

The Linguistic Style and Properties of English Translation of Chinese Dish Names: A Case Study of Eight Major Cuisines

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Keywords: English Translation; Chinese Cuisine; Linguistic Style and Property; Eight Major Cuisines; Chinese Dish Names

Abstract: Chinese cuisine plays an important role in everyday life owing to extremely prosperous culture. The English translation of Chinese dish names in cross-cultural communication is of vital importance, especially with the global popularity of Chinese cuisine. Chinese cuisine is divided into eight major cuisines in the light of the different origins. The paper is based on a brief introduction to the language style and properties of English translation of Chinese dish names. The uniqueness of eight major cuisines is regarded as a representative research object. According to the analysis of the linguistic style and main properties of English translations in Chinese dish names based on eight major cuisines, the effectiveness in cross-cultural communication is explored. The English translation of some typical dish names from Chinese cuisines are probed into, especially in eight major cuisines, in order to make a comparative analysis of the Linguistic Style and Properties.

1. Introduction

Chinese cuisine, one of the Chinese cultural treasures, is popular both at home and abroad with a long history, which is underpinned by its profoundly rich cultural heritage. In cross-cultural communication, the English translation of Chinese dish names carries vital importance—especially when Chinese cuisines gain global popularity. The Chinese cuisine is categorized into eight major groups based on the localities of their origin: Su (Jiangsu, including Suzhou and Yangzhou), Yue (Guangdong), Chuan (Sichuan), Lu (Shandong), Min (Fujian), Zhe (Zhejiang), Xiang (Hunan), and Hui (Anhui). (Sun Weixin, 2004: 225) ^[1]. This paper first provides a brief overview of the key characteristics of Chinese cuisines, with a focus on the uniqueness of these eight major cuisines, which serves as a representative research subject. To analyze the linguistic features and core attributes of English translation of Chinese dish names, some examples from eight major cuisines are elaborated on. In addition, their effectiveness is explored in cross-cultural communication, especially comparative analysis of linguistic style and properties of English translation of Chinese dish names.

2. General Properties of Chinese Cuisine

China's vast territory, varied climates, and diverse local produce have given rise to numerous

regional culinary styles. In eight groups, each has unique characteristics: Sichuan cuisine emphasizes spicy and numbing flavors (with Sichuan peppercorns); Cantonese cuisine focuses on fresh and delicate tastes, often using seafood; Shandong cuisine excels in savory, umami-rich sauces and roasting techniques. This regional variety means dish names often carry local linguistic or cultural markers.

Various kinds of food are usually included in Chinese cuisine, such as chicken, duck, fish, meat, wild game & sea food, vegetable & tofu, soups and other food & desserts, snacks, drinks, etc. Therefore, Careful consideration should be given to the language functions of Chinese dish names in English translation according to their linguistic style and properties.

2.1 The Application of Rhetoric to the English Translation of Chinese Dish Names

Rhetoric which is a vivid means of language use leaves a deep impression on readers through similes, metaphors, hyperbole, pun, etc. If rhetoric is used in the English translation of Chinese cuisine, the dish names sound sweet and witty, especially similes and metaphors are used in English translation, for example, *Crystal-like Chinese yam balls* (Hui cuisine) is translated from Chinese into English, in which simile is used. Besides, *Crisp Fried Bean Curd* that also belongs to Hui cuisine is translated, which metaphor is used in this translation. *Steamed Pigeons in Clear Soup* that is classified as Lu cuisine, is translated from Chinese into English, etc. In order to promote the sales of Chinese cuisine, hyperbole is often used to attract customers. For example, *Chicken with Colorful Fish and Shrimp Cake* (Xiang cuisine) is translated, while *Chicken with Colorful Fish and Shrimp Cake* (Su cuisine)" is translated, etc. Additionally, pun is widely used to bring about a striking effect. As a compelling example, *Broiled chicken cutlets with turtle* (Su cuisine) is translated, in which *bie* (*bid farewell to*) is the same as *turtle* in pronunciation, *ji* (*Concubine*) and *ji* (*chicken*) as well.

2.2 Characteristics of Syntax in the English Translation of Chinese Dish Names

In linguistics, syntax is the study of how sentences are structured, or in other words, it tries to state what words can be combined with others to form sentences and in what order. Since sentence is usually considered as the largest grammatical unit of a language, syntax has long been the center of grammatical study. A sentence is traditionally regarded as a sequence of words; therefore, the study of sentence formation involves a great deal of the study of the word, such as the classification of words in terms of parts of speech, the identification of functions of words in terms of subject, predicate, etc. (Hu Zhuanglin, 2001:115)^[2]. In this section, we shall discuss briefly some of these categories as well as the formula transformation of English translation of Chinese dish names. For example, *Fish Fillets in Mushroom Sauce* (Yue cuisine) is translated from Chinese into English, in which the preposition is used between the main material and side material. The verb in Chinese is transformed into a preposition.

In order to help readers to understand the skills of English translation of Chinese dish names, the various formulas of the translations are given in the following. Meanwhile, the overseas visitors can benefit from the translations and learn more about Chinese cuisine culture.

Firstly, to begin with the main ingredient used by the dish.

Formula one: main ingredient plus (with) matching ingredients. For example, *Chicken Cubes with Chili Pepper and Peanuts*, which is a traditional famous dish with distinctive features both at home and abroad, has its historical origin: it is generally believed to have originated in the Qin Dynasty and is related to Ding Baozhen, the governor of Sichuan. Therefore, this dish is categorized as Chuan cuisine and translated as *Chicken Cubes with Chili Pepper and Peanuts*; Apart from that, *Spring Chicken with Osmanthus* (Su cuisine) as well as *Shark fin with Minced Chicken* (Yue cuisine) is translated in this way.

Formula two: main ingredient plus (with, in) sauce. For example, *Fish Maw in Chilli Sauce* belongs to Sichuan cuisine, in which fish maw is used as the main ingredient, cooked with seasonings such as chilli sauce. It features a spicy, numbing, fresh and fragrant flavor, which conforms to the style of Sichuan cuisine. According to the specialty, this dash is translated into *Fish Maw in Chilli Sauce*. In addition, *Chicken Wings and Legs with Brown Sauce* is one of the representative dishes in Yue cuisine, etc.

Secondly, to begin with the cooking methods of the dish

Formula one: cooking methods plus main ingredient. For example, *Steamed Dried Prawn* (Yue cuisine) and *Braised Pork Joint* and *Soft Fried Pork Fillet* (Lu cuisine) begin with the cooking methods of the dish.

Formula two: cooking methods plus main ingredient plus (with) matching ingredient. For example, *Barbecued Pork with Stuffed Eggs* (Yue cuisine) and *Grilled Abalone with Fresh Vegetable* (Lu cuisine) are translated in this formula.

Formula three: cooking methods plus main ingredient plus (with, in) sauce. For example, *Fried Shredded Pork with Sweet and Sour Sauce* is extremely representative in Sichuan cuisine. It uses shredded pork as the main ingredient, paired with auxiliary ingredients such as shredded fungus, shredded bamboo shoots, and shredded carrots. Additionally, *Saut éed Sliced Beef with Oyster Sauce* is one of the famous Yue cuisines.

Thirdly, to begin with shape or taste.

Formula one: shape (taste) plus main ingredient plus (with) matching ingredient. For example, in Yue cuisine, *Sliced Abalone with Heart of Cabbage* and *Crispy Fried Chicken with Glutinous Rice Stuffing* are translated from Chinese into English in this way. In addition, *Diced Hare with Chili and Wild Pepper Sauce* (Chuan cuisine) is also a very typical example.

Formula two: shape (taste) plus cooking methods plus main ingredient. For example, In Sichuan cuisine, *Tender Stewed Fish* as well as *Crisp-fried Duck* is translated from Chinese, of which *Tender* and *Crisp* belong to *shape(taste)*, *Stewed* and *fried* to cooking methods, *Fish* and *Duck* to main ingredient.

Formula three: shape(taste)plus main ingredient plus (with)sauce. For example, *Spicy Sliced Lamb in Ginger Sauce* is one of the representative dishes of Shandong cuisine (Lu cuisine). In Zhe cuisine, *Salt Baked Duck in Lotus Leaf* and *Crisp Shrimps with Rice Wine Sauce* are translated in a similar way.

Finally, to begin with the inventor (origin) plus (cooking methods) plus main ingredient

Formula one: inventor (origin) plus (cooking methods) plus main ingredient. For example, *Mapo Bean Curd*, one of the most famous dishes in Sichuan cuisine, was originally created by the Chen Mapo Tofu Restaurant in Chengdu, Sichuan, and has a history of more than 100 years. Therefore, this dash is translated into *Mapo Bean Curd*. In addition, *Chicken of South China Style* in Yue cuisine is another typical English translation.

In order to keep the culture in Chinese cuisine, we should make clear of the material and cooking methods. Original names with notes may be adopted in the translation of the dish names, which the foreign visitors can get a clear understanding of the history and contents of the dishes. Therefore, they can be translated as *Mapo Bean Curd (Stir Fried Bean Curd in Hot Sauce)* and *Chicken of South China Style (Chicken Skin Spread with Shrimp)* respectively. (Wang, Lv Hefa, 2006:199)^[3]

Meanwhile, the literal translation plus notes can be used in the translation of Chinese dish names with rich culture, which both keeps the culture and lets foreign visitors know more about the dishes. For example, *The Dragon Fighting Against the Tiger, (Stewed Snake and Wild Cat)* is a Cantonese famous dish in which Dragon means Snake and Tiger means Cat; therefore, it is regarded as “snake meat” simmering “cat meat”. If this dish is directly translated into the *Dragon Fighting Against the Tiger*, the foreign visitors will be confused. When directly translated into *Stewed Snake and Wild Cat*,

it seems too simple. So the dish is correctly translated into *The Dragon Fighting Against the Tiger, (Stewed Snake and Wild Cat)*. (Cheng Jinneng, Lv Hefa, 2008:404)^[4]. Additionally, Close attention should be paid to the translation of the dish names. Generally speaking, in the light of the general principle, several methods can be classified according to different perspectives in the translation of Chinese cuisines. Basically, the English translation of Chinese cuisines are divided into metaphrase or literal translation as well as paraphrase or free translation.

3. The Language Function and the Style Features of Chinese Dish Names

3.1 The Language Function

As far as the language of Chinese cuisine is concerned, the primary communicative functions can be categorized as informative, expressive, vocative, and aesthetic. “The informative function is predominantly the major role of language. Language is the instrument of thought, and the use of language to record the facts is a prerequisite of social development, which is indeed an important function of language. It is also called ideational function in the framework of functional grammar.” (Hu Zhuanglin, 2001:12) Halliday notes that “Language serves for the expression of ‘content’: that is, of the speaker’s experience of the real world, including the inner world of his own consciousness. In serving this function, language also gives structure to experience, and helps to determine our way of looking at things, so that it requires some intellectual effort to see them in any other way than which our language suggests to us.” (Halliday, in Lyons, 1970:143)^[5].

Of the four functions mentioned above, the informative function is considered the most fundamental. In practical terms, it is essential that a menu should convey adequate and relevant information. Generally speaking, a well-prepared menu provides diners with insights into the characteristics of Chinese cuisines, including flavor attributes, regional distinctions, nutritional content, and other culturally or gastronomically significant elements.

In other words, most Chinese dishes inform customers of the basic functions. Due to its nourishing properties, *Black-bone Chicken* is used in all of China's eight major cuisines. However, it is most extensively utilized in Cantonese cuisine and Fujian cuisine, where it is particularly good at combining with herbs to exert its health-preserving value. A good example is the specialty, *Black-bone Chicken and Mushroom Soup* which has a good nutritional value for a pregnant woman successfully shows the function of this soup for fetus protection. Therefore, the informative function refers to the use of language to represent extralinguistic reality, encompassing both external contexts and factual content related to a given topic. This function poses a particular challenge in the translation of Chinese cuisines, as some dish names often do not directly denote the actual ingredients or culinary nature of the food. Instead, they may allude to historical origins, cultural references, or anecdotal narratives associated with the dish.

Apart from that, *Beggar’s Chicken /Baked Chicken Vagabond Style/Mud-Baked Chicken* enjoys great popularity in Sichuan. Honored as the “King of Fujian Cuisine”, *Fotiaoqiang* is a typical of Fujian cuisine (Min cuisine). It is also renowned as one of the region’s most nourishing banquet, famous for its rare ingredients, intricate preparation processes, and rich, mellow flavor. According to its distinguishing features, this dish is translated as *Fotiaoqiang—Steamed Abalone with Shark’s Fin and Fish Maw in Broth (Lured by its delicious aroma even the Buddha jumped over the wall to eat this dish.)*. (Cheng Jinneng, Lv Hefa, 2008:409).

Vocative function, which some people may call it as imperative function, is the use of language to call upon the readership to act, to think or feel, in fact to react in the way intended by the text. For one thing, vocative function means a good dish can inform consumers of the certain nutritional value. As a result, it serves the purpose of attracting consumers to taste this dish. For another, the communicative orientation of translation of Chinese cuisines also lays great stress on its persuasive

and promotional functions, aiming to capture the attention of potential customers and stimulate their appetite. In this sense, the translation often serves advertising and marketing purposes. For instance, in the context of Sichuan cuisine, dishes such as *Steamed Chicken with Chili Sauce*, *Saut éed Bullfrog in Chili Sauce*, and *Tasty and Refreshing Ox Tripe*, etc.

The aesthetic function of language in the context of Chinese cuisine refers to its capacity to evoke a sense of beauty and provide consumers with an aesthetically pleasing experiences. This aesthetic appeal is typically realized on two levels: formal beauty and content-based beauty. Formal beauty encompasses phonological elegance and visual appeal, while content-based beauty involves semantic richness and the evocation of vivid imagery. Such aesthetic qualities not only enhance memorability but also serve marketing purposes by increasing consumers' interests. Furthermore, the aesthetic function shows, through the linguistic construction of artistic conception, the referencing elements such as color, shape, numbers, and culturally significant symbols of good fortune. Given the unique characteristics of the Chinese language and culinary culture, consumers tend to interpret the distinctive features of Chinese dishes—such as their color, aroma, flavor, presentation, symbolism and so forth. For example, *Bitter Melon in Plum Sauce*, *Saut é Prawn with Green Jade Sauce* and *Crystal-like Chicken* are very famous Yue cuisine. As a result, Chinese cuisine is named and translated into English in this way; some nouns or adjectives that can produce the aesthetic feeling are added before the dish names in order to attract customers to dine.

The expressive function refers to the capacity of Chinese dish names to convey specific information about popular culinary features, including their functions, distinctive characteristics, nutritional value, and other culturally or gastronomically relevant attributes. For example, *Tai-ji Dish* (Lu cuisine) is translated from Chinese into English, but the most successful translation is *Tai-ji Dish (Sliced Bread with Sweet-Smelling Mushroom, Vegetable and Dry Shellfish)* whose shape is similar to the dish and tends to awaken people's imagination. In other words, *Dry Shellfish*, *Vegetable*, *Mushroom*, and *Bread Slice* are put on the plate in the light of Tai-ji's form. Chinese people are familiar with *Tai-ji* which is regarded as the symbol of auspiciousness; therefore, it usually keeps the symbol when translated into English (Wang, Lv Hefa, 2006:199). In addition, expressive function is the use of language to express or depict some objects or events. In most instances, linguistic expressions do not serve a single communicative function in isolation; rather, multiple functions often overlap and interact, resulting in language fulfilling several roles simultaneously. For example, in the Yue (Cantonese) dish name *Crisp Chicken Stuffed with Eight Delicacies*, the character *eight* not only denotes a numerical value but also contributes to the phonological rhythm and aesthetic appeal in accordance with the expressive conventions of the Chinese language. Meanwhile, *crisp* conveys a sensory description of the dish's texture, fulfilling an expressive function by evoking a vivid image of the dish's appearance and mouthfeel. Thus, this dish name embodies a synthesis of both aesthetic and expressive functions. Therefore, in Sichuan cuisine of *Mapo Tofu (Stir-Fried Tofu in Hot Sauce)*, *Mapo* used to be a person's name and she invented a way of cooking. Hence, many dishes are named after his or her name according to the way of cooking. The phoenix tail is used to describe the appearance of the prawns, thus the dish name has both the informative function and the expressive function. Besides, *Boiled King Prawns en Casserole* is one of the famous Lu cuisines. *Zibu* in Chinese means that this dash is nutritious and has a special effect on health. For the purpose of arousing people's attention, *Zibu* is used in some cuisines, so it combines both the vocative function and expressive function.

3.2 The Style Features

3.2.1 Literal Translation Style

Generally speaking, literal translation preserves the overall form, structure and metaphors of the

source language (SL). However, it requires appropriate adjustments to ensure that the target language (TL) is clear, smooth and acceptable, enabling TL readers to experience similar feelings as SL readers. Literal translation is different from word-for-word translation, with the latter being inferior owing to its stiffness and unintelligibility. Since most Chinese dish names are realistic descriptions of the dishes, literal translation is widely applied in English translations.

Nevertheless, some literal translations may fail to fully convey the metaphorical and humanistic implications of the dishes. In such cases, explanatory notes should be added as supplements to achieve faithfulness to the original. Peter Newmark (2001a:39)^[6] argues: "Generally, in communicative as in semantic translation, provided that equivalent-effect is secured, the literal word-for-word translation is not only the best; it is the only valid method of translation. There is no excuse for unnecessary 'synonyms', let alone paraphrases, in any type of translation." Examples of literal translation in eight major cuisines are as follows: *Steamed Perch* (Yue cuisine); *Dezhou Braised Chicken, Shandong Specialty* (Lu cuisine); *Stir-fried Winter Bamboo Shoots, Fujian style* (Fujian cuisine); *Three Shreds in Spicy Oil* (Sichuan cuisine); *Three Delicacies Casserole* (Zhejiang cuisine), etc. (Feng Qinghua, 2006:92)^[7]. It is characterized by the direct conversion of ingredients, cooking methods, or literal meanings. For example, the Cantonese dish *Tomato Scrambled Eggs* is a literal translation. This method is widely applied to dishes with straightforward names. A case in point is *Scallion Braised Sea Cucumber* from Lu(Shandong) cuisine.

From the examples above, it is evident that each element of the translation aligns with the corresponding position in the formula—a common rule applicable to all literal translations of Chinese dish names. Regarding explanatory notes, the approach to "literal translation plus annotations" aims to avoid confusion arising from cultural differences or linguistic conflicts in the target language. For example, in Zhejiang cuisine, *Choudoufu* in Chinese is translated as *Doufu(Pleasantly Pungent Bean curd)*(Zhang Chenxiang, 2008:143)^[8]. Besides, taking the dish *Green Dragons Crossing the Sea* as an example, literally, the name may sound intimidating, but it actually refers to a simple water celery soup, a classic in Cantonese cuisine. Thus, its translation should be "*Green Dragons Crossing the Sea*" supplemented with the note "*Vegetable Soup.*" (Wang, LvHefa, 2006: p200)

3.2.2 Free Translation Style

Free translation refers to a translation method that conveys the meaning and spirit of the original text, rather than a simple word-for-word translation. It involves adjusting and reorganizing the original text according to the expression habits and grammar of the target language. This method is most often employed when literal translation is truly unfeasible for the translator. Compared with literal translation, free translation is different in coping with the English translation of Chinese cuisines. Ultimately, literal translation is by no means a word-for-word rendering, just as free translation is far from arbitrary.

For example, *Stewed Pork Soup with Crab Cactus Flowers*, which is a special stewed soup in Zhaoqing, Guangdong. In this dash, *Jianhua* in Chinese is a crab cactus flower, and is also called *Bawanghua* in Chinese (Jin Huikang, 2004:293)^[9]. For another example, *Sweet Soup of Lily and Lotus Root*, which is literally "a harmonious union for a hundred years", is a representative dish of Cantonese cuisine, one of the *Eight Major Cuisines* in China. It is especially served at wedding banquets because it implies that the couple will stay together until old age and enjoy a harmonious marriage for a hundred years. The first and last characters of the dish name, when combined, form "Bai He", which means "lily" in Chinese. In Cantonese, "Nian" (year) and "Lian" (lotus) are the same in pronunciation. Therefore, this dish has a profound symbolic meaning, representing good luck and auspiciousness as well as expressing sincere wishes to the newlyweds. As a result, it is recommended to translate it as "*Sweet Soup of Lily and Lotus Root*". (Cheng Jinneng, Lv Hefa, 2008:404). In conclusion, that translators must have a wide knowledge of cooking is an essential prerequisite for

translating such dish names. In addition, they are familiar with the ingredients and cooking procedures of these dishes and must not rely on partial understanding.

3.2.3 Hybrid Translation Style

Combination of literal and free translation is a key characteristic of hybrid translation style. For example, *Dongpo Braised Pork* in Zhejiang cuisine retains the proper noun plus literal translation of the dish type. For another example, *Dongpo Pork Joint* which is a famous dish from Meishan in Sichuan belongs to Sichuan cuisine (Chuan cuisine). Here, an explanatory note is needed to clarify that "Dongpo" refers to Su Dongpo (1037-1101), a versatile poet of the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127). Such annotations help provide overseas customers, especially first-time diners, with a complete understanding of the dish's origin, thereby achieving equivalent effect in Chinese-to-English dish translation. As a result, this dash is translated into Dongpo Pork Joint.

4. Conclusion

This paper is based upon main linguistic styles and properties in the English translation of Chinese dish names taking eight major cuisines, namely the application of rhetoric, characteristics of syntax, language functions and style features. In addition, some practicable suggestions should be made to enhance translation quality, such as context-adaptive strategy selection, and its significance for facilitating cross-cultural communications. The research is limited to traditional dishes; in the future, attention should be paid to the study of more flexible techniques of translation.

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