# The cultural barrier between languages

## Different cultures may interpret the same word differently due to references within the culture, and may create misunderstanding when communicating between different cultures

As the An Lushan Rebellion broke out in December 755 in China, young Du Fu started to travel around China in order to hide from the chaos of the war. It is this experience, that turned him into the great poet that he is, significantly influencing the Chinese and Japanese literary culture even until now.

While incompatibility of different culture references is a problem especially prominent in the case of Du Fu’s poems, since his poems often feature morality and history in the context. Western readers, without proper understanding of the historical and moral context, could easily misunderstand or fail to understand the message of the poem. However, translators makes adjustments to the content and devices of the poem to allow readers to understand the poem’ better.

Here is an example of Du Fu’s poem and its translation by Kenneth Rexroth:

绝句二首

其一

迟日江山丽，

春风花草香。

泥融飞燕子，

沙暖谁鸳鸯。

其二A

江碧鸟逾白，

山青花欲燃。

今春看又过，

何日是归年

South wind

They days grow longer, the mountains

Beautiful. The south wind blows

Over blossoming meadows

Newly arrived swallows dart

Over the steaming marshes.

Ducks in pairs drowse on the warm sand.

Another spring

White birds over the grey river.

Scarlet flowers on the green hills.

I watch the Spring go by and wonder

If I shall every return home.

Kenneth’s translation of Du Fu’s poem (right) A set of poem by Du Fu which he describes the beautiful spring full of wild life

The original poems made several Chinese cultural references, but with changes in diction and imagery, Kenneth is able to translate the general message to the western audience:

In the second line of the first poem, Du Fu used the word “spring wind” to create an imagery of the scent of warm nature. Kenneth replaced this phrase with the term “south wind”. This makes sense because winds in spring are often referred as “south wind” in America, as south is the direction which wind blows in spring. Furthermore, South wind have a special meaning to the native American Iroquois, for representing the warm air, smell of flowers and songs from birds. (Native American Myths and Beliefs) With the greater cultural ties of the Americans with south wind, Kenneth’s diction would be more easily recognized and understood by his American audience

Also, in the beginning of the second poem, Du Fu created an imagery of birds fading into the river, and flaming colored flowers on mountains to create a sad atmosphere. The original poem describes the river of processing a turquoise color. However, the river is described as “grey” in Kenneth’s translation. This is because in the English culture, turquoise is often associated with livelihood and positive emotions, which instead create a positive mood. Grey blends in with white, which preserve the fading effect in the original poem. Since water are usually colored in a shade of blue, making it grey also makes the frame less colorful, thus adding successfully preserving and improving the atmosphere.

Some times adjustment of literary devices is able to convert unfamiliar context into familiar references, but that is not always the case. In the poem “Winter Dawn”, the settings are influenced significantly by culture, and more adjustments to the content of the poem is needed to be made in order for the western audience to completely understand the message.

杜位宅守岁

守岁阿戎家，椒盘已颂花。

盍簪喧枥马，列炬散林鸦。

四十明朝过，飞腾暮景斜。

谁能更拘束？烂醉是生涯。

Winter Dawn

The men and beasts of the zodiac

Have marched over us once more.

Green wine bottles and red lobster shells,

Both emptied, litter the table.

“Should auld acquaintance be forgot?” Each

Sits listening to his own thoughts,

And the sound of cars starting outside.

The birds in the eaves are restless,

Because of the noise and light, Soon now

In the winter dawn I will face

My fortieth year. Borne headlong

Towards the long shadows of sunset

By the headstrong, stubborn moments,

Life whirls past like drunken wildfire.

Kenneth Translation of Du Fu’s Poem (right) A poem by Du Fu: first describing a party celebrating new year, then reflecting on future of his life in a depressing way

Du Fu used the second and third verse displays the setting of the scene: pepper in cups of wine on a table (an ancient Chinese New Year tradition), people gathering around, with noises from horses in the stable. With the large amount of references to the Chinese culture, Western audiences would not have enough context to understand the poem. Kenneth approaches this problem by directly changing the setting to “Green wine bottles and red lobster shells” on the table. In North American culture, lobsters are seen as a sumptuous meal. The Green empty wine bottles help preserve the lively atmosphere of the party, and the lobster shells being a luxurious food demonstrates the importance of this party. Further more, Kenneth translated the sound of horses into “sound of cats starting”, making the imagery more relatable to modern people, since cars are far more popular than horses now. Therefore, by changing to the elements in the imagery into familiar objects, Kenneth makes the scene more relatable to the modern western audience.

Aside from Du Fu’s poems, there are many other great literary works of other languages who suffer under the same problem: not being able to be perfectly translated into another language due to incompatibility of the different cultures. While this may appear troublesome, the variety of culture is what should be celebrated, since the purpose of language is to communicate the difference in individual, groups and cultures.