

# Discussion of the Difficulties in Translating Terms of Address in Chinese and English

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## 1. Introduction

The semantic field of kinship terms and honorific pronouns is extensive in Chinese, and therefore differs greatly from English. “In a dictionary compiled by Liang Zhangju at the end of the Qing dynasty [end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century], more than 5000 address terms were listed. To resolve problems of translating this complex system, many writers divide them into two categories - family address terms and social deixis” (Wu 2003, p83). To improve on this oversimplified system, Wei Zhiqiang (1991), further classified them into 6 different semantic categories - name / surname + name, family deixis, status related deixis, job title, slang address terms and zero address terms. This discussion will largely focus on family deixis and status related terms of address.

“Semantic fields are arranged hierarchically, going from the more general to the more specific. The general word is usually referred to as *superordinate* and the specific word as *hyponym*” (Baker, 1991, p20). A lexical gap or *lacuna* is the absence of a word in a semantic field of a particular language that is present in another (He, 2004). A good example of a lexical lacuna between Chinese and English is the reverential second-person pronoun *nin*, meaning ‘you’, for which English has no equivalent.

A central factor with Chinese terms of address is respect, which is normally related to age - the older a person, the more they are respected. Therefore many Chinese terms of address involve the adding of *lao* (meaning old) as a prefix, which is also used satirically in Chinese jokes when people use it to refer to themselves (Zhong 2002).

The aim of this study is to first introduce Chinese family and honorific terms of address. I will then take a more detailed look at how these two systems affect terms of address referring to non-family members.

## 2. Family Address Terms

China has over 5000 years of feudal history, in which the extended family had traditionally been the smallest economical unit in the so-called ‘small-scale peasant economy’ (Wu, 2003). The ‘family’ in China has traditionally been the centre of all activity and is the focus of Chinese life (Zhong, 2002). Blood relations have always been extremely important, and a common situation even today is ‘three generations

living under one roof' (Li, 2006), where grandparents, parents and children live together. Due to this close-knit family based lifestyle, in which there is also very little migration (Cao, 2004), a complex system of address terms has evolved and has been in use since the Shang Dynasty, BC 1600 – 1000 (Li, 2006), in which paternal or maternal relations, age, gender and closeness of relation are distinguished clearly. "In *Address Terms in Chinese*, a dictionary compiled by Zhao Yuanren, 114 different family address terms are listed, and in a later paper, *Discussion of the development of Chinese family deixis* by Fan Pan, 363 different terms are listed" (Wu, 2003, p84). In contrast, family address terms in English are very simple, based around the nuclear family where there is less need to distinguish between more distant relations. This difference in nomenclature has resulted in many lexical gaps, causing serious difficulties in translation. For example, there are eight translations for *cousin* in Chinese (Zhong, 2002), and five different translations of *aunt* (Wu, 2003). Therefore, in translating *aunt* from English into Chinese, the translator would have to be aware of the age and relationship of the referent to the speaker in order to produce a faithful translation. The excerpt below is from *Dream of Red Mansions* by Cao Xuejin, which is taken from Cao (2004), the translation illustrates that often the only available technique is to use the generic English term.

(1) Now the refreshments were cleared away... Dai-Yu [went] to see her two uncles.

Here Cao uses the 'alienation technique' of translating *jiujiu* (mother's brother) into the generic term "uncle". To have provided the English target reader with this over-specific information would have served to make the text confusing and less accessible. Needless to say there are many instances like this concerning Chinese family address terms. Even more complicated is the honorific system.

### **3. Chinese Honorifics**

In many languages honorifics are used to express different levels of politeness or respect, according to the mutual status of the participants (Crystal, 1997). A Chinese edict: 'deprecate oneself and pay respect to others', sums up the honorific system well. An elaborate system of honorific language was widely used in ancient China, where it was considered rude to use personal pronouns to refer to both oneself and others (see references, number 19). In ancient Chinese culture, politeness was considered to be an inner quality that was expressed outwardly through the use of honorific language, whereby the speaker would use self-deprecating terms to refer to him/herself and related people (or places), and use respectful terms to refer to others (He, 2004). According to Xue (2006), out of the most common terms there are two prefixes

meaning ‘you’ and ‘your’: *ling* is used to refer to family members of the listener, Eg. *linglang* ‘your beautiful young lord’, meaning *your son*; and *zun* referring to things or people related to the addressee, for example, *zunfuren*, meaning ‘your (dignified) wife’. There are also over 30 self deprecating prefixes and ways to say *I* or *my*, for example, *yuxiong* – ‘I, the unintelligent’; *biren* – ‘I, the less educated’; *nujia* – ‘I, your slave’ (wife); *bixiao* – ‘my (wretched) school’; *jiannei* – ‘my (despicable) wife’ (see references number 19). I shall not discuss this wide range of self deprecating honorifics here, however, below are some examples to illustrate the difficulties faced by the Chinese-English translator when translating honorifics. The first example is a translation of an excerpt from *Golden Lotus*, translated by Clement Egerton, taken from Ye (2002):

(2) Golden Lotus bowed her head deeply and said with a smile “it was very careless of your slave to strike you, please don’t be angry with me my lord.”

The term *nujia* is a self deprecating term used by young women, literally meaning ‘your slave’. The translator opted for a direct translation of the term, which at a glance seems to be semantically consistent with the source text, however the true cultural connotations of *nujia* in this context are still not adequately expressed, furthermore such a term used in an English translation may be confusing to the target reader. However, if translated as ‘me’, the basic illocutionary force is successfully rendered into the target text at the expense of the cultural value (Ye, 2002).

In most cases, when translating self deprecating honorifics such as this, it is unlikely the translator will find a semantic equivalent where the cultural content of a term can be entirely rendered into the target text (Ye, 2001), therefore the safest option and best way to provide a pragmatic translation is simply to translate using the equivalent personal pronoun of the honorific. A leading Chinese pragmatist, He Ziran, recognizes that an important factor in pragmatic translation of address terms is to ensure the equivalence of the illocutionary force. He (1988) believes that when it is not possible to translate both the semantic content and illocutionary force of a proposition, the former must be sacrificed. Therefore, in the pragmatic translation of self deprecating honorifics, there will always be some semantic loss.

Honorifics indicating respect are easier to translate. The two examples below are from two translations of *Dream of Red Mansions* by Cao Xuejin, taken from Ye (2002):

(3) He therefore politely and urgently requests you to influence your esteemed son to relinquish young Qi.

Translation by Florence and Isabel Mchugh

(4) I beg you, therefore, to ask your noble son to send Qi Guan back.

Translation by Yang Xuanyi

Both translators render the respectful tone implied by the use of the honorific term *linglang* (an honorific used to refer to the addressee's son) into English quite well. Often when translating respectful terms like this, using words in English that have a similar pragmatic effect, such as *esteemed*, *venerable* and *respected* can achieve a good level of equivalence (Ye 2002).

“After the liberation in 1949, a whole series honorifics faded from usage” (Jin Di, Nida, E., 1984, p48), however some are still used at formal occasions (Zeng, 2001), or in business language (He, 2004). For example, the question ‘*nin guixing?*’ (what is your surname?) is still used, however the traditional self-deprecating answer *bixing*, is now considered old fashioned (Jin Di, Nida, E., 1984). Another honorific phrase that is still common today is ‘*qing jiao daming*’, which literally translated means ‘please teach me your great name’, normally rendered as ‘May I have your name?’ (He, 2004).

Although many of these terms are now not in use, there are still examples in modern Chinese of depreciatory and reverential terms of address, for example, Di and Nida (1984), list the seven translations for *teacher*, with varying degrees of reverence:

*Jiaoshujiang* - depreciatory

*Jiaoshude* – slightly depreciatory

*Jiaoyuan* – neutral

*Jiaoshi* – respectful

*Laoshi* - reverential

*Xiansheng* – reverential in reference or address

*Shizhang* – highly reverential

Di and Nida point out that the term *xiansheng*, even though highly reverential can also be used in a derisive sense, as is the case in a well known article by Chairman Mao. The article comments on the destructive nature of the West, the English translation reads:

(4) It was very odd, why were the teachers always committing aggression against the students?

The irony of the teachers (a euphemism for the West) abusing their students is of course rendered into the target text, however, the satirical tone evoked by the reverential term *xiansheng* is very powerful in Chinese, unfortunately “the English translator has to use the neutral word *teacher*, which is really much closer to the indifferent term than to either of the reverential ones” (Di and Nida, 1984, p47).

#### **4. Family Address Terms Referring to non-Family Members**

Tong (2001) refers to these as ‘assumption terms’, whereby a family term of address is used to refer to a non-relative. In the Chinese mentality, society as a whole is seen as an extension of the family (Li 2006), and there is no clear distinction between family and country. For example, in ancient China, the monarch - *jun* was often referred to as *junfu* – the suffix *fu* meaning father, and politicians - *chen* were often referred to as *chenzi*, the suffix *zi* meaning son (Li 2006). Much of modern Chinese thought is still affected by ancient Chinese philosophy, for example a popular quote of Confucius ‘address [treat] each other as one family’ is still popular today (Wu 2003). Generally speaking all people – coworkers, students, friends even strangers tend to use family address terms to refer to each other, and if names are used it is considered rude (Wu 2003). As within a family, these terms are also used according to the age and gender of the addressee and can indicate differences between interpersonal relationships, reflecting status and closeness. This can also reflect the level of education and politeness of the speaker. A young person could refer an old man (a stranger) as *shushu* or *yeye* (‘uncle’ or ‘grandfather’), (Li, 2004) or *laobo* (‘old uncle’) (Ma, 2003). Someone that he did know would be called *dabo* (‘big uncle’) or *bobo* (uncle) and an old woman could be referred to as *nainai*, (‘grandmother’) (Li, 2004). According to Ma (2003), as two people become closer and more familiar they will use honorifics or family address terms to reflect this, normally with the addition of the prefixes, *lao* (‘old’) – which signifies knowledge and experience, or *xiao* (‘small’) will be used to refer children as a sign of affection. The reverential suffixes *ye* (grandfather) or *xiong* (brother), or *di* and *ge* (‘younger’ and ‘older brother’) can be added to a person’s surname.

English does use *uncle* and *aunt* to refer to non-family members, however this is normally reserved for close family friends, and there are no such terms used to refer to younger people, apart from maybe *son*, which does have limited use. In English, the use of family or reverential terms to convey politeness to non-family members could

actually be considered quite rude, for example referring to an older woman as ‘granny’ is likely to cause offense, as in this context *old* would not carry the same connotations of wisdom and respect. Calling a stranger ‘uncle’ would also probably be considered strange. The more subtle aspects conveyed by the use of assumption terms are even harder to express in English, some examples illustrate this below.

(5) “Sister-fairy” he begged with a smile, “do tell me where you are from...”

Taken from *Dream of Red Mansions*, by Cao Xue-jin

In this extract (taken from Li, 2006), Bao Yu on meeting a fairy in a dream, addresses her as *jiejie* (‘older sister’), this serves to be respectful of someone who is older than him, while at the same time showing that he doesn’t consider her a stranger (Li, 2006). The translation of “sister” manages to convey the latter, however the representation of age difference is lost.

Sentences 6 and 7 are from *Dream of Red Mansions*, by Cao Xue-jin, taken from Ma (2003).

(6) He was overheard by Shi Yin, who arrived just then, “I see you have high ambitions, brother Yu Cun” he joked.

Shi Yin is a middle-aged high ranking official, and Yu Cun is a young but impoverished student. The use of the reverential *xiong* suffix by Shi to refer to Yu Cun shows the Chinese reader that he holds a great deal of respect for him. *Xiong* does indeed mean brother, and this direct translation of the form seems to work, however the semantic meaning of respect is lost in the translation, and the target reader will not be made aware the respect that Shi holds for Yu cun.

(7) “Why didn’t you say so before?” interposed Shi-yin. “I’ve often wondered about this, but since you never mentioned it, I didn’t like to broach the subject”.

In this passage, the older Shi Yin uses the reverential *xiong* to refer to the younger Yu Cun, and also refers to himself using the slightly depreciatory *di* (younger brother). In the translation of “you” and “I”, the honorific aspect of the discourse is lost. However, there seems to be no way in English to express this without the translation sounding awkward and unnatural.

(8) “It’s very hot  aunty, and Mr. Wu has caught a chill. .... Mr. Wu is  my father’s favorite student;  you’ll have to treat him well!”

Taken from *Song of Youth*, by Yang Mo.

“Aunty” is a direct translation of *ama*, which is a term widely used to refer to any woman of middle-age or above. However Bao (2003), points out that it is also used as a polite address form for older female servants. For example, in three translations of Lu Xun’s *Xiangzi the Camel*, there are three different translations of *zhangma* – ‘Amah Zhang’ (Even King), ‘Zhang Ma’ (Jean James) and ‘Nanny Zhang’ (Shi Xiaoqing). Bao concludes that Shi’s translation is the most accurate. In (8), *ama* refers to the servant woman of the house, therefore translating it as ‘aunty’ is inaccurate. “My father” is a translation of *laoye* which is a highly reverential term used to refer men of wealth, position and power (Bao, 2003). A daughter using this phrase to refer to her own father is of significance to the Chinese reader, which cannot be conveyed in the translation.

This example is transliterated from a dialogue in *Dream of Red Mansions*, by Cao Xuejin, taken from Tong (2001):

(9) “Guniang zenme bu anxi?” “Jiejie qingzuo”

Daughter why [NEG] sleep sister please sit

*Guniang* can mean *daughter* or *aunt*. Here the younger Xi Ren is talking to Lady Dowager (unrelated). Similarly, Lady Dowager refers to Xi Ren as *jiejie* – older sister. Making a direct translation of these kinship terms would result in a misleading translation, therefore Tong opts for the following translation: “Why didn’t you go to bed?” “Sit down, please.” Tong admits that although this is pragmatically faithful to the source text, much of the semantic content of the dialogue between the two speakers has been lost.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper has shown that there are large lexical gaps in the translation of Chinese family terms of address and honorifics into English. There are many more family address terms in Chinese, therefore when translating these into English, the translator must use the more general hyponym in English. For example *bobo*, *jiujiu*, *shushu*, *yifu*, *gufu* must all be translated as ‘uncle’, and *shenshen*, *bomu*, *jiuma*, *yima* and *guma* are all ‘aunty’ (Li, 2006). Translating into Chinese, more information is needed to make an accurate translation, without maternal/paternal and age information, it is often impossible to accurately translate English family terms of address into Chinese.

As the examples above have shown, often the only way to translate honorific and assumption terms into English is through the pragmatic translation of the address term into its simple deictic equivalent. This will be acceptable to the target reader, however a certain amount of cultural connotation will be sacrificed in the process (Li, 2006). As mentioned above, many honorifics are now obsolete, however, assumption terms are still widely used and pose the biggest problem of semantic loss in translation of address terms.

## 6. References

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