Original Paper

On Cultural Default and Translation Compensation Strategies in *The Middle* from the Perspective of Relevance Theory

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Abstract

This paper, based on Relevance Theory, analyzes the phenomenon of cultural default present in the situational comedy The Middle. By dissecting the cultural elements within the show, it reveals how the cultural information in the original work affects audience comprehension. To address these cultural deficiencies, various compensation strategies are proposed, which not only preserve the humor effect and emotional depth of the original but also effectively bridge the cultural cognitive gaps for the target language audience, thereby enhancing the acceptability and viewing experience of the translated work. Ultimately, the study concludes that appropriate compensation techniques can promote cross-cultural communication and deepen audience understanding and resonance with the work.

Keywords

cultural default, The Middle, relevance theory, translation compensation strategies

1. Introduction

The Middle is an American situational comedy that premiered in 2011, depicting the various problems and challenges faced by a typical American family in their daily lives. The show has gained widespread popularity due to its humorous narrative style and authentic portrayal of family relationships; however, the cultural background differences among viewers can create certain barriers to their viewing experience. Cultural default, as an important concept in translation, refers to the phenomenon where certain cultural information fails to be effectively conveyed to the target audience due to differences in cultural backgrounds between the source and target languages. This paper will explore the phenomenon of cultural default in *The Middle* and the compensation strategies employed in its translation, analyzing the impact of these phenomena on audience comprehension from the perspective of Relevance Theory.

2. The Theoretical Framework of Relevance Theory

Relevance Theory, proposed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, emphasizes the selectivity and relevance of information in communication, aiding our understanding of the challenges and strategies faced during the translation process. This theory provides a robust analytical tool for examining the cultural default phenomena present in *The Middle.*

2.1 Relevance

Relevance is the core principle of Relevance Theory, referring to the notion that the value of information in communication is determined by its relevance to the audience's cognitive goals. Highly relevant information can stimulate audience interest and facilitate understanding and acceptance. Translators must ensure that the information and expressions they choose resonate with the cultural and background knowledge of the target audience, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of the translation.

2.2 Cognitive Effort

When receiving information, audiences engage in a cost-benefit analysis of cognitive effort, tending to prefer information that offers greater benefits while requiring less effort. Translators should be aware that cultural differences may heighten the difficulty of comprehension for audiences, necessitating the design of translation strategies that reduce cognitive load. By employing appropriate explanations, annotations, or simplified language, translators can assist audiences in grasping complex cultural content with greater ease.

2.3 Background Knowledge

The background knowledge of audiences plays a crucial role in information comprehension, influencing their interpretation and response to texts. When selecting translation methods, translators need to consider the cultural, social, and historical contexts of the target audience to better convey the meanings of the source text. By contrasting the source culture with the target culture, translators can identify which information needs to be emphasized or supplemented to facilitate audience understanding.

2.4 Explicit and Implicit Information

Relevance Theory highlights the relationship between explicit (clearly expressed content) and implicit (potential or implied meaning) information. During the translation process, translators must pay attention to how to effectively convey this implicit information to ensure that the target audience can grasp the deeper meanings of the source text. Through appropriate cultural compensation and contextual cues, translators can help audiences understand the cultural backgrounds and emotions that are not directly articulated.

3. Cultural Default in *The Middle*

3.1 Causes of Cultural Default

The phenomenon of cultural default arises from several key factors. Firstly, discrepancies between the cultural backgrounds of the source and target languages often lead to the omission of specific cultural

information. For instance, certain customs, holidays, or colloquialisms within the source culture may lack direct equivalents in the target culture. Additionally, the translator's cultural literacy and comprehension skills directly influence the quality of the translation. Translators with a higher degree of cultural awareness are more likely to recognize these discrepancies and adopt effective strategies for compensation.

3.2 Cultural Default in The Middle

Within The Middle, numerous cultural elements may pose comprehension challenges for non-American audiences. The most prominent instances of cultural default include the depiction of American traditional holidays, the use of slang, and the portrayal of societal customs.

3.2.1 Cultural Defaults Related to Religious Beliefs

Religious beliefs, as part of culture, profoundly impact a nation's language and daily life. It is well-known that there are differences in religious beliefs between Chinese and Western individuals. The rich religious connotations embedded in language create a significant obstacle in cross-cultural communication. When the creators of American sitcoms overlook shared religious knowledge, religious terminology can lead to cultural omissions in intercultural exchanges.

(1) Mom: There is a ceremony next week and Brick's doin'it.

下周有个仪式，Brick 得去参加。

Brick: What? I'm not prepared! How am I gonna learn all stuff in a week？You stopped driving me to Sunday school.

什么？ 我还没有准备好呢!我怎么可能一周内把那些东西都学完？你都没开车送我去主日学校。

(S8 E19)

"Sunday school" is a place for young people to receive religious education in the United States,. Every Sunday, American youths are expected to attend Sunday school to learn about religion and read the Bible. In The Middle, if the translator merely renders "Sunday school" as "星期天学校" , Chinese audiences unfamiliar with the religious cultural implications might interpret it as a training institution aimed at improving academic performance or fostering children's interests. Consequently, they may fail to understand why Brick feels so anxious about the pastor's words. Cultural omission occurs when an incorrect cultural schema is activated in the cognitive background of the target audience. Therefore, translating "Sunday school" as "主日学校" would be more appropriate.

3.2.2 Cultural Defaults Related to Characters

(2)Bricks: I was thinking with recent popularity of "Hamilton" that I should write and submit my own Because if we're celebrating unsung heroes, I believe there' someone we're all forgetting Sergeant Charles Stuart Mackenzie！

最近《汉密尔顿》这么火，我也应该创作然后提交我自己写的戏剧，因为如果我们要庆祝无名英雄的话,我觉得有个英雄我们忘记提了 Charles Stuart Mackenzie 中士！(S9E15)

Charles Stuart Mackenzie was a British soldier who sacrificed his life to save a comrade. It was not until his grandson Joseph Mackenzie wrote the song "We Are Soldiers" that people began to hear his

story and recognized him as an unsung hero. The translator's decision to retain the original name in the text is not an appropriate choice. Even when Chinese audiences encounter a Chinese version of the story of Charles Stuart Mackenzie, they are unlikely to deduce anything about this character from his English name. In fact, most Chinese viewers may never have heard of the unsung hero called Charles Stuart Mackenzie. Thus, the cultural omission associated with this character can lead to confusion. Furthermore, translators shouldn't overlook the opportunity for cultural exchange. It is recommended that "Sergeant Charles Stuart Mackenzie" be translated as "一战无名英雄查尔斯·麦肯齐中士 (Unsung Hero Sergeant Charles Mackenzie of World War I)" to better convey its cultural connotation.

3.2.3 Cultural Defaults Related to Films

Movies, television, and literary works are significant components of culture. Authors and producers create works within their own cultural contexts, allowing people living in those regions to easily comprehend the omitted cultural information. However, when a limited number of films and literary works are introduced to other countries, the omitted cultural information can confuse individuals from different cultural backgrounds. The cultural implications behind films, television shows, and literary works are prone to causing cultural omissions during cross-cultural communication.

(2) Brad: I am telling you, sue.

我告诉你把，Sue。

New York is nothing like "On the Town". I mean, the Bronx is up and the Battery's down but that's it.

纽约根本不像"锦城春色"里那样，确实布朗克斯是在北边，炮台是在南边,仅此而已。(S8E10)

"On the Town" is an American romantic comedy that follows the humorous adventures of three young sailors pursuing love in modern-day New York City. However, many Chinese viewers may not have seen this film. The related cultural schema does not exist in their memories, leading to a degree of cultural omission. For them, it is challenging to infer that "On the Town" is a film about life in New York. As a result, the target audience cannot locate a corresponding schema within their cognitive background. It is suggested that adding "电影" before 锦城春色 is an effective method for addressing cultural omissions, thus constructing an appropriate schema in the minds of Chinese viewers.

4. Translation Compensation Strategies

To address the issue of cultural defaults, translators often employ various compensation strategies to ensure that the target audience can understand and appreciate the cultural nuances present in the narrative.

4.1 Transplant Translation

Transplant translation refers to the process of directly transferring the linguistic forms and cultural images of the source language into the target language without compromising the understanding of the target audience. This includes both literal translation and transliteration. In the sitcom The Middle, popular American foods and literary works often lack corresponding terms in Chinese. Additionally, the differences in social customs and habits between China and the United States are significant. If

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translators strive to find similar terms in the target language, the unique characteristics of the local culture may often be lost. Therefore, transplant translation should be prioritized during the translation process. Language is an open and dynamic system, and as cultural exchanges become more frequent, Chinese audiences may exhibit a more accommodating attitude towards foreign vocabulary.

4.2 Annotation

Annotation involves providing explanations for components that are culturally deficient. This can be divided into annotated literal translations and annotated transliterations. When there are no better alternatives for compensating cultural deficiencies, annotated literal translations and transliterations can effectively address the issue of cultural omission. Annotations help introduce foreign terms into the target language, filling semantic gaps and establishing discourse coherence (Wang, 1997: 58). Due to the constraints of time and space, subtitle translation differs from literary translation; while excessive annotation is generally discouraged, appropriate annotations can play a significant role in addressing cultural omissions and promoting cultural exchange between nations.

4.3 Localization

Localization refers to replacing expressions imbued with cultural information from the source language with those bearing cultural significance in the target language. The aim is to convey the original content using expressions familiar to readers of the target language (Wang, 1997: 58). There are shared elements across different cultures. Idioms, as the essence of culture, often exhibit numerous parallels. An idiom from one cultural group may find similar linguistic expressions in another. For these idioms, localization is the optimal choice, as it maintains the vibrancy of the language while alleviating the comprehension burden on target audience members.

4.4 Free Translation

Unlike literal translation, free translation is a method that directly interprets the meaning of the original sentence within its context. It retains the essence of the source language while providing flexibility for the translator. When cultural vocabulary related to idioms, social customs, and practices cannot be found in similar expressions in other language systems, free translation serves as an effective technique.

4.5 Contextual Expansion

Contextual expansion refers to the practice of clearly presenting the context that the original readers may take for granted but that the target language readers might be unaware of it (Ke, 1991: 24). Translators directly convey the connotations of cultural vocabulary in the target language, an effective technique for addressing cultural omissions related to films, television, literature, religious beliefs, and social customs. This approach doesn't disrupt the experience of the target language audience; rather, it enhances their viewing experience.

5. Conclusion

Through a comprehensive analysis of the cultural defaults and translation compensation strategies in

The Middle, we can draw several conclusions:1) successful translation relies not only on linguistic conversion but also on the effective transmission of culture. 2) When addressing cultural omissions, translators must take into full account the cultural backgrounds of the target audience and employ flexible compensation strategies such as annotation, free translation, and analogy to ensure the effective conveyance of cultural information.

Future research could further explore similar phenomena in other cultural works and investigate how more effective translation strategies can cater to the needs of diverse audiences, thereby promoting cross-cultural understanding and communication. As globalization progresses, the exchange and comprehension of cultures become increasingly vital, raising the bar for translation practices.

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