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A Study of the Subtitles of *A Bite of China* from the Perspective of Semantic and Communicative Translation

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Abstract

With the increasing attention of the international spread of Chinese culture, documentaries became an essential carrier of Chinese culture to the world. Based on Newmark's theories of semantic translation and communicative translation, this study analyzes the English subtitles of A Bite of China Episode 4: The Taste of Time, and discusses the use of the two translation methodologies in the Chinese documentary subtitling. The findings reveal that the subtitle translation is a flexible blend of semantic translation and communicative translation to strike a balance between the preservation of culture-specific information and the understanding and acceptance of the audience, thus allowing the cross-cultural communication of Chinese cuisine.

Keywords

A Bite of China, Semantic Translation, Communicative Translation, Subtitle Translation

1. Introduction

As globalisation accelerates, documentaries are a key means for overseas viewers to comprehend China. Documentary films are authentic, culturally rich and communicatively valuable and make an important contribution to cross-cultural understanding. *A Bite of China* is a representative Chinese cuisine documentary, which not only exhibits the richness of Chinese culinary culture, but also depicts Chinese lives, regional traditions and cultural values through the depiction of food. The documentary has gained a lot of interest from outside audiences and the English subtitles are a critical medium for viewers to explore and interpret Chinese culture. Apart from linguistic transfer, we can regard subtitle translation as a kind of cultural mediation. Thus, how to effectively communicate culture-specific meanings in the limited space of subtitles has become an essential subject in documentary translation studies.

The theories of semantic translation and communicative translation by Peter Newmark (1988) provide an important theoretical foundation for the study of subtitle translation. The semantic translation seeks

to preserve the meaning and cultural elements of the source text, whereas the communicative translation seeks to achieve comprehension and response from the target audience. Because of the confines of documentary subtitling, in terms of time and space, and the constraints of the audiovisuals, translators are usually faced with the dilemma of balancing cultural appropriateness and audience comprehension. In light of the above, this study takes Newmark's translation theories as theoretical support and analyses food-related expressions and culture-specific words in *A Bite of China*, hoping to explore the use of semantic and communicative translation in documentary subtitle translation.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Core Concepts of Newmark's Translation Theory

The principles of semantic translation and communicative translation are methodically explained by Peter Newmark in *A Course in Translation* (1988). He suggests a translation approach that takes into account the function of the text and the communicative intent, moving beyond the usual dichotomy between literal and free translation. Newmark states that the aim of semantic translation is to render the precise contextual meaning of the source text as nearly as the semantic and syntactic structures of the destination language allow. Therefore, it emphasises the preservation of the meaning, cultural qualities and stylistic features of the source text. Communicative translation, on the other hand, strives to achieve an impression on the target readers as close as possible to that of the original readers. Thus, more weight is given to readability, intelligibility and the communicative needs of the target reader. Newmark considers semantic translation and communicative translation to be complimentary approaches rather than mutually exclusive. Depending on the text type, the objective of the translation and the communicative context, translators may use either approach or mix components of both (Newmark, 1988).

Newmark's theory has long been considered as a major addition to text-type orientated approaches to translation in Western translation studies. Often it is compared with other major frameworks, such as Functional Translation Theory and Skopos Theory, with which it is often mentioned along. Rather than prescribing a set of fixed translation techniques, the theory is typically appreciated for its capacity to account for strategic decisions made by translators in varied communicative situations. Its focus on the relation between the text's function and the translation approach has made it a relevant instrument for the analysis of a variety of text kinds.

Since its coming to China, Newmark's theory has been paid much attention by the translation scholars. Liu (1999) points out that the theory is somewhat comparable to the traditional Chinese translation concept of "faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance" but more systematic in explaining the process of translation decision-making (Liu, 1999). Tan (2004) further contends that the theory underlines the relationship between text function and translation method, thereby giving a more clear analytical framework for translation practice and research (Tan, 2004). These research have led to the localisation and further application of Newmark's theory in the Chinese setting.

Hu (2004) continued to interpret translation from the standpoint of Eco-translatology, drawing on prior investigations. He contends that translation is fundamentally an adaptive selection process, in which translators make decisions at linguistic, cultural and communicative levels (Hu, 2004). In this sense, Newmark's notions of semantic and communicative translation can be seen as various modes of adaptive choice in the translation process, stressing the translator's struggle to reconcile the requirements of fidelity to the source text and of the target audience.

Newmark's translation theory has been widely used to the analysis of many types of texts. It has evolved to an influential analytical framework in translation research. It stresses the connection between text function and translation approach, and so provides a helpful instrument for the investigation of translation practice and methodological support in the analysis of specific translation cases. Its flexibility and explanatory power have ensured that it remains relevant in translation studies and in the practice of translation.

2.2 Characteristics and Previous Studies of Documentary Subtitle Translation

Audiovisual Translation (AVT) is an exciting and fast growing subject of translation research. AVT focuses with multimodal semiotic systems where meaning is built up through the interplay of language, visuals, sound and other audiovisual components, unlike standard translation types which concentrate mostly on verbal texts. Subtitling, as one of the main modes of audiovisual translation, has established itself as one of the most studied topics in the industry, due to its vital role in intercultural communication.

International research has always viewed subtitling as a limited type of translation. According to Gottlieb (1994), time and space constraints affect subtitle translation by influencing the display of translated text and the tactics of information reduction (Gottlieb, 1994). These limitations separate subtitling from translation of traditional written materials. Later, Díaz Cintas and Remael (2007) placed subtitling within a multimodal communication paradigm, where meaning is produced through the interaction of visual, aural and spoken components. From this perspective, translation of subtitles is not only a matter of linguistic transmission, but of intersemiotic mediation in which meaning is recreated across distinct sign systems (Díaz & Remael, 2007).

Since the introduction of the AVT theory into China, study on subtitle translation expanded from the linguistic analysis to the more general topic of communication, culture and multi-modality. Qian (2000) was one of the initial scholars to incorporate film and television translation within the field of translation studies and emphasised its importance in intercultural communication (Qian, 2000). Later on, Li Yunxing (2001) made an analysis of subtitle translation from a linguistic standpoint and pointed out its main characteristics such as conciseness, immediacy and colloquiality. He contends that these traits have substantial ramifications on the translators' strategic decisions and the overall success of subtitle translation (Li, 2001).

Based on prior studies, Ma (2005) views subtitle translation from the perspective of communication studies. He holds that subtitle translation is not only a process of linguistic transfer but also a process of

balancing communicative efficacy and audience reception (Ma, 2005) is engaged in the research of translation of subtitles from the point of film and television translation. She emphasises the multimodality of the subtitles. She asserts that the meaning of subtitles should be read in the context of the entire audiovisual text, rather than the examination of separate language elements (Zhang, 2005).

The link between cultural transmission and translation has received growing interest in the field of documentary translation studies. Zhang (2014) holds that documentaries are essential carriers of cultural communication, and the efficiency of cross-cultural transmission of documentaries depends largely on the quality of subtitle translation and the degree of cultural adaptation. Wang (2016) is also of the opinion that documentary translation constitutes an important part of cultural transmission. Translation is not merely a linguistic transfer but a recontextualization and reconstruction of cultural meaning, according to him.

The study of audiovisual translation has steadily changed from a strictly linguistic approach to a multimodal interpretive framework. Simultaneously, subtitling has transitioned from a technological issue to a complex area of communication methods and semiotic integration. As a result, subtitle translation research has become more diverse, encompassing a broader range of text kinds, including documentaries and other culturally relevant audiovisual products.

3. Case Analysis

Newmark's theories of semantic translation and communicative translation offer an important theoretical basis for documentary subtitle translation. In documentary subtitling, these two approaches are not mutually exclusive, but rather work in a complementary way and are flexibly used according to different communicative settings. *A Bite of China* is a representative documentary of Chinese culinary culture and contains extensive culture-specific content. Its narrative has many food related expressions, traditional methods of production, references to area culture and culturally important imagery. These are not only the reflections of the unique features of Chinese food culture, but also bring great difficulties for subtitle translation. Therefore, this paper uses the episode 4 of *A Bite of China*, "The Taste of Time" as its research corpus and analyses the sample subtitle examples from the standpoint of semantic translation and communicative translation. The purpose of this paper is to study the application of Newmark's translation theory in the process of subtitling of cultural documentary films and the role of it in the cross-cultural dissemination of Chinese food culture.

3.1 Semantic Translation

According to Newmark, semantic translation lays more focus on the source text and attempts to reproduce the semantic content, stylistic qualities and cultural information as closely as feasible. In cultural documentaries, subtitles are not only a channel of information transfer but also a channel of cultural representation. Therefore, the process of translating is largely aimed at maintaining the culture-specific meanings. As a typical documentary of Chinese culinary culture, *A Bite of China* is endowed with a large number of food-related idioms and culturally ingrained references, which

provides abundant materials for discussing the application of semantic translation in documentary subtitling.

Example 1:

Source Text: 醉蟹

Target Text: Drunken Crabs

Drunken Crab is a traditional preserved seafood dish from the Jiangnan area of China. The cultural meaning of the expression is not really in the ingredient "crab" itself, but in the word zui (醉), which is typical of a unique Chinese culinary naming tradition. In the context of Chinese cuisine culture, zui does not mean literal intoxication. It is not a method of cooking, but of preserving and flavouring food in the traditional way by marinating with yellow wine or Shaoxing wine to give the food a unique scent and flavour.

More crucially, the term zui is typically used to describe human states, such as drunken slumber or intoxication. When applied to food, it is a sort of personification, giving human attributes to a food item. The naming convention is not simply a description of how the food is cooked, but also reflects a trait of Chinese culinary discourse where food is often conveyed through human experiences and emotions. Therefore, "Drunken Crab" not only conveys the precise meaning of the source text, but also retains the cultural imagery and rhetorical effect included in the original phrase. From Newmark's semantic translation approach, the translator may maximise the preservation of the source language's cultural features and linguistic style, which helps promote the dissemination of Chinese culinary culture to the international audience.

The translator does a direct translation of the term and comes up with the subtitle "Drunken Crabs". From the ordinary use of English, adjective inebriated is more frequently used in reference to human states of drunkenness than to food. As a result, the statement may seem slightly unusual to English-speaking listeners. But it is just this same unconventionality that serves to preserve the personification inherent in the original Chinese term.

Alternative translations like "Wine-Marinated Crabs" or "Pickled Crabs" would give a more explicit description of the cooking procedure, and could lessen the processing load of the audience. But these functional equivalents would turn zui (醉) into a mere technical description of preservation in wine, so losing the personified picture and the cultural connotations of the original phrase. But these translations, although making the material more directly accessible, would ruin the aesthetic effect and the cultural iconography of the source work.

From the standpoint of Newmark's semantic translation, the translated version "Drunken Crabs" takes into consideration the maintenance of the linguistic qualities and cultural implications of the source text. The translation, despite the possible slightly increased cognitive load for the target readers, manages to maintain the rhetorical effect of the source phrase and to accentuate the cultural uniqueness of Chinese culinary discourse. In this way, the subtitle serves as an information transfer device as well as a cultural representation device.

Example 2:

Source Text: 这是时间的味道。

Target Text: This is the taste of time.

This sentence is spoken at the end of the episode, as a response to the theme of “The Taste of Time” and as a recap of the previous conversations on curing, fermentation, and air-drying. The Chinese term *weidao* (味道) is not simply the flavour of food, but a far wider sense of meaning and cultural resonance. Thus the term is both literally and metaphorically significant.

The translator does not translate “taste” in the subtitle as a more explanatory phrase, such as “This is how time shapes food.” This decision respects the dual meaning of the original language and its succinct, lyrical form. From the point of view of Newmark’s semantic translation, the subtitle is authentic to the linguistic form and cultural connotations of the source text. A more informative translation may be more accessible to foreign audiences but it might dilute the thematic and aesthetic influence of the original. Thus “This is the taste of time” is a good retention of the cultural imagery and the emotive language of the original text.

“This is the taste of time” is not a more explanatory translation, and does not adequately explain the meaning of the original. Rather, the style is more akin to documentary narration, preserving the subtlety and brevity of the original text. The translation communicates the general subject well and also preserves the language nuance and expressiveness of the original. This is a sign of semantic translation’s concern with retaining the form and cultural implications of the source text.

Example 3:

Source Text: 时间是食物的朋友，也是它的敌人。

Target Text: Time is a friend of food, and also its enemy.

The phrase “Time is both food’s friend and its enemy” here personifies time, making it an active force in food. In the Chinese culinary culture time is of the essence: curing, fermentation and preservation. It is a so-called “friend” since it promotes flavour and maturity, but also a “enemy” because it can induce spoiling and deterioration. The phrase thus conveys the traditional Chinese view of the dual significance of time in food production.

In the subtitle translation, the translator adopts the literal translation, with the statement translated as “Time is a friend of food, and also its enemy.” The translation is mostly consistent with the syntactic structure and rhetorical form of the original text. The metaphorical antagonism ‘friend-enemy’ is preserved, therefore preserving the personification of time and the expressive effect of the source text. Another translation, such as “Time shapes and destroys food” might be more obvious about the essential idea. However, it would substitute the figure of speech in the original with a more explanatory expression, thus weakening the rhetorical force deriving from the contrast between “friend” and “enemy”. As documentary narration often has literary and aesthetic features in addition to its informative function, it is preferable to keep the original metaphor, which is more compatible with the style of the source text. From the viewpoint of Newmark’s semantic translation, this approach can help

preserve the language form and cultural imagery of the source term.

In terms of translation efficacy, this version successfully conveys the intended meaning and preserves the grammatical and rhetorical qualities of the source text. It shows how semantic translation can preserve the emotive character of documentary narration while enabling cross-cultural contact.

3.2 Communicative Translation

Communicative translation, unlike semantic translation which is more orientated to the source text, is more orientated to the target audience. According to Newmark, the purpose of the translation is to enable the target readers to attain an understanding and reaction as close as feasible to that of the original readers. This principle is critical in the translation of subtitles for documentaries.

Subtitles have to be short and easy to comprehend due to temporal and space constraints. Moreover, translators should make appropriate alterations to help international audiences better understand Chinese culture, which they may not be familiar with. Therefore, the subtitles of *A Bite of China* typically apply tactics like amplification and syntactic correction to attain successful communication.

Example 1:

Source Text: 香味就出来了

Target Text: The fragrance will float out.

“The fragrance comes out” is a common dynamic statement in Chinese. And “comes out” here does not mean some sort of literal bodily movement, but the slow discharge of perfume. A direct translation of “The fragrance comes out” would be grammatically true but would sound somewhat mechanical and would not convey the wonderful vision of the original. Instead the translator utilises “float out”, adopting a communicative translation technique. The word “float” encapsulates the idea of the fragrance’s birth and its leisurely dispersal, fitting well with the visual image of rising steam and spreading perfume. The translation is more natural and approachable to target audiences, and is able to effectively preserve the sensory effect of the original narration.

Example 2:

Source Text: 上方

Target Text: Shangfang, literally the upper part

“Shangfang” is a phrase particular to Chinese culture that may not be easily understood by international readers just through transliteration. While “Shangfang” retains the original cultural reference, it doesn’t ensure understanding. Therefore, the translator adopts the approach of amplification by adding the explanation “literally the upper part”. This addition serves as a form of cultural compensation, helping to bridge the knowledge gap between the source and target audiences.

The translator keeps the original cultural element intact, supplying enough information to make it understandable, rather than substituting the phrase with a functional explanation. In terms of communicative effectiveness, this method simplifies the difficulty of understanding and allows for efficient transmission of cultural knowledge.

Example 3:

Source Text: 经过时间的等待，美味最终形成。

Target Text: Delicious food is finally created through time.

Chinese typically presents background information before the main message, whereas English tends to emphasize the subject and information focus. A direct translation such as “After waiting through time, delicious food is finally formed” sounds odd in English. Therefore, the translator reorganizes the sentence structure and places “Delicious food” at the beginning, making the subtitle more natural and reader-friendly. In terms of communicative translation, this adaptation boosts fluency and audience comprehension.

4. Conclusion

Based on Newmark’s theories of semantic and communicative translation, this paper examines representative examples from the English subtitles of Episode 4, “The Taste of Time,” of *A Bite of China* and explores the application of these two approaches in Chinese culinary documentary subtitling. The findings show that the subtitles achieve a balance between semantic and communicative translation. Semantic translation is mainly used to preserve cultural information, linguistic features, and literary expressions, while communicative translation improves readability and audience comprehension through strategies such as amplification and syntactic adjustment. Documentary subtitling therefore requires flexible strategy selection according to text type, linguistic characteristics, and communicative purpose. The combination of semantic and communicative translation helps balance cultural preservation with audience comprehension, demonstrating the continued applicability of Newmark’s theory to the subtitling of Chinese cultural documentaries.

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