

Original Paper

Application of Functional Equivalence in English-Chinese

Subtitle Translation in *Green Book*

Qi Zhang^{1&2}

¹ Zhijiang College of Zhejiang University of Technology, Shaoxing, China

² Faculty of Foreign Studies, Beijing Language and Culture University, Beijing, China

Received: February 11, 2024

Accepted: March 22, 2024

Online Published: April 03,

2024 doi:10.22158/eltls.v6n2p120

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/eltls.v6n2p120>

Abstract

*Under the trend of globalization, movies, as a medium of cultural communication and exchange between countries around the world, are becoming increasingly prominent. Subtitle translation, which has been sublimated from an obstacle between cultures to a convenient tool, can restore the effects of art in movies and television programs, and extend the meaning within the works to facilitate cultural dissemination. In this sense, different meanings within movies as well as cultural background and character features have to be translated. This article intends to summarize the functional equivalence theory, and base the analysis of translation skills and characteristics in the movie *Green Book* on the theory. Through further consideration for the relationship between the theory and the practice, the research questions of how lexical equivalence, syntactic equivalence, textual equivalence and stylistic equivalence function and cooperate with one another are to be fully investigated. Finally, the conclusion is to be drawn with the purpose to show the original taste of the movie *Green Book* and put forward some advice in subtitle translation.*

Keywords

*Functional Equivalence Theory, *Green Book*, Subtitle Translation, Culture, Language*

1. Introduction

With the rapid economic and social growth across the world, the relationship between countries has become closer. Movies have long since become a key part in intercultural communication among countries, but different languages seem to have blocked such exchange. At this time, subtitle translation is particularly important, for it can break down the language barriers in an attempt to help the audience to better understand what is presented in foreign movies. In recent years, the majority of foreign language films have been introduced to China, and a large number of professional and amateur subtitle

translators in China are in the place to do the job. Therefore, it is necessary to have a better mastery of what is going around in the field of movie subtitle translation and find efficient solutions to address the problems.

Due to the lack of resources and technology in the late 1990s, subtitle translation is still little known and noticed by the public. As movies and TV programs, to a large extent, have become a symbol of a particular culture when people from distinct countries are far more eager to know about each other, a markedly increasing number of people are turning to subtitle translation for both knowledge and pleasure. In the present society, whether it is a formal company or a group of individuals who are interested in subtitle translation, the quality of subtitle translation has greatly improved and people's watching experience has also benefited a lot from it.

Green Book, the topic to be discussed in our study, is produced based on a true story. In 1962, Tony Lip, a tough bouncer, was looking for a job when his nightclub was closed for renovations. The most promising offer turned out to be the driver, who came for the African-American classical pianist Don Shirley for a concert tour into the Deep South states. Although hardly enthused at working for a black man, Tony accepted the job and they began their trek armed with *Green Book*, a travel guide for safe travel through racial segregation regions in the United States. At the very beginning of the movie, the snobbishly erudite pianist and the crudely practical bouncer could barely get along with their clashing attitudes to life and ideals. However, as the disparate pair witnessed and endured the appalling injustices on the road, they found a newfound respect for each other's talents and started to re-look at each other. In doing so, they came to nurture a friendship and understanding that would change both their lives.

When it comes to the movie *Green Book*, the diverse cultural differences between China and the United States should be taken into consideration. For one thing, the two main antagonists in the story present themselves with bright and vivid depiction of their characters, so that the translation methods will change when applied in the characterization. For another, plenty of oral English expressions and slang words in the film have produced a humorous atmosphere, which is a test for the translator. Functional equivalence theory has been widely applied in all kinds of translation. Its founder Eugene Nida is an important representative of the translation theory school in the western linguistics field, and it is his belief that translation does not require literal correspondence, but achieves functional equivalence between two languages (Xu, 2019). Based on the functional equivalence theory, this paper intends to discuss major principles and methods in the subtitle translation of the movie *Green Book*, and analyze the degree to which the functional equivalence theory suits subtitle translation, in an attempt to see whether the target language audience can receive the information from the movie as the source language audience.

2. Language Features of *Green Book*

Green Book is a growth-oriented documentary film set in the United States in 1962. That year was during the 100th anniversary of the breaking out of American civil war and the abolition of slavery, and the United States was in the midst of the black civil rights movement with the greatest tension between black and white people in history. Therefore, the director used a strong contrast and multi-level parallel to highlight their rich emotional lines. In the first half of the story, Dr. Shirley was high above the pack, but at the same time he knew that he was alone and even lonely, for there was no such thing as an alternative to reconcile a broken marriage with a perfect job. And Tony, who was not good at talking but really had a deep feeling for his family, had never offended anyone and seemed too sophisticated. In the second half of the story, as the two got along further, their feelings were gradually sublimated, causing their emotions to clash with each other. Tony learned to pay attention to the interests of the whole and Dr. Shirley realized that he could not stick to his own opinion all the time. Although the last performance was a mess, he saved his dignity, and at that moment, he found his true self. There were huge differences between the two antagonists in race (black and white), education (civilized and rude) and social status (upper society and lower society).

2.1 Vernacular Language

There are a lot of dialogues in the movie, especially when Tony was involved. As he came from a family of the lower class and was not well-educated, there often appeared a lot of vulgar language and American slang in his words. If the translator does not understand the meaning of the language Tony had used, it is difficult to grasp the core of the whole sentence and may cause misunderstanding among the target audience. When confronted with Tony's straightforward expressions, we should be careful enough not to select those words on formal occasions, but to use plain words that people use to stay closer to life. As Tony was from Italy, it is quite common to encounter a variety of Italian and colloquial language in the film. Owing to Tony's dislike towards black people, the use of Black English in the movie seemed to be a trigger of his emotional clash with Dr. Shirley. Moreover, there came along many "slips of the tongue" by Tony in the movie, composing a key part so as to demonstrate cultural characteristics of the English language and background information of him. It is generally the case that the personality of the characters determines what they say as well as the way they produce the utterances; if we cannot find the way out in better understanding their modes of words and behaviors, there may be deviation in the translation process that will give rise to unsatisfactory results. Therefore, whether we can master the distinctive features of those characters largely determines the quality of the whole translation (task).

Example 1: I am meeting all the highly leading citizens of the town. People that use big words, all of them. But you know me, I get by, I am a good bullshiter. As I am writing this letter, I am eating potato chips and I am starting to get thirsty. I washed my socks and dried them on the TV. I should have brung the iron.

Translation: 我见了镇上所有的文化人, 所有那些夸夸其谈的人, 但你了解我的, 我插不上话, 我就会吹吹牛。我写信的时候正在吃薯条, 后面就觉得有点儿渴了。我把袜子洗了, 然后放在电视上晾着, 早知道我就戴 (dai¹) 上熨斗了。

This is the text of Tony's letter to his wife, which seems like a running account. Some of the words are wrong like *brung* for *brought*, together with mixed use of present progressive and simple past tense that could have led to confusion. Nevertheless, the translation has to be adjusted to a free style, as is suggested in a running account, applying those underlined characters in particular to indicate an ill-educated man. Mistakes in English have also been translated by improper characters in Chinese, such as the case that *dai¹* (put on) should have been replaced by *dai²* (带, bring or take).

Example 2: Nice turn Mike, what he makes it up?

Translation: 走得好, 他嚼啥舌根了?

The translation conforms to the very way that the Chinese expressions are uttered in daily life. “嚼舌根”, as is used to translate “make up”, means to “talk about someone else's business behind their back, often in an unfavorable way”. The use of such an expression from Chinese dialect is of help for most Chinese readers to understand the meaning of this sentence.

2.2 Compressible Language

The most important aspect of subtitle translation is its brevity. Due to the limited time, space and other factors, the subtitles on the screen have to be limited to a proper amount, so compressibility in the translated text is necessary for subtitle translation. As is suggested in the previous studies, on the one hand, word-for-word translation usually does not gain much acceptance among the target language audience. On the other hand, the meaning of an expression to be presented to the audience is barely the combination of each word within it, as is in the case of “brand-new fool”. “Brand-new fool” that appears in the film is translated as “闻所未闻的蠢蛋” (a fool who is never heard of) instead of “新型的傻瓜” (a totally new type of fool), for the former can add to the fun in the Chinese context while the latter is an unacceptable expression.

Example 3: You ungrateful bastard!

Translation: 你这个白眼狼!

In Chinese, “白眼狼” is used to describe a person who is ungrateful and hurts those who help him. There is nothing wrong with the literal translation of “不知感恩的混蛋”, but it is wordy and less frequently used in Chinese. Besides, the translator has come a bit closer to the target culture in an attempt to offer the audience a better experience of watching this movie.

Example 4: I need some sleep.

Translation: 我困了。

This sentence also has the same effect. Chinese people do not say “我需要些睡眠” (word-for-word translation of the original sentence), which is too puzzling and awkward in daily communication. Short as the utterance “我困了” is, the colloquial expression is concise enough to understand, because too

much unnecessary information is of little importance to translate subtitles.

2.3 Humor

In fact, *Green Book* is an interesting movie with a number of humorous utterances that have attracted the attention of native audience. In this way, how to reproduce the similar effect among Chinese audience is a challenging test. Even though the translator pays much attention to those humorous expressions and turns the “meme” of the English language into some equivalent that seems to be (re)produced with the Chinese language, it cannot be said that the elements in the English culture has been translated into those in the Chinese culture. It is the cultural barrier – the language and its form has been converted to Chinese, while the content that is deeply rooted in an exotic environment remains English. The following two examples are concerned with the case of seemingly irrelevant correspondence between Chinese and English, where the translator has to pursue equivalence in language function instead of language form or literary meaning of the original text.

Example 5: Not shit. Must have been naughty kids.

Translation: 这样啊，那肯定是特别不乖的孩子。

“这样啊” appears to be lexically irrelevant to “Not shit”, but it actually functions the way the original expression does. “Not shit” (or “no shit”) was first used as army slang during the 1960s, and gradually grew into a common phrase in daily life. It occurs in questions as well as in exclamations to show doubt or thrill of the speaker, which is similar to “Really? / Is that true?” or “Believe me. / I’m telling the truth!” Tony said he bought a record called “orphan” and explained that the cover showed the record of a group of children sitting around a campfire. Dr. Shirley said the record was called “Orpheus,” and that the cover was not of a child but of a demon in the depths of hell. That is why Tony said they were naughty kids and the use of “Not shit” here is his confirmation of information he had received.

Example 6: Ooh, I am gonna get grease on my blankie. Come on, have a piece.

Translation: 呜呜，我的小毯子要沾上油了。别废话了，来一块吧。

Here is a long dialogue. Fried chicken was a kind of common food for African Americans at that time, but Dr. Shelley, who was black, had never eaten it. Tony repeated Dr. Shirley’s words with a little sarcasm, hoping that he could taste a piece of Fried chicken. The Doctor was finally persuaded by Tony and ate a lot later. Tony’s repetition of the doctor’s concern about the blankie is in stark contrast to his attempt to convince the doctor of the delicious food, which is just fun and can present the sense of humor together with the actor’s performance

3. Equivalence in Subtitle Translation of *Green Book*

Eugene Nida discarded the old terms like literal, free, and faithful translation and turned to “two basic orientations” or “types of equivalence”: formal equivalence and dynamic equivalence (Nida, 1964, p. 159). As is stated in Nida (1964, p. 159), formal equivalence focuses on the message both in form and content, and the message in the target language should match as closely as possible the different

elements in the source language. In this sense, formal equivalence is a ST-oriented principle which requires translation practice to conform to ST structure, often with scholarly footnotes. While for dynamic equivalence, later called functional equivalence, Nida believes the relationship between receptor and message should be substantially the same as that which existed between the original receptors and the message (Nida, 1964, p. 159). The goal of dynamic equivalence, naturally, is to seek the closest natural equivalent to the source-language message (Nida & Taber, 1969, p. 12). For Nida, achieving equivalent effect or response is one of the four basic requirements of a translation: producing a similar response (Munday, 2016, p. 68), and the other three are making sense, conveying the spirit and manner of the original, and having a natural and easy form of expression.

3.1 Lexical Equivalence

Word is the basic unit to form a sentence, a paragraph, an article, but it usually brings trouble or inconvenience to for polysemy. It is unlikely that two words are exactly equivalent in meaning, while different words or phrases can express the same meaning or intention. In order to convey the accurate information to Chinese audience, the meaning of words should be carefully handled in the translation process, lest a small mistake may spoil the atmosphere of the whole movie.

Example 1: Johnny: Maris is up. Tony: Yeah, so am I.

Translation: 约翰尼: 马里斯上场了。 托尼: 嗯, 我也起床了。

At first glance of the two short sentences here, there is nothing wrong with them, but according to the plot of the movie, the translator should pay special attention to the meaning of the word “up”. “Be up” means “appear” or “get up” on different occasions. In the movie, people were watching a baseball game and they were all excited. Johnny told his friends Maris appeared on the field playing the game, while Tony was waken up by noisy chatting and cheering. Thus, it is the effect of polysemy that may cause misunderstanding and here comes the careful translator who should quickly make a difference.

Example 2: Just put the apple-butter away, boy.

Translation: 可快闭嘴吧你。

The meaning of “apple-butter” here is not a simple combination of the two words. The latter seems reasonable but it is completely wrong in the film. The setting was a prison, where Dr. Shirley kept pleading for a phone call but the warden said impatiently. After a check in the dictionary, it is known that this compound is an American slang expression, which means a small talk. The whole sentence means “do not talk”, and “shut up” is an extension of the meaning if the translator takes the context into account. In this way, obstacles usually occur in the translation when cultural factors are included, and only a deep understanding of both cultures can make the translation perfect.

3.2 Syntactic Equivalence

Syntactic equivalence, which involves grammatical elements such as number and gender in this case, is much more complex than lexical equivalence. There is no obvious change in the singular and plural forms in Chinese, but the change of the singular and plural forms in English will bring about the change of the predicate.

Example 3: You are embarrassing. You are embarrassing your son. He is killing you.

Translation: 你简直丢人, 你儿子都没眼看了, 他要碾压你了。

It was a hot dog eating contest, and Tony's friend was making a fun of Tony with a vicious joke. The first two sentences meant that if Tony did not do a good job, he would embarrass his son. The word "kill" clearly means "defeat" so that there is no reason to think that Tony's son would be ashamed enough to kill his father. Meanwhile, "He" does not mean "your son" but "Fat Paulie", Tony's rival. Therefore, a better mastery of what was happening in the movie enables the translator to be cautious enough not to make such a mistake.

3.3 Textual Equivalence

A good translation consists in a correct understanding of the context, and the translator must attach enough importance to a single sentence as well as what lies both before and after the sentence. For sometimes even the translator might neglect cultural elements if he or she is excessively concerned with one sentence and might take seemingly correct information for fact.

Example 4: So if you want me, it's a buck and a quarter a week.

Translation: 想要雇我, 就是每周 125 块。

"a buck" in the sentence is not an exact unit of number but means "a dollar", "money" or even a "male deer". In this movie, it stands for 100 dollars, as is mentioned in the previous scene about the salary. Furthermore, "a quarter" is one fourth of a buck, i.e. 25 dollars, thus making the translation of the currency conversion equivalent to U.S. dollars.

Example 5: Ten-to-one, you slap this moolie out, you come home in under a month.

Translation: 我赌你肯定会跟那个黑佬打起来, 不到一个月就回家。

"Ten to one" usually suggests a kind of possibility, so it is often understood as "very likely". Tony's friend thought that he could not get along well with black people, using the expression as emphasis. From the textual evidence the translator concludes that "Ten-to-one" is actually an American slang and should never be thought of as a score in a match or counting numbers.

3.4 Stylistic Equivalence

Different styles embody the theme and spirit of movies. Translators who are believed to be proficient in two or more languages are obliged to reflect the style of the original text. The cultural factors as well as the effect of genres should be fully considered. The overall style of *Green Book*, as is shown on the screen, is humorous with a warm atmosphere, which should be maintained in translation so that the target audience can expose themselves to the atmosphere and finally come to better approach and understand what this movie is intended to convey.

Example 6: Sorry, not for me.

Translation: 我欣赏不来。

Tony was eating a pimiento-cheese sandwich but it wasn't to his taste, so he spat it out again and said "Sorry, not for me". The translator did not simply translate it as "not suitable for me", but change it into

the expression “欣赏” (to appreciate) which shifts from appetite to appreciation. The replacement here successfully adds some humor and wit which seems more like tease than dislike, thus making the translation more in line with modern language style.

Example 7: When I think of you, I am reminded of the beautiful plains of Iowa. The distance between us is breaking my spirit. My time and experiences without you are meaningless to me. Falling in love with you was the easiest thing I have ever done. Nothing matters to me but you. And everyday I am alive, I'm aware of this. I loved you the day I met you, I love you today and I will love you to rest of my life.

Translation: 每当想到你, 映入脑海的便是爱荷华州美丽的平原。我们之间的距离真是令人心碎, 没有你, 一切时光和旅程都变得毫无意义。与你相爱, 的确是最轻松的事, 没有什么比你更重要, 只要活着, 每一天都会是这种感受。偶遇的那天就对你一见倾心, 今天依然如此, 余生来日方长。 This passage is about the moment when Dr. Shirley was teaching Tony how to write a letter, which fully reflects the cultural connotation of Dr. Shirley, and also shows the warmth between people of the movie. The subject “I” is not directly put in the first place in the translation, for the subject is omitted to avoid redundancy (the repetition of “我” in Chinese) and to display theme-salience in Chinese, i.e., the theme and topic present themselves without the subject.

4. Discussion

In this movie, the translation process should first consider the background of the story and the character's personality. Since the audiences in the two countries live in different environments, are educated in various ways and with distinct cultures, translators should pay attention to the above aspects. Nida's functional equivalence theory was the product of the 20th century, and it is seemingly outdated for translation studies of the new century. However, the essence and principles involved in it can still play the role in translation practice. It is not our job to criticize Nida's theory, or even to completely abandon it, which does no good to have a full understanding about what has happened to translation theory and its evolution. What we need to do is involve cultural and social analyses in translation studies, with the purpose of figuring out how cultural and social factors exert influence on translation practice and translator's decisions, in addition to the attention paid to linguistic levels of translation, i.e., how to ensure the quality of translation, improve its readability and thus bridge the gap between the original and target languages.

References

- Munday, J. (2016). *Introducing translation studies: theories and applications*, 4th edition. London & New York: Routledge.
- Nida, E. A. (1964). *Towards a science of translating*. Leiden: Brill.
- Nida, E. A., & Taber, C. R. (1969). *The theory and practice of translation*. Leiden: Brill.
- Xu, C., & Jiang, B. (2019). Application of functional equivalent in subtitle translation of *Venom*.

Ability and Wisdom, 19(24), 214-215.

Note(s)

Note 1. This article is supported by “the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities, and the Research Funds of Beijing Language and Culture University” (22YCX118)