

Original Paper

Analysis of the Subtitle Translation of *Titanic* from Multimodal Discourse

Xi Huang¹ & Guangfang Huang*

¹ Hubei University of Technology, Wuhan, China

* Corresponding author, Guangfang Huang, Hubei University of Technology, Wuhan, China

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Abstract

This paper takes the multimodal discourse analysis theory as the framework, focuses on the subtitle translation of the movie Titanic, and explores the collaborative mechanism and the effect of meaning transmission in terms of culture, context, content and expression. It is found that subtitle translation is not merely a simple text conversion but also an integration of cross-modal resources and a reconstruction of cultural meanings. This research aims to break through the limitations of a single language, provide new perspectives and strategies for subtitle translation practice, and has positive significance for promoting understanding and communication among different cultures.

Keywords

multimodal discourse analysis, subtitle translation, Titanic

Across the globe, countless films are shown to audiences, and movie subtitles serve as a vital bridge for cultural exchange, allowing viewers to gain insights into foreign cultures. However, the original language of films frequently carries cultural subtleties that pose challenges for international audiences to comprehend. When translations are inaccurate, they can result in misunderstandings and hinder the smooth flow of cross-cultural communication. For this reason, researching movie subtitle translation is of great significance for facilitating effective cultural exchange. In recent academic studies, the theory of multimodal discourse analysis has become increasingly influential. Given that films combine visual elements, audio components, and linguistic content, this theory offers a suitable analytical framework for examining film discourse. Taking *Titanic* as a specific case study, this research intends to carry out a multimodal analysis of the film's subtitles. The primary objectives of this analysis are to improve audiences' ability to appreciate the film and enhance the effectiveness of cross-cultural communication achieved through movie subtitle translation. By exploring the multimodal elements present in *Titanic*'s

subtitles, researchers can pinpoint effective translation strategies—strategies that are better able to convey both the cultural connotations and emotional core of the film.

1. Introduction to Multimodal Discourse Analysis

The theory of discourse analysis was first proposed by the American linguist Harris in the 1950s, and multimodal discourse analysis originated in the 1990s. With the cross-integration of disciplines such as linguistics, especially its integration with fields like cognitive science, communication studies, and semiotics, it has gradually developed (Chen, 2020). Multimodal discourse refers to the phenomenon of communication that employs multiple senses such as vision, hearing, and touch, and utilizes various means and symbolic resources including language, images, sounds, and action (Zhang, 2009). The earliest systematic analysis of multimodality abroad was conducted by the French scholar Barthes (1977), who explored from the perspective of semiotics the relationship between images and language in the construction of meaning and how they interact. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001) studied the relationship between modality and media, specifically exploring the phenomenon of multimodal phenomena expressing meaning in a regular manner, including visual images, color grammar, as well as the layout design of newspapers and the roles of different media. O'Halloran (2004) not only studied the theoretical construction of multimodality but also specifically investigated multimodal phenomena in mathematical discourse. Domestic scholar Li (2003) introduced multimodal discourse social semiotics and presented visual grammar and image analysis methods. Zhu (2007) emphasized the significance of systemic functional linguistics in multimodal discourse analysis, arguing that apart from language, other symbols are also sources of meaning. Zhang (2009) studied multimodal discourse from the perspective of systemic functional linguistics and summarized a comprehensive theoretical framework for multimodal discourse analysis. This framework consists of four levels: the culture level, the context level, the content level and the expression level. This article mainly analyzes the case of Chinese translation of film subtitles based on Zhang Delu's theoretical framework.

2. Analysis of Multimodal Elements in Subtitle Translation of *Titanic*

Titanic is based on the real maritime disaster of the RMS Titanic in 1912. It tells the love story of Rose, a young lady from a noble family, and Jack, a poor painter, who crossed class boundaries. While presenting their passionate love, the film also portrays the choices made by different characters and the complexity of human nature when disaster strikes, making it a classic in film history. Up to now, the subtitles of this film have been translated into over 40 languages, including English, Chinese, French, Spanish, Japanese, and other major languages used around the world, facilitating the understanding of the plot by audiences from different countries and regions. Based on this, the following will analyze the multimodal elements in the subtitle translation of this film from aspects such as culture, context, content and expression.

2.1 Culture Analysis

The cultural level focuses on the adaptability of discourse to specific cultural contexts. It mainly concerns how translation can retain the cultural connotations of the source language while conforming to the cognitive habits, emotional resonance patterns and expression traditions of the target language culture, achieving equivalent meaning transmission across cultural contexts.

Example 5: "it hits you like 1,000 knives stabbing you all over your body."

Translation 5: "让你感到万箭穿心，浑身像针扎一样。"

In the above sentence, translating "1,000 knives stabbing" as "万箭穿心" not only substitutes the unfamiliar "thousands of knives stabbing" with a familiar image in the target language culture, but also uses the cultural symbol attribute of "万箭穿心" to enable Chinese audiences to instantly understand the degree of pain reaching the core and unbearable, which has a much stronger emotional impact than a literal translation. Instead of directly translating the source language cultural symbols such as "刀刺", it uses the more emotionally charged "针扎" in Chinese culture, but the core cultural meaning of extreme pain remains unchanged, which is in line with the essential requirement of cultural fidelity.

Example 6: "We're practically goddamn royalty, ragazzo mio."

Translation 6: "我们是达官贵人，皇亲国戚。"

In this example, the handling of "goddamn" is translated as "皇亲国戚" in Chinese, which is the core symbol of top-level nobility in Chinese culture, corresponding to "royalty" in the West. This not only retains the core meaning of high status, but also activates the cultural associations of Chinese audiences, avoiding cross-cultural cognitive barriers. The addition of "达官贵人" further aligns with the multi-dimensional understanding of "noble status" in Chinese, making the meaning more complete and easier to understand. "Ragazzo mio" through "我们是..." simplifies the "affectionate kinship" while maintaining the atmosphere of close relationship between the two parties and the casual display of one's status, fitting the daily scene in Chinese culture where "close people chat and show off their own status". This translation is not merely a simple replacement of words. Instead, it is based on a deep understanding of identity symbols, expression habits, and tone logic in both Chinese and Western cultures. Through adaptation and reconstruction at the cultural level, it enables Chinese audiences to accurately grasp the core meaning of the source language's intention to convey, which is dignity and arrogance, within the framework of their local cultural cognition. It is a typical case of "cultural equivalence" in cross-cultural subtitle translation

2.2 Context Analysis

Zhang (2009) pointed out that the contextual level is an important support for the construction of multimodal discourse meaning. It covers situational context and cultural context, and needs to be coordinated with multimodal symbols such as language, vision, and behavior to ensure the accurate transmission of discourse meaning and the understanding of the audience. In movies, subtitles and context promote the development of the plot, and context determines the translation of subtitles. From

the perspective of context, subtitles play the role of connecting the preceding and the following, making the plot of the film develop naturally.

Example 3: "Your daughter is far too difficult to impress."

Translation 3: "讨你女儿欢心比登天还难。"

The core context of this scene is that Carl is trying to express to Rose's mother the difficulty of pursuing Rose, implicitly complaining about Rose's "not easily obedient" attitude, while maintaining a proper social balance with his future mother-in-law. The translation first achieves the alignment of the communicative purpose. The word "讨.....欢心" directly corresponds to the core meaning of the original sentence "impress", and "讨" has a slight sense of active compliance. It not only reflects Karl's efforts to win Rose's approval, but also subtly aligns with his "reporting" style of communication towards Rose's mother, which is in line with the dialogue scenario of the two as "the future son-in-law and mother-in-law". "比登天还难" is an exaggerated expression with a strong visual effect in spoken Chinese, replacing the abstract description of the original sentence "far too difficult". It not only retains the core information of "extremely difficult", but also is more in line with the oral situation of complaining about the difficulty in daily conversations. It is highly consistent with the relaxed scene of the two people's private communication in the film. It avoids the disconnection between language form and context.

Example 4: "So I lit on out of there and I haven't been back since."

Translation 4: "于是就背井离乡，浪迹天涯。"

In this example, the entire discourse meaning is constructed by the interaction of the contextual and linguistic modes. Their relationship is complimentary. The primary means of expressing meaning is through language, and contextual mode serves to strengthen language mode. "lit on out of there" was translated as "背井离乡", which is a very fitting translation. It accurately conveys Jack's decision to leave his hometown and move away from his past life. Additionally, the phrase has a strong emotional connotation in Chinese, expressing nostalgia for one's hometown and uncertainty about the future, which aligns with the context in the movie where Jack is. From an contextual mode standpoint, the translation "浪迹天涯" captures Jack's determination to pursue freedom, adventure, and a new life very well. This phrase is often used in Chinese to describe someone who travels the world in search of a certain ideal or belief, which perfectly fits Jack's character in the movie. Through this translation, audiences can better understand and feel Jack's inner desires and pursuits. Finally, from a whole multimodal discourse analysis perspective, this translation also aligns well with the visual and auditory elements of the film. In the film, when Jack says this line, his expression is determined and full of hope, while the background music's tempo gradually picks up, creating an atmosphere of adventure and anticipation. The translation perfectly complements this atmosphere, further deepening the audience's understanding and experience of the film's emotions.

2.3 Content Analysis

The content level includes the meaning level and the form level. At the level of discourse meaning, there are conceptual meaning, interpersonal meaning and discourse meaning restricted by the scope of discourse, the tone of discourse and the mode of discourse. At the form level, it is mainly manifested as auditory modalities such as music and language, as well as visual modalities such as views and text (Lv, Wu, 2012). In depicting the love between the two protagonists, Jack and Rose, the director and screenwriter skillfully use various rhetorical devices to make the dialogue between the two men full of poetry and deep feeling.

Example 1: "You stand there and the world is at your feet."

Translation 1: "你站在那儿，世界就在你脚下。"

From the perspective of meaning, the translation accurately conveys the conceptual meaning, interpersonal meaning and discourse meaning of the original sentence. Conceptually, "stand there" is translated as "站在那儿" and "the world is at your feet" is translated as "世界就在你脚下", fully restoring the scene concept that the character is in a specific spatial position and has a sense of control. It is highly consistent with the visual scene in the film where Jack and Rose stand at the bow of the boat and overlook the sea, achieving a synergy in meaning between language symbols and visual symbols. In terms of interpersonal relationships, the original sentence implies Jack's encouragement to Rose and the intimacy of sharing his current state of mind. The translation adopts a concise and straightforward colloquial expression without adding redundant embellishments, retaining the equal and natural communicative tone of the original sentence, which is in line with the interpersonal context at that time when the two broke through social class barriers and shared emotional resonance. In terms of discourse, the translation follows the logic of short Chinese sentences, separating two clauses with commas, which echoes the syntactic structure of the original sentence. At the same time, it adapts to the characteristics of instantaneous and concise of film and television subtitles, ensuring that viewers can quickly receive language information while watching the scenes like character postures and panoramic sea views, achieving efficient transmission of discourse information.

From the perspective of form, the translation takes into account both the conciseness of the original sentence and the visual rhythm of the picture in terms of language form. The original sentence is a simple compound sentence. The translation does not make complex sentence structure conversions. It uses the action description of "你站在那儿" corresponding to "you stand there" and the metaphorical expression of "世界就在你脚下" corresponding to "the world is at your feet". The simplicity in form forms a modal complementarity with the intuitive visual symbols of "two people standing and a wide field of vision" in the picture, avoiding the distraction of the audience due to the complexity of the language form, which is in line with the core viewpoint emphasized by Zhang Delu that the form layer serves the transmission of meaning and multi-modal collaboration.

Example 2: "Something Picasso. He won't amount to a thing."

Translation 2: "叫什么毕加索，无名鼠辈而已。"

“Something Picasso” is literally translated as “什么毕加索” restoring the vague reference to the figure “Picasso”. “He won’t amount to a thing” is translated as “无名鼠辈而已”, fully retaining the core evaluation of believing Picasso to be of no value and difficult to achieve, and is highly consistent with the scene concept in the film where Karl, as an upper-class figure, is arrogant and looks down upon emerging artists. Realize the semantic synergy between language symbols and visual symbols such as character expressions and identity backgrounds. In interpersonal relationships, the original sentence implies Karl’s contempt and sense of superiority. The translation “无名鼠辈而已” uses a colloquial and derogatory expression, intensifying the tone of class arrogance, which aligns with Karl’s contemptuous attitude towards lower-class art and emerging creators, precisely restoring the interpersonal power relations and emotional tendencies among the characters. The colloquial structure of “叫什么……而已” corresponds to the casual evaluative tone of the original sentence. It is concise in form and carries a strong subjective color. This formal choice forms modal complementarity with Cal’s casual expression and condescending posture in the scene, preventing the emotional expression from being weakened by overly lengthy linguistic forms. Meanwhile, through the localized derogatory term “无名鼠辈”, cultural cognitive differences are eliminated, allowing the audience to intuitively perceive Cal’s class prejudice.

2.4 Expression Analysis

The level focuses on how different symbolic modalities convey meaning through specific forms, particularly emphasizing that the form selection of the linguistic modality should be coordinated with other modalities to ensure the precise realization of the overall functions of the discourse, such as emotions, attitudes, and intentions.

Example 7: “Will you give us a chance to live, you limey bastard!”

Translation 7: “给我们留条生路吧，你这冷血动物！”

The original sentence was an emergency call for help during a shipwreck. The translation uses the imperative sentence “给我们留条生路吧” which directly restores the core function of “pleading for survival”, and is more in line with the oral scene of urgently expressing demands in a life-and-death situation than a direct translation of the interrogative sentence. The phrase “你这冷血动物” at the end of the sentence continues the structure of pleading first and then blaming in the original sentence, using a colloquial Chinese condemnation sentence to enhance the emotional progression. “Limey bastard” is an aggressive derogatory term, where “limey” implies regional cultural barriers and “bastard” expresses angry condemnation. In the picture, the passengers are desperately trembling and the person being condemned is indifferently self-protecting. The translation “留条生路” corresponds to the visual state of the passengers’ plea for survival, and “冷血动物” corresponds to the indifferent expression of the other party. In terms of sound, the character “吧” is suitable for the hoarse plea of the emergency call, and the exclamation mark intensifies the angry tone, achieving resonance between language, vision, and sound, allowing the audience to directly immerse themselves in the emergency scene.

Example 8: “Now, there’s something you don’t see every day.”

Translation 8: “此情此景，世所罕见。”

When this line appears, the film shows the huge, brand-new and majestic hull of the Titanic on its maiden voyage, leaving the port with a grand momentum. “此情此景” directly corresponds to “Now and something”, using the combination of “情” and “景” to cover the reference of the specific scene in the original text. The four-character antithetical structure replaces the English declarative sentence, which not only conforms to the Chinese habit of expressing emotions with concise language, but also accurately restores the core meaning of emphasizing the rarity of the scene. “世所罕见” conveys a sense of amazement that exceeds daily experience. This expression is in line with the historical drama background and solemn narrative style of the film, and elevates the tone of the dialogue at the expression level, making it depart from the category of casual chat and match the epic genre of the film. At this time, the film’s background music is a grand and inspiring symphony, creating an epic and awe-inspiring atmosphere. At this moment, the visual and auditory modes of the most core grand scene are perfectly matched and mutually reinforced. The text serves the picture, and the picture verifies the text.

3. Conclusion

This study explores the intricate relationship between subtitle translation and multimodal discourse analysis through a detailed examination of the film *Titanic*. In terms of language and text, the subtitles are highly accurate in conveying key information such as the plot and character dialogues of a film. On the levels of context and culture, subtitles can flexibly adapt to the changing contexts of the film, including scenes, character relationships, and dialogue content. While promoting cross-cultural communication, it also retains the cultural characteristics of the original film. In terms of sound and image, it further enriches the transmission of emotions. The study reveals that subtitle translation is not merely a textual conversion but a sophisticated process of cross-modal resource integration and cultural meaning reconstruction. In conclusion, this study has demonstrated the crucial role of multimodal discourse analysis in guiding the translation process of subtitles for films like *Titanic*, helping audiences cross cultural boundaries and better appreciate and understand film works. Multimodal discourse analysis provides new theoretical support for translation practice, but research in this field still needs to be deepened.

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