https://doi.org/10.37420/j.cer.2026.039

# On Interpreters' Awareness of Cross-cultural Communication

**Zhao Hongmei***
**TIANFU COLLEGE OF SWUFE, City of Mianyang, Sichuan Province, China**
***Corresponding author, E-mail: 449707171@qq.com**

**Abstract:**
*Interpretation as a cross-cultural communicative act, involves many factors among which culture is seen as an outstanding one. Apart from bilingualism, an interpreter, as a cultural mediator, should have a due acquaintance with cultures in respective languages and raise the general awareness of the importance of cultural elements in interpreting. The present paper aims at enhancing the interpreters' cultural awareness by analyzing the heavily cultural-bound phenomena: classical allusions and idioms and the corresponding strategies adopted to deal with such problems.*

**Keywords:**
*Interpretation; Culture; Classical Allusions; Idioms*

## 1. Introduction

The idea of translating across culture and culture proficiency has increasingly preoccupied the attentions of the theorists and translators since the role of language within a culture and the influence of the culture on the meanings of words and idioms are so pervasive. As is known to all, interpretation, a mediator of culture as well as language, is usually seen as a cross-cultural communicative acts and characterized with such features: all interlocutors are present, sharing the same spatial and temporal situation, circumstances and knowledge relevant to the topic of discourse. Considering the distinctive features of interpreting and visible influence of culture on language, an interpreter is confronted with difficulties in safeguarding against confusion and misunderstanding in limited time, especially on some extremely important occasions his role as a mediator stands out and further illustrated by the statement "…the future of the world may depend upon the accurate translation of one word; …" (Gentzler, Edwin, 2004: 106). In this sense, apart from bilingualism it is imperative that a qualified interpreter should heighten the awareness of culture fact, and for truly successful transmission of information, raising general awareness for the importance of the cultural factor should become the focus of discussion of the paper in which interpreting idioms is a case in point.

## 2.The Relationship between Culture and Language

Culture, a widely discussed term, is said to be defined in more than five hundred ways. Diverse though the perspectives of giving definitions, there is still a widely quoted one given by the British anthropologist

© 2026 by the author(s); licensee Mason Publish Group, this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Edward Burnett Tylor in 1871: “Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” From the definition, it is self-evident that language is an integral part of culture and thus plays an important role in it. Language is influenced and shaped by culture and accordingly mirrors culture. Language interacts with culture and the understanding of one requires understanding of the other. Social scientist points out that cultures differ from one another, and that each culture is unique. Cultures are diverse and so the languages. It is only normal then that with differences both in cultures and languages, considerable difficulties may arise in inter-cultural bilingual communicative acts, especially in interpreting in view of the fact that further correction and embellishment are not allowed because of the brief time an interpreter has on the scene. In this respect, any one who is to determined to take up this practice must bear in mind that a successful oral communication depends too much on his cultural proficiency just as Eugene.A.Nida points out that biculturalism is even more important than bilingualism, since words only have meanings in terms of the cultures in which they function. (1993: 110). Some unique expressions in Chinese such as 下岗，农民工，户口 etc. , the frequent concomitants of the social and economic advancement, are the case in point. In English-speaking countries no such equivalents can be found to match them since there is a cultural gap between different languages.

This paper will focus on the cultural factors in classical allusions and idioms, especially those heavily cultural-bound expressions.

## 3.Classical Allusions and Idioms and Possible Difficulties of Interpreting Posed by Them

In most, if not all, languages people especially those well-educated people, have a liking for embellishing their speech with references to characters or events from their history, legends, literature, religion, etc. Allusions not only make the language rich and colorful, but facilitate the communication among the people with a shared knowledge whereas they are barriers to the people from different cultures and thus the communication become more difficult. For instance, at a banquet in honor of the US former visiting president Nixon, he quoted in his toast lines from a poem by Mao Zedong: “So many deeds cry out to be done, and always urgently; the world rolls, time presses. Ten thousand years are too long, seize the day, seize the hour!”( 多少事，从来急；天地转，光阴迫；一万年太久，只争朝夕。) Obviously, an accurate rendition of the lines entail a due acquaintance with some famous poems. At the Conference of Dialogue of Asian Civilization, the Chinese vice foreign minister once ever quoted from Confucius: “ 中国古代的睿智先哲提出‘四海之内皆兄弟’，‘和为贵’，‘海纳百川’等思想主张 …...”. Undoubtedly, such ideas are regarded as the most distinctive features in Chinese culture. Correct understanding of these allusions is the first step toward interpreting. An interpreter should get prepared for the possible difficulties in rendering them into the target language acceptably. In most cases conveying meaning takes priority to other factors. When in carrying out such tasks, the interpreter must take into consideration the audience in the target language; at least he should take measures to safeguard against the confusion and misunderstanding.

Idioms are usually seen as an important part of the language and culture of a society. Broadly speaking, idioms comprises all the idiomatic and special expressions in that language, including , in this context, all the set phrases, colloquialisms, proverbs, slang and clichés in English, and all the four-character set phrases( 四

© 2026 by the author(s); licensee Mason Publish Group, this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

字成语 ), common sayings（俗语）, proverbs and two-part allegorical sayings( 歇后语 ) in Chinese. If used properly, idioms can add to the rich and bright colors in a speech. However, they are often hard to understand and even harder to use correctly. What's more, the meanings of idioms cannot be derived from their constituent parts. Misunderstanding and mistranslation are unavoidable because of the numerous "false friends" in the two languages. The saying" A horse stumbles that has four legs" is likely to be rendered into Chinese 有四条腿的马会跌倒，a version may sound quite strange to the audience. Indeed, to render idioms is a complex matter and gives rise to numerous pitfalls and problems. There are four categories of difficulties interpreting idioms may pose:

i) An idiom may have no equivalent in the target language. The way a language chooses to express, or not express, various meanings cannot be predicted and only occasionally matches the way another language chooses to express the same meaning. One language may express a given meaning by means of a single word; another may express it by means of a transparent fixed expression, a third may express it by means of an idiom, and so on. It is therefore unrealistic to expect to equivalent idioms and expressions in the target language as a matter of course. Especially the instance of idioms and fixed expressions which contain culture-specific items adds to the difficulty of comprehension and accordingly interpretation of them.

ii) An idiom or fixed expression may have a similar counterpart in the target language, but its context of use may be different; the two expressions may have different connotations, or they may not be pragmatically transferable, so to speak. The English idiom "Even a worm will turn" seems to be able to find its Chinese equivalent" 狗急跳墙 ". The reverse is true. The original meaning of the English idiom is that if a weak and worthless, cowardly person is bullied too much, he will fight back while in the Chinese idiom " 狗急跳墙 ", it means that if some one is cornered, he will do something desperate. Because of the different cultural background and the emotional coloring, the two idioms have different mental associations and different responses from the audience in the target language as well as the source language.

iii) An idiom may be used in the source text in both its literal and idiomatic senses at the same time. Unless the target-language idiom corresponds to the source-language idiom both in form and in meaning, the play on idiom cannot be reproduced in the target language. Say, the English idiom "go out with" have both literal and idiomatic meaning ('have a romantic or sexual relationship with someone'). If an interpreter fails to notice this case, the failure of communication might be unavoidable and occur.

iv) The very convention of using idioms in written discourse, the context in which they can be used, and their frequency of use may be different in the source and target languages. English uses idioms in many types of text, though not in all. Their use in quality-press news reports is limited, but it is common to use them in English advertisements, promotional material, and in the tabloid press. Using idioms in English is very much a matter of style. Chinese makes a sharp distinction between written and spoken discourse and on the whole tends to avoid using idioms in written texts.

In the following part, idioms will be classified and corresponding strategies and methods will be adopted to tackle the serious problems with idiom interpreting.

© 2026 by the author(s); licensee Mason Publish Group, this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

# 4. Corresponding Strategies for Dealing with These Problems

In the following part, corresponding strategies and methods will be adopted to tackle the serious problems with idiom interpreting.

## *4.1 Using an Idiom of Similar Meaning and Form*

This strategy involves using an idiom in the target language which conveys roughly the same meaning as that of the source-language idiom and, in addition, consists of equivalent lexical items. This kind of match can only occasionally be achieved. Translating Idioms with Idioms undoubtedly will contribute to the retaining of senses and images.

Difficult though it is, to the interpreters' delight, there are some idioms in which their equivalents both linguistically and culturally can be found to match them. For instance, the English idiom "A fall into the pit, a gain in your wit" has its Chinese equivalent: 吃一堑长一智 . More examples: facts speaks louder than word( 事实胜于雄辩 )；Fish in troubled water ( 浑水摸鱼 ). In such cases, the method of word-for-word translation is adopted here to bring the whole images in the source language into the target language since idioms in English contain images, descriptions and meanings identical with idioms in Chinese. This approach is usually adopted when occurs the complete cultural overlapping on condition that the image contained in an idiom can be easily understood by the audience of the target language.

## *4.2 Using an Idiom of Similar Meaning and Dissimilar Image and Alteration of Images*

Due to the different geographical distribution and living environment, images contained in some idioms may be slightly different from those in other languages, but fortunately in great measure they can be applied to the same circumstances. In other words, they have similar cultural images and same meanings, say, kill two birds with one stone( 一箭双雕 ). In this case idiom-interpreting entails a slight alteration in images in order to better off the understanding between the two cultures. I

In this regard the dissimilarity between different cultures poses serious problems with interpreting in view that culture plays an important in giving a language its own characteristics. People who live in coastal areas and whose livelihood is dependent on the sea will have idioms about sailing, about braving the weather, about fish and fishing. To Eskimo people, because of their living in the icy far end of North America, there is said to be about twenty words for snow. Naturally enough, idioms in their culture are associated with snow so much. China, an ancient nation with a brilliant civilization has been enjoying a world-wide reputation for the philosophical traditions reflected in Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism , which put much stress on social harmony, fraternity or doing good, as in 天人合一；四海之内皆兄弟；前人栽树，后人乘凉，etc. The role of language within a culture and the influence of the culture on the meanings of words and idioms are so pervasive that scarcely any text can be adequately understood without taking its cultural background into careful consideration.

In order to successfully fulfill the communication between two totally different languages and cultures, it falls to the interpreter, the cultural mediator to represent and convey the meanings of idiom in terms of language and culture as accurately as possible. Of course if reappearance of cultural elements is out of the

© 2026 by the author(s); licensee Mason Publish Group, this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

question, the method of free translation is plausible. Take for instance the English idiom a fly on the wheel( 自以为本领很大的人 ), the images in it , if translated into Chinese literally, may sound odd and unnatural to the Chinese audience. Nevertheless, one must bear in mind that an interpreter has to see to it that his rendition must be accurate and acceptable, though a certain amount of cultural elements might be lost as a result of some insurmountable cultural barrier. More importantly, a qualified interpreter should very sensitive to the "false friends" in two different languages, say, to have a bone in one's throat, is by no means the Chinese equivalent: 如鲠在喉 ; the Chinese idiom 另人发指 seemingly matches the English idiom: to make one's hair stand on end. As a matter of fact, they are the "false friends" which are likely to lead to mistranslating on the part of a green hand in interpreting. In this respect, an excellent command of both languages and full awareness of cultural cross-communication are sufficient to get rid of the unavoidable mistranslation.

### *4.3 Interpreting by Paraphrase and Omission*

This strategy can be applied to the difficulties in categories iii) and iv) already mentioned before above. This is perhaps by far the most common way of dealing with interpreting idioms when a match in terms of language and culture cannot be found in time or when it is inappropriate to use idiomatic language in the target discourse. For instance, the Chinese idiom 不管三七二十一 can only be worked into English like this: regardless of the consequences; more examples: every dog has its day( 人人皆有得意之日 )；天有不测风云，人有旦夕祸福（The unexpected always happens.）etc. In this case all images in Chinese idioms and English idioms are omitted in order to successfully fulfill the cross-culture communication between different language communities.

## 5. Conclusion

Interpreting is a bilingual cross-cultural communication. The process of interpreting involves many factors, among which culture plays an important role. An interpreter should raise his general consciousness of cross-cultural communication. The paper aims at illustrating the point by analyzing the heavily cultural-bound phenomena: classical allusions and idioms in different languages and cultures. Corresponding methods are adopted to tackle various problems hindering the smooth communication between different communities.

## References

[1] 梅得明 . 高级口译教程［M］. 上海：上海外语教育出版社，2000.

[2]Bassnett, Susan ＆ Lefevere, Andre, Constructuring Cultures: Essays on Literary Translation, Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2001.

[3]David, Katan, Translating Cultures: An Introduction for Translators, Interpreters and Mediators, Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2004.

[4]Deng yanchang, Liu Runqing, Language and Culture, Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 1989.

[5]Eugene A. Nida, Language, Culture, and Translating, Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education

© 2026 by the author(s); licensee Mason Publish Group, this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Press, 1993.

[6]Mona Baker, In Other Words: A Coursebook on Translation, Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2000.

© 2026 by the author(s); licensee Mason Publish Group, this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)