

(Poster Session)

從英中字典看文化及意識形態之差異：以「解放」二字為例

Understanding ideology and cultural differences: meaning shifts in the Chinese-term "解放" (Liberation) among English-Chinese dictionaries

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Abstract

Dictionaries are thought to be accurate and objective. In school, teachers often encourage learners to check up a Chinese dictionary to learn Han characters and their meanings. Unfortunately, dictionaries may not be as reliable as many of us expect. Not all Chinese dictionaries can provide consistent, unitary, neutral and universal definitions that stand outside of religion, politics, social changes, popular culture, etc. This is particularly obvious when it comes to Chinese words or/and terms that have been 'hijacked' by political propagandists.

To illustrate our argument, in the poster, we collect and examine various word explanations and exemplary sentences of the Chinese term “解放” (Liberation) from several commonly used English-Chinese dictionaries. Comparisons are drawn between (1) printed and online English-Chinese dictionaries; (2) old and new English-Chinese dictionaries, and (3) English-Chinese dictionaries published in Hong Kong, Mainland China and Taiwan. As predicted, the Chinese term “解放” (Liberation) is interpreted and shaped differently, if not contradictorily across different dictionaries. The shifts in meaning are found to be most noticeable in the comparisons of dictionaries written and published in Hong Kong, Mainland China, and Taiwan. We believe that such shifts in meaning suggest not only cultural diversity, but also manipulations of Han characters and Chinese vocabulary.

Despite the small scale of the comparative study, our research results reflect that dictionaries can be utilized as a tool for ideological purposes. It is strongly recommended that teachers and learners of Han characters use at least two dictionaries as reference, so that they can be more aware of hidden ideology, stereotypes, and cultural differences among different Chinese-speaking societies, which are crucial in understanding the culture and historical background while learning the language. Learning the language, after all, is a way to shed light on understanding cultures and the way of thinking behind the text.

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