

II. The Manifestations of Cultural Differences in English and Chinese Kinship Terms

2.1 The Difference in the Degree of Precision of Address Systems

In Chinese cultural traditions, the family holds a significant position, and kinship terms can to some extent represent a person's status, generation, and order of birth. Therefore, kinship terms based on blood relations and marital relations are often given great importance (Long & Yu, 2018). The Chinese kinship terminology system is characterized by its precision, making strict distinctions among various types of kinship relations. For instance, in the paternal line, it differentiates not only between "elder brother of the father" and "younger brother

of the father" but also further specifies birth order through terms like "eldest uncle," "second uncle," and "third uncle." In the maternal line, clear distinctions exist between blood relations (e.g., "mother's brother") and marital relations (e.g., "husband of mother's sister"). Additionally, Chinese terms use modifiers like "paternal cousin" or "maternal cousin" to indicate kinship proximity and even emphasize social hierarchy through age-based distinctions (e.g., "elder brother," "younger brother," "elder sister," "younger sister").

In contrast, English kinship terms demonstrate significant generality. For example, the term "uncle" encompasses a broad range of relationships that Chinese differentiates into distinct categories such as "father's elder brother," "father's younger brother," "husband of father's sister," "mother's brother," and "husband of mother's sister." While English may specify "paternal uncle" or "maternal uncle" for clarity, it does not inherently reflect birth order, age hierarchy, or marital connections. This contrast directly reveals differing cultural perceptions of kinship relationships between Chinese and Western societies.

2.2 The Absence of Symmetry in Cultural Connotations

Kinship terms carry information about social relationships and family structures, reflecting the perception and differentiation of family members and kinship relations in society (Pang, 2024). Chinese kinship terminology transcends mere labels for blood relations, embodying profound cultural significance. For instance, the differentiation between terms for "father's sister's husband" and "mother's sister's husband" reflects traditional cultural attitudes toward paternal versus maternal relatives. Similarly, the distinction between "paternal cousins" and "maternal cousins" is deeply tied to the patriarchal clan-based concept of "shared surname, shared lineage," which prioritizes lineage continuity within the male line. These linguistic nuances reveal how kinship structures are intertwined with cultural values, social hierarchy, and ancestral worship in traditional Chinese society.

In contrast, English kinship terms focus more on functional descriptions. For instance, the term "cousin" simply indicates a relationship among peers without specifying gender, blood relation, or marital origin. This "culture-neutral" approach to kinship terms reflects the Western cultural tendency towards individual independence and the simplification of social relationships.

III. The Underlying Causes of Cultural Differences

3.1 The Divergence of Historical Traditions

As an agrarian powerhouse, China has long been a society where people primarily engaged in agricultural cultivation for subsistence. Against the backdrop of a long-standing self-sufficient agricultural economy, many individuals related by blood or marriage lived together, forming extended families that included three or four generations under one roof. This gave rise to a clan-based society founded on family units and blood relations (Luo, 2018). In such a "clan-based society," the family was the fundamental social unit, and kinship relations were closely intertwined with political power and inheritance of property. To maintain family order and clarify the hierarchy of seniority and respect, a complex system of kinship terms became a necessary tool. For instance, the terms for seniority such as "eldest, second, third, youngest" originally correlated with the order of succession among hereditary nobility.

In contrast, the simplification of kinship terms in the West can be traced back to the individualistic traditions of ancient Greece and Rome. After the Middle Ages, with the widespread acceptance of the Christian concept of the "dignity of individual" and the rise of capitalism, individuals became more independent from the family network. Kinship relations gradually weakened from being social obligations to mere emotional connections, and the kinship terminology system consequently became more streamlined.

3.2 The Reflection of Social Structure

Chinese culture is a quintessential example of a collectivist society, where the concept of family permeates every aspect of social life. Moreover, in Chinese society, family relationships are highly hierarchical, and kinship terms serve as a key marker for delineating these hierarchies (Zhang, 2020). The precision of kinship terms is not merely a record of blood relations but also a means of regulating social relationships—clarifying each individual's social role and responsibilities through their titles. For instance, the distinction between "nephew" (son of a brother) and "nephew by marriage" (son of a sister) directly relates to differences in inheritance rights and obligations of support.

In contrast, Western societies place greater emphasis on the relationship between the individual and society, viewing kinship relations as part of the "private sphere." In this context, the simplification of kinship terms aligns with the societal need for "efficiency first," avoiding the communicative burden that might arise from overly detailed distinctions.

IV. Translation Strategies for English and Chinese Kinship Terms

4.1 Translation Strategies for Accurate Conveyance under the Principle of Cultural Equivalence: Literal Translation

Literal translation is the most fundamental and direct method in the translation of English and Chinese kinship terms. Although there are significant differences in the use of some kinship terms between English and Chinese, there are still some usages that are the same (Liu, 2016). When English and Chinese kinship terms have a strict correspondence in semantics, cultural connotations, and social functions, literal translation can maximize the retention of the original information. For example, “father” is translated as “Fuqin” and “mother” as “Muqin,” which not only fully conveys the core kinship relationship but also conforms to the cognitive habits of the target language readers. This strategy is applicable to basic kinship terms without cultural differences, such as parents, children, and siblings, where information can be conveyed without barriers and without the need for additional explanation. It is particularly advantageous in texts that require precision, such as legal documents and genealogies.

However, the application of literal translation requires strict verification of cultural symmetry. On the one hand, it is necessary to ensure that the target language term does not have multiple meanings. For example, when “grandfather” is literally translated as “zu fu,” the context must be used to distinguish between “Yeye” (paternal) and “Waigong” (maternal). On the other hand, for English terms that are more general (such as “uncle”) or Chinese terms that have specific subcategories, literal translation may cause ambiguity. In a typical case, when “This is my uncle” is literally translated as “This is my Shushu,” the reader needs to rely on the context to clarify the specific branch of kinship. This illustrates the efficiency of literal translation in situations of complete cultural equivalence but also reveals its limitations in more complex relationships.

4.2 Semantic Compensation Strategies Oriented by Functional Equivalence: Free Translation

Free translation serves as a vital strategy in translating English and Chinese kinship terminology, particularly when addressing cultural disparities. Its essence lies in achieving functional equivalence through semantic reconstruction. When direct term-for-term equivalence is absent between source and target languages, translators must transcend literal meanings to convey the social attributes of kinship relationships in ways comprehensible to target readers. For instance, the Chinese term “Tangge” cannot be rendered simply as “brother” in English; instead, it requires translation as “older male cousin (paternal side)” to specify both lineage and age hierarchy. Conversely, the English term “stepfather” may be directly translated into Chinese as “Jifu,” but contextual clarification is necessary to distinguish it from “Shengfu” (biological father) and avoid ambiguity. This strategy bridges semantic gaps by adding explanatory information, enabling target readers to grasp the original term’s social function accurately.

The application of free translation demands a balance between precision and conciseness. On one hand, translators must supplement core kinship attributes—such as paternal/maternal lineage, age seniority, or gender—through parentheses, footnotes, or contextual cues to prevent omissions. On the other hand, over-explanation should be avoided to maintain textual efficiency. A prime example is the English “cousin,” which requires differentiation into Chinese terms like “Tangxiong, Biaojie” to specify gender and age. Similarly, “godfather” in religious contexts may be translated as “godfather (a spiritual mentor in the Christian faith)” to retain cultural specificity while achieving functional equivalence. This flexibility makes free translation the preferred approach for handling complex kinship terminology, especially in literary translation and cross-cultural communication scenarios.

4.3 Translation Orientation Prioritizing Culture: Domestication and Foreignization

The translation of terms of address must be faithful to the target audience, context, and cultural background, because translation in this domain is not merely a form of communication between two languages but also a form of cultural exchange. The focus of analysis lies in how to choose between domestication and foreignization, and the basis for that choice (Wang & Li, 2014).

4.3.1 Adaptive Transformation Oriented by the Target Culture: Domestication

Domestication is a translation strategy in kinship terms that centers on the target culture, converting source language terms into expressions familiar to readers to reduce cognitive load. Its core principle is the “priority of cultural adaptability,” which entails sacrificing some source language cultural details to achieve smooth communication. Essentially, this reflects the “reader-oriented” principle of translation.

The application of domestication is evident in three aspects:

1. Semantic Simplification: For example, the Chinese term “Biaojie” is translated as “cousin (female).” Although this does not distinguish between “Tang” (paternal) and “Biao” (maternal) relatives, it aligns with the broader understanding of “cousin” among English readers.
2. Functional Substitution: The English term “brother-in-law” is translated as either “jie fu” (husband of one’s elder sister) or “Meifu” (husband of one’s younger sister) depending on the context, clarifying the marital

relationship through specific terms.

3. Cultural Filtering: For instance, “Gufu” (father’s sister’s husband) is directly translated as “uncle” to avoid lengthy explanations, though this may obscure the specific hierarchical relationship.

However, it is important to note that excessive domestication can lead to cultural distortion. Therefore, a balance between fluency and accuracy must be maintained.

Domestication is suitable for general-purpose translations, such as news and business texts, where its strength lies in enhancing readability. However, one must be cautious of over-simplifying cultural connotations. In cross-cultural communication, domestication can serve as a “default option,” facilitating information delivery while laying the groundwork for deeper cultural dissemination.

4.3.2 Cultural Dissemination Strategy with Source Language Cultural Retention: Foreignization

Foreignization is a translation strategy in kinship terms that prioritizes the source language culture, preserving the uniqueness of terms to convey cultural differences. Its core principle is the “priority of cultural visibility,” which integrates cultural differences into the translation as part of the message conveyed to the reader. Essentially, this reflects the “cultural dissemination” principle of translation, challenging the dominance of the target culture.

The application of foreignization is evident in three aspects:

1. Literal Translation with Annotation: For example, the Chinese term “Gufu” is translated as “husband of my father’s sister,” using a relative clause structure to retain the hierarchical features of Chinese kinship terms.

2. Transliteration with Explanation: The English term “godfather” is translated as “godfather (a spiritual mentor in the Christian faith),” which retains the cultural specificity while achieving functional equivalence.

3. Cultural Transplantation: For instance, “Tangxiong” is translated as “older male cousin (paternal side),” using additional information to clarify the social attributes of the kinship relationship.

However, excessive foreignization can increase the reading difficulty. For example, translating “Biaojie” as “female cousin (maternal side)” is precise but cumbersome. Therefore, the intensity of the strategy should be adjusted according to the reader’s tolerance.

Foreignization is suitable for specialized cultural translations, such as literary or anthropological texts, where its strength lies in promoting cultural exchange. However, it needs to be dynamically adjusted based on the reader’s cultural background. In cross-cultural communication, foreignization can serve as a “tool for in-depth cultural dissemination,” providing readers with a window to understand cultural differences while preserving the source language’s characteristics.

V. Conclusion

The study of cultural differences and translation strategies in English and Chinese kinship terms is essentially an exploration of the interplay between “cultural identity” and “linguistic function” in cross-cultural communication. This paper systematically analyzes the differences in precision, cultural connotations, and social functions between the two, revealing the deep-seated cultural foundations of family concepts, historical traditions, and social structures in the East and West. The “precision” of Chinese kinship terms is rooted in the orderliness required by a patriarchal society, while the “generality” of English kinship terms reflects the efficiency-oriented individualist tradition. This difference is not only evident on the surface of language but also serves as a key window to understanding the cultural DNA of the East and West.

In terms of translation strategies, the “cultural equivalence-functional equivalence-cultural priority” framework proposed in this paper offers solutions for the translation of kinship terms. Literal translation, with its focus on “accurate conveyance,” is suitable for the seamless conversion of basic kinship relationships. Free translation, through “semantic compensation,” effectively bridges cultural gaps. The combined use of domestication and foreignization achieves the dual goals of “information delivery” and “cultural dissemination.” These strategies are not mutually exclusive but need to be adjusted according to the purpose of translation, the target audience, and the text type—general-purpose texts prioritize domestication for smoothness, culturally specialized texts favor foreignization to retain cultural nuances, and intermediate texts can balance the two through “moderate foreignization.”

The significance of this study extends beyond translation practice to providing methodological insights for cross-cultural dialogue. In the dual tension of globalization and localization, translation serves both as a “bridge” and a “mirror”—it needs to eliminate cultural barriers while also respecting cultural differences. Future research could further integrate cognitive linguistics and communication theories to explore new pathways for the translation of kinship terms in the digital age, such as optimizing strategy selection through corpus analysis or enhancing the interactivity of cultural dissemination through multimedia means. Ultimately, the goal of translating kinship terms is not only to “make it clear” but also to “help the world understand why we say it this way.”

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