

# Translation Shifts, Synonymy, Polysemy and Culturally Loaded Words in Translating Textbooks for Teaching Chinese as A Foreign Language

Chi Derek Asaba

*Masters of Translation and Interpreting*  
*Shanghai Jiao Tong University, School of Foreign Languages*  
*Shanghai, People's Republic of China*

---

## Abstract

This paper is a shrewd and detailed analysis of problems that ensue during the translation of textbooks for teaching Chinese as a foreign language and how they can be tackled appropriately. Textbooks for language teaching have distinct features which make them unlike with ordinary textbooks in language structure and style. Translating such texts warrants that certain adjustments and/or modifications be carried out on the source text without fundamentally derailing from its original meaning. This paper begins by reviewing the status of Chinese language teaching before identifying some of the major problems posed by the translation of textbooks for teaching Chinese as a foreign language and how they can be remedied. Major problems identified include polysemy, synonymy, grammar, culturally loaded words and contextualization. This paper thus discusses how the translator can fulfill the specific purpose of translating a textbook for language teaching destined for an audience that is widely different and how the cultural gap between the two languages can be bridged while maintaining a high degree of accuracy. The paper draws examples from the author's past works and research on some popular textbooks to show how the appropriate use of translation shifts can help to surmount such translation related problems.

**Key words:** Culturally Loaded Words, Polysemy, Synonymy, Translation Shifts, Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language

---

Date of Submission: 26-09-2022

Date of Acceptance: 11-10-2022

---

## 1. Introduction

Over the past decades, the number of foreigners signing-up for Chinese language courses has been on a steady increase. According to official statistics from the Chinese Ministry of Education, there were over 50 million Chinese language learners worldwide as of 2014 and the number was expected to reach 150 million by 2022. As of date, more than 180 countries have officially incorporated Chinese language into their national education systems with over 75 countries issuing laws and regulations incorporating Chinese into the national education curriculum. More than 4,000 universities have established Chinese language departments, majors and courses, over 75,000 primary and secondary schools and training institutions worldwide have opened Chinese language courses. Cumulatively, about 200 million learners have learned the language<sup>1</sup>.

The popularity of the Chinese language across the world has been remarkable especially with the coming into force of the Belt and Road initiative<sup>2</sup>. The Confucius Institute as the Chinese government's strategic organization for the dissemination of the Chinese language and culture keep attracting countless students across the globe. As of 2021, more than 1,500 Confucius Institutes and Confucius classrooms had been established in 159 countries. This steady increase can be attributed to China's growing economic power, and the increasingly important role China is playing in international politics and economics.

This current trend of exponential growth in the number of learners has pushed many teachers, researchers, language specialist and pedagogues in China and abroad to come up with multifarious textbooks,

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://english.www.gov.cn>

<sup>2</sup> The Belt and Road Initiative is a global infrastructure development strategy adopted by the Chinese government in 2013 to invest in nearly 150 countries and international organizations. It is a central component in the present government's diplomatic strategy.

manuals and workbooks to facilitate the teaching and learning of Mandarin<sup>3</sup>. Most learners especially beginners have very limited knowledge of Chinese in general and linguistic concepts in particular, consequently, teaching aids (textbooks and workbooks) are translated and annotated into different languages. Most textbooks for teaching Chinese as a foreign language (hereinafter referred to as TCFL textbooks) are generally translated and annotated in English because of its influence that extends to over two billion people globally.

According to the Chinese Language Institute, the five most widely used TCFL textbooks are: *Integrated Chinese*《中文听说读写》published by Cheng and Tsui, *New Practical Chinese Reader*《新实用汉语课本》, *Road to Success*《成功之路》, *Developing Chinese*《发展汉语》, *The HSK*<sup>4</sup> *Standard Course Series*《HSK 标准教程》all published by Beijing Language and Culture University Press.

Foreign language acquisition is a complex psychological cognitive process. Adult foreign language learners generally have a good command of their mother tongue or first language. In most cases, the first language or mother tongue greatly influences their comprehension of a foreign language thus, any undue bias or emphasis towards one given aspect of a word's meaning in the way it is translated may cause misunderstanding for learners in the language learning process especially for learners at beginner's level. The rendering of words and concepts thus require extra diligence especially when it comes to polysemic and synonymic words. One of the characteristics of the Chinese language is its deep attachment to the Chinese culture, consequently, there exist thousands of words (culturally loaded words) without any linguistic equivalents.

From a linguistic point of view, a word may have several meanings ranging from conceptual, connotative, social, affective, reflected, collocative, and thematic. Conceptual meaning according to Leech (1987: 9) is the core meaning of a word and the main research task in semantics. It is the summary reflection of the essential attributes or general attributes of an objective phenomenon in the human brain. A single word can therefore possess different meanings and implications. It is thus incumbent on the learners to concentrate on obtaining a word's range of meanings in suitable contexts so as to be able to use the word irrespective of the context.

Textbooks are the main teaching and learning resource used by both teachers and students. The primordial role they play both in the foreign or second language acquisition classroom or in situations of self-study cannot be overemphasized.

Within the context of the Chinese language, TCFL textbooks are mainly made up of Chinese words, phrases, sentence patterns, pinyin (phonetic transcription), parts of speech, and translations organized in the form of a vocabulary list. This format is considered an efficient way for learners to grasp the meaning of a word at first glance. The vocabulary table is general followed by texts, grammatical structures, annotations, exercises and cultural notes.

The quality of vocabulary translation as well as the annotations directly affects the whole teaching and learning process especially the learner's level of comprehension. The five textbooks earlier mentioned come with English translations and annotations. Nevertheless, research has increasingly shown that although learners may have been taught how to use words, they cannot always apply them appropriately in practice due to inaccuracies and other problems related to the translations provided.

Most TCFL textbooks provide translations for vocabulary list in a simple Chinese-English translation style. Current translation strategies within TCFL textbooks reflect common translation approaches, such as word-for-word translation, free translation, and mixed strategies. Due to differences between the Chinese and English linguistic systems, translation problems persist even when appropriate translation strategies are applied. The reasons are two-fold.

Firstly, Mandarin and English belong to two different language families (English is a Western Germanic language of the Indo-European language family while Chinese belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language family). Secondly, there exist a huge cultural gap, different customs and traditions between the two. These differences lead to discrepancies and difficulties in finding appropriate equivalents either for a particular lexical term, idea or concept that bears a lot of cultural connotations (culturally loaded words). For example, the Chinese adage “一口吃不成胖子” could be vague and meaningless if translated as “**One meal won't make a fat man**”. This sentence is generally used to encourage someone when he/she feels like giving up, it thus has some kind of connotative meaning, hence, a word for word translation will be utterly meaningless. The adage has a literal and figurative meaning which must be taken into consideration. Literally, it means “**you cannot get fat with only one mouthful**”, and figuratively, it means “**Nothing can be accomplished in one single effort**”, or “**learn to walk before you run**”. Such expressions abound in Mandarin.

Mandarin is typically a polysemous language, thus, there are bound to be conflicts in word meaning as used in different context. Various approaches are used in the translation of TCFL textbooks. These consist of;

---

<sup>3</sup> This paper uses Mandarin to refer to the Chinese language, official language used in Mainland China in order to differentiate it from other forms of Chinese.

<sup>4</sup> HSK Chinese Proficiency Test. International Standardized test of Chinese language proficiency.

direct translation methods, morpheme, context, collocation and semantic association methods (Hufei, 2017). The direct translation method is commonly used in vocabulary lists. When a Chinese word has an equivalent translation in the target language, the translation can be directly used. When no equivalent translations can be found in the target language, the word can be explained. For example;“旗袍” is a straight close-fitting silk dress with a high neck and slit skirt, worn by Chinese and Indonesia women mostly during very formal occasions. Although it is commonly referred to as “cheongsam”, in order to preserve its originality, it would be appropriate to add meaning to the existing English equivalent; “旗袍”-**cheongsam-a close-fitting Chinese dress with side vents.**

The context method is used to translate specific Chinese vocabulary. Context here refers to the specific linguistic environment around the target word. As earlier mentioned, the majority of Chinese words are polysemous in nature. Thus, the selection of meaning should be in accordance with the term's specific context. This is also very common with words that belong to more than one lexical category. For example; the word “开” in Mandarin means “to open”, like in “开门” open the door, “开窗” open the window. However, when used with electrical appliances, it cannot be rendered as “open” but rather turn-on or switch-on, for example, 开灯 turn on the light, 开电视机 switch on a T.V set, 打开机 to boot or start up a machine like a computer. 开 also means “to drive a car as in 开车, or to fly a plane 开飞机”. Thus, there is an absolute need to take into consideration the context in which a particular word is used. Translation shifts have proven to be one of the effective approaches suitable for handling such cases.

Taking into consideration that TCFL textbooks have a double objective (teaching and learning), that the target audience is similar but different (teacher and student) and that there exist a wide cultural gap between the two languages (Mandarin and English), this paper seeks to find out; how the translator can fulfill the specific purpose (teaching and learning) of translating a textbook for language teaching destined for an audience that is widely different? And how can the cultural gap between the two languages be bridged while maintaining a high degree of accuracy?

This study thus seeks to demonstrate how the correct application of translation shifts could help to solve the above-mentioned translation problems with special emphasis on polysemy, synonymy, grammar, and absence of linguistic equivalents. The paper analyzes some of the challenges posed by the translation of such texts by drawing from the author's previous experience of translating TCFL textbooks<sup>5</sup> and how they can be overcome. We focus on problems of polysemy, synonymy, grammar and the phenomenon of culturally loaded words in Chinese. The present study draws examples from *New Practical Chinese Reader*, *Developing Chinese* and *Hello Cameroon* for illustration.

## **2. Research Methodology**

The research methodology consists of comparing the source text with the target text in order to identify the various translation shifts used during the translation process and how they contribute to bringing the target text closer to its audience.

To this effect, samples of the source text are collected (from previous translations), and compared with their target language translations followed by a description of the kind of translation operation carried out. The shifts are analyzed and the reasons for such shifts as well as their functions discussed. Collected samples include; words, phrases, sentences, concepts or ideas. To facilitate the research procedure, the shifts are divided into various categories depending on the type. The following approaches were used; lexical, grammatical and cultural shifts. These shifts are further sub-divided into various kinds of operations; lexical operations (addition of meaning, limitation of meaning, omission of meaning and grammatical (omission of meaning, change of word order). Most of the examples in this section are drawn from English translation of *Hello Cameroon* and *Intermediate Chinese* both TCFL textbooks translated by the author.

### **2.1 Translation Shifts**

Generally speaking, the term ‘shifts’ refers to the changes a translator has to or makes during the translation process. According Catford (1965) there are two main types of shifts; Level shifts and Category shifts. Level shifts occur when the source language item at one level(grammar) has a target level equivalent at another level(lexis). Simply put, expressed by grammar in one language and lexis in the another while category shifts on their part are sub divided into; Class shifts (shift from one part of speech to another. For example, a verb translated into a noun(adjective to noun,verb to noun) and unit shift which involves changes in rank. Rank here

---

<sup>5</sup> Works by the author: English translation of *Hello Cameroon*, an elementary textbook for teaching Chinese as a foreign language in the Republic of Cameroon, and *Intermediate Chinese*, a comprehensive textbook for intermediate learners, by Shanghai Jiao Tong University Press

refers to hierarchical linguistic unit of sentence, clause, group, word and morpheme(word to group). We also have structural shifts, that is shifts in grammatical structure(passive voice to active voice), inter-system shift(This occurs when there are approximately corresponding terms between the source text and the target text, but where the translation involves selection of non-corresponding term in the target language system (plural to singular). Besides the above level and category shifts described by Catford, Klaudy(2003 and 2005) developed a meticulous system that can be used to identify shifts carried out by translators, she calls them "Transfer Operations". These transfer operations involve; replacement of source language lexical units, restructuring of sentences, changing of word order, addition and omission of certain grammatical and or lexical items. She distinguishes between lexical and grammatical operations as a way of facilitating their identification. She thus defines the following lexical operations; Lexical operations; narrowing and broadening of meaning, contraction and distribution. For grammatical operations, she identifies the following; specification and generalization, diversion, contraction, omission, addition transposition and replacement Klaudy (2002&2005).

### **3. Analysis of Translation Problems in TCFL Textbooks**

Most translation problems faced in the translation of TCFL textbooks arise as a result of the lack of linguistic equivalents and the polysemic nature of Mandarin. Other problems arise as a result of the differences in the structural organization of Mandarin and English as well as cultural differences between both languages. Some of the most recurrent ones include problems of synonymy and polysemy, grammar and culturally loaded words.

#### **3.1 Synonymy**

One of the most glaring characteristics of TCFL textbooks is the vocabulary list. Most if not all text books come with a vocabulary list. The list contains new words to be learned in each chapter. The learner is expected to master these new words in order to understand the text in the said chapter. In most manuals, this list is generally placed at the beginning of every new chapter for beginner and intermediate textbooks and after the text in advanced learners' textbooks. The tabulated list generally has three columns: one with the word in the original language, the second indicating the word's lexical category and the last column carries the translation of the original word. In the case of Mandarin, there is often an additional phonological component called "pinyin" indicating the pronunciation of the words. The translation of the vocabulary list is a very important part in the translation of TCFL textbooks. This is because the student's ability to understand the text in every chapter depends on whether or not he/she understands the meaning of the new words. Although the vocabulary list contains words, the rendering of the latter into the target language cannot always adopt the "word for word" or "direct" translation approach.

English and Mandarin belong to two language families thus there's bound to be discrepancies and differences when it comes to word class, meaning and even word order. Most words in Mandarin have more than one meaning in English. When translating the vocabulary list, it is virtually impossible to indicate all the different meanings of a word in the target language. For example, "点" means "order" as in 点餐 to order food in a restaurant.

我已为你点好菜了 I have ordered for you.

However, the word "点" has a wide range of meanings like; "point"

整个讨论内容均以此点为准 The whole discussion pivots on this point

你如果不对他硬点,他是决不会把钱付清的. He'll never pay up unless you get tough with him.

Others include: "decimal", "drop(of a liquid), dot(punctuation mark), stroke in Chinese characters, etc.)

Vocabulary translation is therefore one of the most important elements of TCFL textbooks.

Synonymy problems also occur when unclear distinctions of word usage are made between two synonyms. For example, both "爷爷" and "外公" stand for "grandfather" in English, "奶奶" and "外婆" mean "grandmother". Similar examples include "叔叔" and "伯父" for "uncle", "阿姨" and "伯母" for "aunt". Although these words are broadly synonymous, the specific usage should be clearly explained to avoid any misunderstanding. For example, "爷爷" paternal grandfather and "外公" maternal grandfather. These words are reflection of the complexity of the Chinese family tree.

#### **3.2 Polysemy**

Polysemy arises as a result of the original word having more than one meaning in different contexts. For example, "家". Its lexical meaning is "family" or "household";

他全家都是工人- they are all workers in their family. The word also means "home" 不在家 not at home.

我要去我老师家参加晚宴 I have to get ready and go to a banquet at my teacher's house.

Besides its lexical meaning, there are other connotative meanings. Person or a family engaged in a certain trade “船家” boatman, specialist in a certain field “科学家” scientist, school of thought “儒家” Confucian school or Confucianism, measure word for families or business establishments “一家电影院” a cinema.

The selection of meaning should be in accordance with the given context to avoid any misuse.

### **3.3 Cultural loaded words**

In the translation of textbooks for teaching Mandarin, culturally loaded words also pose a lot of problems which often lead to misunderstandings. Culturally loaded words refer to words that directly reflect aspects unique to China's culture. These words are specific and closely associated with traditional Chinese history, customs and regions. For instance, the names of Chinese food “馄饨”, “年糕”. These are names of two very popular Chinese delicacies. They are specific to China and thus have no English equivalent. In practice, such words are translated by using their phonetic transcriptions as in “won ton”, or “niangao” for “馄饨” and “年糕” respectively. However, it would be very difficult for any English language speaker who has never been to China or read about the Chinese cuisine to understand its meaning. A better way to put it would be;

“馄饨” “won ton”, a stuffed thin dumpling served with soup

“年糕” “niangao” a pastry made of the flour of glutinous rice and used primarily in the lunar New Year period.

Most of these words are often translated using the alphabet or their phonetic transcriptions. We also have words like “高考”, the Chinese college entrance examination. It is often translated as “Gaokao” however it would be more appropriate to precise that it's a college entrance exam (addition of meaning).

### **3.4 Contextualization**

The fourth category concerns problems of context. Most Mandarin words have different meanings when used in different contexts. Context can be general or specific. The general context refers to the main context formed by the main bodies that participate in the communicative activity, linguistic context in communicative activities, and social background context. For example, the word “叫”, from a general perspective, means “to call or be called” For example,

“你叫什么名字?” What is your name? “我叫玛丽” I'm called Mary.

In these two examples “叫” is a verb translated as “called”. However, it has other meanings when used in certain contexts. For example,

“我叫了四份炒饭” I ordered for four plates of fried rice, “叫一份比萨饼” Order a slice of pizza, “叫” although used as a verb bears another meaning “to order”.

In most TCFL textbooks, only one meaning of a word is given when it appears in the first chapters of the text book. These words always pose problems to many learners when used in a different context in later chapters of the same textbook. For example, the word “叫” is used to mean “name, call” in previous chapters and in latter chapters it is used to mean “order, hire”.

“叫一个出租车” Hire a taxi. In this case “叫” means “to hire”. (meaning in context)

In most languages, it is very common to find a word or words belonging to more than lexical category (part of speech). This is a very common phenomenon in both Mandarin and English. Most vocabulary lists in text books for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language always have the word class along with the translated word. This makes indicating the lexical category quite difficult; is the word a verb or a noun?

For example, “希望” hope, to wish

我希望你明天能来 I hope you will come tomorrow, 他康复的希望不大 There is little hope of his recovery, 他放弃一切希望. He has abandoned all hope.

In the first example, “希望” is verb and in the second “希望” is used as noun. Thus, the meaning of the same word varies in different contexts. The translation should consequently take context into consideration. In the translation of TCFL textbooks, context is determined by the way a word is used in a sentence, a paragraph and a text. The misuse of the collocation and usage of a word may also cause problems at the pragmatic level in translation. Problems like inappropriate word order, wrong collocation and loss of functional information will affect a reader's comprehension of the meaning of a word.

### **3.5 Grammatical Issues**

During the translating process, some translation problems occur at the grammatical level, such as the conversion of a part of speech, the conversion of a sentence component or a change of sentence pattern. Where no suitable translation can be found in the target language, the conversion of grammatical components can be applied to maintain the original word and translation equivalence at a grammatical level. For example,

“把衣服洗洗” wash the clothes, “他把我的外套挂起来” He hung up my coat

"把" in Chinese is commonly used as a preposition to indicate how a person or thing is dealt with or affected. It is used to shift the object ahead of the verb, which must be reduplicated or accompanied by some other words or expressions. The word after "把" is the object to be dealt with or affected. In examples above, "dress" and "coat" are the objects that are to be washed and hung up. The given translation has introduced the collocation of "把" and the verbs. But the proper translation and usage of "把" should be provided to avoid any misunderstanding or misuse.

#### **4. Translation Shifts as a Magic Bullet for Translation Problems in TCFL Textbooks**

One of the major challenges in Chinese-English translation in general and TCFL textbooks in particular is that of linguistic inequalities that exist between English and Mandarin. In most cases, there are absolutely no absolute equivalents especially when it comes to aspects of Chinese culture and the structure of both languages. In order to faithfully translate such concepts and help learners grasp basic concepts of Mandarin, there is absolute need to carry out a few adaptations and readjustments on the source text. In this section therefore, the source and target text are compared to see the various kinds of adaptations, adjustments, omissions and additions that were carried out on the target text. The various shifts are categorized into various sub-types for convenience sake; level shifts, category shifts, lexical operations, grammatical operations and cultural shifts. Parts of the source text (words, phrases and or sentence) shall be extracted and compared with the target text in order to identify the type of shift concerned.

##### **4.1 Lexical Shifts and Operations**

Most words in Mandarin have more than one meaning in English. Unfortunately, when translating the vocabulary list, it is virtually impossible to indicate all the different meanings of a word in the target language. Thus, there is always a need to either limit or add the meaning of a word in order to avoid confusion in later chapters. The additions, omissions and or adjustments that are carried out at the level of the translation of the vocabulary list are determined by the way the word is used in the text in that particular chapter.

##### **4.1.1 Addition of Meaning**

This category of shifts is motivated by a number of factors;

- Two different words in one language translated using the same word in the other language.
- A word with more than one meaning is used in two different ways in different chapters of the book.
- A word in one language has two different meanings although both belong to the same lexical category (same word class).

In order to avoid confusion, it is important to add meaning to these words, such that when they reappear in other chapters or are used in a different context, it would be easier for the learner to make out the difference at a glance.

Atypical example of addition of meaning can be seen with the translation of nationality adjectives. In English, these adjectives can be used to designate both people from a particular country, the language they speak as well as goods or products peculiar to that country. For example; Chinese could mean- someone from China, the language spoken in China as well as made in China goods (Chinese movies, Chinese phone). Although there is no ambiguity when it comes to Mandarin, it is very important to clarify what the words mean exactly as used in the text. For example: 西班牙语 Spanish (language), 西班牙人 Spanish (person), 汉语 Chinese (language), 中国人 Chinese (person).

他是德国人 He is a German, 我不会说德语 I can't speak German, 是德国的 It is German.

In Mandarin, there is no strict distinction between subject pronouns and object pronouns. The first-person singular pronoun in Mandarin is "我", it can serve as both the subject and object of a sentence. Whereas English makes a clear distinction between subject pronouns and object pronouns. In the case of "我", the subject pronoun is "I" while the object pronoun is "me", thus, when explaining these words, it is important to clearly state the difference between them. The same situation prevails with the interrogative pronoun "哪" which could mean, where, how, what, which (one). For example: 哪一个 which one? 你要哪几个? Which one do you want? 哪个国家 which country or "where" as in 你住哪 where do you live? 你去哪? where are you up to? and "what", 你学的是哪国语言? What foreign language are you studying?

你是哪国人? What is your nationality? There is thus an absolute need to add some meaning to these words so that learners don't get confused when they are used in different ways in subsequent chapters of the book. In the vocabulary list, "哪" for example is thus explained as; interrogative pronoun; where, how, what; which (one), and "叫" as to call (of animals), including bark, bleat, crow, neigh, sing, etc., to shout, to greet, to call, to give a name.

Other examples include; 饭 which could be “boiled or steamed rice”, “other cereals cooked like rice”. For example, 我要一碗饭 I would have a bowl of rice and as “meal”, 饭前洗手 Wash your hands before meals, 我们可没有餐厅, 所以他们把饭送来 There was no restaurant, so they brought you food, 在此期间, 他们一天只能吃两顿饭 During this period, they are supposed to eat just two meals a day.

“坐” is a verb that describes the action of “sitting” For example

请坐- please take a seat, 咱们到外面坐一坐好吗? Shall we sit outside?

In Mandarin, it is also used to describe the action of “travelling by a particular means of transport” like 坐车 by bus or by car, 坐飞机 to travel by plane, 他们将坐轮船去 They will travel by boat.

“时候” is a time word that refers to; time (the duration of)

我饿的时候 When I am hungry, 第一世界大战的时候 during the First World War, 战国的时候 during the Warring States period.

It can also be explained as “time”, “moment (a point in)

到考试的时候我来叫你 I will call you when it’s time for the test, 你爸妈什么时候结婚? When did your parents get married? 我们什么时候开始上课? When are we going to begin the lesson?

The word “在” when used as a preposition could either mean “in”, “on” or “at”. It is used as a preposition to indicate one’s present location or where something is found. Although in Mandarin we use just the word “在”, the English equivalent could be one of the above-mentioned words. For example; 我在家 I’m at school, 玛丽在一家银行上班 Mary works at a bank, 我在路上 I’m on my way, 在你的右手边 on your left, 我在宿舍 I’m in the dormitory, 我父母在农村 My parents are in the village, 老师在办公室 the teacher is in the office. The words “上” and “下” are widely used words in Mandarin. They can be used independently or in combination with other words to express different ideas. In *Hello Cameroon*, these two words are used in many different ways, thus it is important to express its meaning beyond the context of the first chapter in which it is used in order to facilitate the learners understanding and avoid confusion especially when it is used in a different way in another chapter of the book

As prepositions: on/under 你的书在桌子上 your book is on the table, 树上 on the tree, 小猫在椅子下 the cat is under the chair, 树下 under the tree

To go to/ to leave 爸爸每天开车去上班 My father drives to work every day. “上班” cannot thus be translated as “\*on work” like “下班” can’t be rendered as “\*under work” 他们每天 5 点半下班 They get off work every day at 5:30 PM, 上课 to go to class 下课 to finish class, 你们去上课 Go to class, 现在下课 Class is over.

The words are also used as adjective; previous, last/next 上个星期 last, 上次 last time, 上节课 the previous lesson, 下个月 next month, 下一班车 the next bus, 下次, next time 下个世纪 next century.

“请” is used in *Hello Cameroon* as “please”, a polite way of making a request (polite speech) Will you please? For example, 请坐-Please be seated, 请安静 Please be quiet, 请速回信 Please reply as soon as possible.

However, the word “请” has got several other meanings like; To invite someone to do something;

请大家把作业本交给我 Please hand over your assignment books

To engage the service of a professional (e.g. a doctor) 请医生 Send for a doctor, to treat someone to a meal

我明天请你们吃晚饭, I am inviting you out for dinner tomorrow, to invite as in 请她吃饭 invite her out for lunch

“现在” As used in the textbook means “now”. For example, 现在几点? What is the time now?

这首歌现在很流行 This song is very popular, 你现在感觉怎么样? How are you feeling now?

“现在” also means “nowadays; today; at present; just now; at the moment, currently, these days”, 现在时态. The present times,

现在的青年有不同的到的观念 Young people of today have different moral values, 现在很少有人用毛笔了 Very few people use writing brushes nowadays.

“不客气” is a common polite expression meaning “you’re welcome; don’t mention it; my pleasure”

谢谢。——不客气 Thanks——My pleasure. It is also used to decline an offer, “please don’t border”.

However, “不客气” can be used as an adjective. Let’s look at a few examples. “不客气” as an adjective: “to be rude to; to be hard on; to be unkind”

你这样做对顾客太不客气了 It is very impolite of you to do so to customers, 说一句不客气的话 to put it bluntly “frank; candid; straight forward”

不客气地说, 我不喜欢她, frankly speaking, I don’t like her, 我们之间就不客气了. Let us not stand on ceremony.

Another peculiarity with Mandarin is the diversity in the way different family members or relatives are addressed. Mandarin has different names for different family relations depending on whether they are related to the father (paternal) or to the mother (maternal). In English, “爷爷, 奶奶, 外婆, 外公” are generally referred to as

“grand father or mother” or simply “grandparents”. “paternal” and “maternal” are only used when there is an absolute need for emphasis. This goes the same with; “叔叔,伯父, 伯母, 舅舅, 姑姑” generally referred to in English as “uncle” or “aunt”. When introducing family members or relatives, one could simply use “grandfather” or “grandmother” when talking about your father or mother’s parents. This is however not the case in Mandarin as “爷爷” can only be used to address your “father’s father” and “奶奶” used to describe your “father’s mother”. They cannot be interchanged and there is no standard appellation that can go for both. Same thing with “叔叔” and “伯母”.

#### **4.1.2 Limiting of Meaning**

In most languages, it is very common to find a word or words belonging to more than one lexical category. This is a very common phenomenon in both Mandarin and English. Most vocabulary lists in text books for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language always have the word class along with the translated word. This makes indicating the lexical category quite difficult; is it a verb or a noun?

For example: “希望” hope, to wish

我希望你明天能来, I hope you will come tomorrow, 他康复的希望不大 There is little hope of his recovery, 他放弃一切希望. He has abandoned all hope.

In the examples above, the word “希望” can be used as a verb; 我希望你明天能来 and as a noun in 他康复的希望不大. However, in the vocabulary list in most textbooks, only one form of the word is used. It is either used as a noun or as a verb especially for text books intended for beginners. In the translation of such a word, it is important to limit the meaning of the word to the context or to the way the word is used in the text that follows the vocabulary list. When the word reappears in subsequent chapters and is used in a different way (as a verb or adjective) the form or part of speech should be indicated to avoid confusion.

#### **4.2 Grammatical Operations**

This section deals with the shifts that involve special aspects of the textbook. These include the translation of sentences, guidelines to exercises and instructions on how to do various exercises in the textbook. As earlier mentioned, TCFL textbooks are made up of several sections, besides the vocabulary list and text, we have aspects of grammar, phonology, culture and exercises. All these sections are preceded by notes, explanations, instructions or guidelines on how to go about the exercises or on how specific aspects of Mandarin operate. The first part deals with instructions to exercises (the translation of phrases and sentences) while the second part looks at other grammatical operations related to sentence order.

##### **4.2.1 Omissions, Additions and Adjustments**

In this section, a few shifts are carried out on the phrases and sentences in order to make the meaning clearer to the students, and also faithfully “translate” the author’s intended idea. In most cases, the sentences in the source language did not contain the author’s intended meaning (the instructions the author wanted to pass across). These shifts were thus based sometimes on further information from the author. They include; addition, omission of meaning and adjustments in sentence structure.

Examples,

在中国, 最常用的问候方式是“你好”, “您好”表示对对方的尊敬。打招呼时, 中国人常招手或点头。为了表示两个人的不同等级, 中国人会加上对方的职称, 例如老师好、医生好。

**Translation:** The most common form of greeting in China is “你好” and “您好”. This form of greeting is usually accompanied by a gesture like nodding of the head and waving of the hand. In order to sound more polite or when addressing an elder or a superior, we can add his/her title to this expression. A teacher for example can be greeted by saying; “老师好” or “您好老师”, for a medical doctor, you could say 医生好!

Here we notice a complete change in sentence structure.

#### **4.3 Structural Shifts**

This section deals essentially with shifts that have to do with a change in sentence structure or sentence pattern. These include, change in word order, passive and active voices. These shifts occur as a result of a difference in the structure of the two languages. This is very common with “question words”.

##### **4.3.1 Word Order**

Changing word order is an inevitable phenomenon in translation, especially when dealing with languages that belong to two different language families.



Negation is a very common phenomenon in almost all languages. Generally, a negative sentence is formed by adding a “negator” to an affirmative sentence. The most commonly used negator in Mandarin is “不”, and “not” in English. These two negative adverbs play the role of negating affirmative or positive sentences in both languages, however, their position in the sentence is not the same. Generally, the negative adverb “不” is placed before the verb like in “我不是学生”, but in English, the negator “not” appears after the verb “I am not a student”. This leads to changes in word order when they appear in the source text

For example, 1) 我不喜欢他们 I don't like them (\*I not do like them) 2)他不会讲中文 He can't speak Chinese (\*He not can speak Chinese)

Another interesting aspect is the use of question words, (who, where, which, when and when). Generally speaking, when asking questions in English, these words are placed at the beginning of a sentence, however, in Mandarin, they can appear at beginning or at the end of a sentence. 谁喜欢吃苹果? Who likes apples? (at the beginning of the sentence) 这是谁的苹果? Whose apple is this? (at the middle of the sentence) 这个苹果是谁的? Whose apple is this? (at the end of the sentence) 你是哪国人- What's your nationality? 你住哪 Where do you live? 你喜欢吃什么 What do you like to eat?

#### 4.4 Cultural Shifts

These are shifts related to culturally loaded words. Examples,

中国的初等中学与高级中学的教育体制不同。初中一般来说不住校。一天上课的时间从早上 7:40 到 16:40。一节课为 50 分钟。高中则为了准备高考会安排住校。(《你好喀麦隆》)

**Translation:** The organizational setup of senior middle schools is different from that of junior middle schools. Generally speaking, while secondary school (junior middle school) students live off campus, high school students usually live on campus so as to better prepare for Gao Kao (College Entrance) Examination. Classes commence at 7:40 and end at 4:40 with each lesson lasting 50 minutes.

...实行“一对夫妇只剩一个孩子”政策，也带来了一些问题...

**Translation:** The ‘one child policy’ was not void of shortcomings

自从 2015 年中国开始执行“开放二胎政策”，允许每个家庭生两个孩子。

**Translation:** In a bid to remedy this situation, the government decided in 2015 to abolish the ‘one child’ policy and adopt a new policy limiting the number of children per family to two.

中国生肖 can be directly translated as “The Chinese zodiac”. This explanation may be true however, the idea of the “zodiac” as not perceived the same way in most western cultures as is the same idea behind the “Chinese zodiac”. We could therefore further explain the word; “生肖” explained as; the twelve animals symbolizing the Twelve Branches used to designate years (according to lunar calendar).

春节一般都在 1 月 1 日到 2 月 19 日之间。在农历中，每年都有一个生肖。

**Translation:** The Chinese New Year comes up between January 1 and February 19. On the Chinese calendar, an animal is attributed to the year

你有没有被中国朋友问过 “你的生肖是什么？”

**Translation:** Have you ever been asked by your Chinese friend, "What is your zodiac sign?" Let's look at this extract from *Hello Cameroon*;

中国的生肖不是根据阳历而是按照农历来算的。中国人相信在某一年出生的人具有这一年生肖的一些特征。中国的农历中一年有 12 个月，中国人用一种动物代表一年，总共有 12 种动物，人们把这 12 种动物叫做十二生肖。在不同年份出生的人有着不同的动物属性，不同的属相有不同的性格。总共有十二个生肖：鼠、牛、虎、兔、龙、蛇、马、羊、猴、鸡、狗、猪。最受欢迎的生肖是龙。很多中国人希望他们的孩子龙年出生(《你好喀麦隆》)

**Translation:** The Chinese zodiac is based on the lunar calendar and not on the Gregorian calendar. Chinese believe that a person born in a particular year has some of the characteristics of the animal attributed to that year. A lunar year is made of 12 moons, that is 12 years. Thus, the Chinese zodiac corresponds to each year in this cycle and is represented by an animal which is said to have an influence on the person's destiny and personality. These 12 animals are: rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, rooster, dog, and pig. The most popular zodiac sign is the Dragon. Many people wish to have their children in the year of the dragon.

Wherever possible, the independence and integrity of cultural identity should be maintained and considered as a key factor in the translation process of TCFL textbooks. Detailed explanations should be provided to avoid confusion and misinterpretation.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper discussed how the appropriate use of translation shifts can help to tackle various problems related to the translation of textbooks for teaching Chinese as a foreign language.

The paper examined the various shifts and strategies used to translate vocabulary like accuracy and conciseness, contextualization, and guidance. It also discussed the strategies used in translating phrases and sentences, grammar features, measure words, and culturally loaded words. From the above presentation, we can deduce that the translation of textbooks for teaching Chinese as Foreign cannot be completed without carrying out some adjustments. This is because of the nature of the text itself and more importantly because of the linguistic and cultural differences that exist between Mandarin and English.

### References

- [1]. Catford, J. C. 1965. A linguistic theory of translation. [M] London: Oxford University Press
- [2]. Culler, J. (1976). Structuralist poetics: structuralism, linguistics, and the study of literature. Cornell: Cornell University Press.
- [3]. Klaudy, K. (2005). Introduction to the Practice of Translation. Budapest: Scholastica. (2003). Languages in Translation. Budapest: Scholastica. Thomas, Herbert, 2010. English Linguistics, A course book for students of English[M]. Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data.
- [4]. Seguinot, C (1989) The translation process, H.G Publications, School of Translation, York University.
- [5]. Yifei, Hao (2017) An analysis of the translation of vocabulary list in textbooks for Teaching Chinese as Foreign Language: Division of Literature and Languages, School of Arts and Humanities, University of Stirling.

**End notes:** All English translations are mine except otherwise stated.

Chi Derek Asaba. "Translation Shifts, Synonymy, Polysemy and Culturally Loaded Words in Translating Textbooks for Teaching Chinese as A Foreign Language." *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, 27(10), 2022, pp. 49-58.