Original Paper

Research on Subtitle Translation from the Perspective of Multimodal Discourse Analysis

—Taking the Movie *Lighting Up the Stars* as an Example

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Abstract

Cinema has played a significant role in promoting cross-cultural communication and ingenious film themes are easy to attract the attention of the audience. The interaction of subtitles and other modalities in the film is conducive to the construction of film meaning. According to the four levels of culture, context, content and expression proposed by Professor Zhang Delu in the comprehensive theoretical framework of multimodal discourse analysis, this paper analyzes how the multimodal discourse plays a role in subtitle translation by studying the subtitle translation of Lighting Up the Stars, and then points out discourse meaning can be expressed by the interaction of visual, auditory and other modalities and subtitle texts. Therefore, the translator can use the translation techniques such as literal translation and omission to convey the core meaning of the movie in a concise and reasonable way. Excellent film subtitle translation helps audiences from different cultural backgrounds to better understand and appreciate the film, and helps Chinese film and television works to go global.

Keywords

multimodal discourse analysis, subtitle translation, Lighting Up the Stars

1. Background

In recent years, the Chinese film industry has continued to flourish and prosper, popular films emerge as the time required, such as *Wolf Warrior*, *Hi, Mom* and *Detective Chinatown*. However, there are relatively few films focused on the funeral industry. *Lighting Up the Stars* was released in Chinese Mainland in 2022, and then landed on overseas platforms such as Netflix, widely loved by Southeast

Asian audiences such as Vietnamese people. Chinese films have achieved success outside of mainland China due to many factors such as exciting storyline, clever filming techniques, and the acting skills of actors. Good subtitle translation is also one of the successful factors.

1.1 Introduction

Movies are featured with good audio-visual experience and are an important learning path for foreign language learners. Nowadays, research on movie subtitles not only focuses on the transformation of cultural factors in subtitle, but also focuses on multimodal aspects such as lighting, images, sound, and background music. This paper attempts to combine the multimodal discourse analysis theory proposed by Professor Zhang Delu (2009) to study the subtitle translation of *Lighting Up the Stars* from cultural level, contextual level, content level and expression level. The paper explores how the translator of *Lighting Up the Stars* combines different modes such as visual, auditory, and sensory elements to jointly construct meaning with the subtitle of the film. The author expects film translators to not only convey as much information as possible in concise language when translating subtitles, but also to adopt different mode resources contained in the film to comprehensively study and polish the translated text, in order to help the audience better understand the content of the film and obtain a better viewing experience.

2. Multimodal Discourse Analysis

Modality refers to the channels and media of communication, including language, technology, images, colors, music and other symbol system (Zhu, 2007). Based on human senses and traditional habits, multimodality can be roughly divided into: spoken language, written language, pictures, music, smell, taste and touch, as well as non-verbal information. In specific social contexts, the interaction between different language and nonverbal resources constitutes multimodality. Discourse is the understanding based on language or speech, and discourse analysis is considered to be the study of how language is used in communication within a context (Zhu, 2003). The integration of multimodality and discourse analysis represents that discourse analysis will no longer focus solely at linguistic level, and non-verbal information such as actions, images, sounds, and other resources will also be included in the discourse analysis framework.

3. Subtitle Translation of *Lighting Up the Stars* from the Perspective of Multimodal Discourse Analysis

Lighting Up the Stars is themed around the funeral industry and family relationships, conveying the philosophical thoughts on life and death issues through laughter and warmth, relieving the difficulties of life and the heaviness of death, and finally viewing life and death with a romantic and transcendent attitude. In the translation process of *Lighting Up the Stars*, the translator utilized multimodal discourse analysis and other translation techniques such as literal translation and omission to make a brief introduction of Chinese funeral ceremonies with foreign audiences, highlighting the hidden emotions

157

between the main characters in the film.

This paper relies on the multimodal discourse analysis comprehensive framework proposed by Zhang Delu to analyze the subtitle translation of *Lighting Up the Stars* from the cultural, contextual, content, and expression levels.

3.1 Cultural Level

On the cultural level, it includes the ideology as the main form of existence of culture and the genre as the potential choice of discourse patterns. The cultural level is the key aspect that makes communication possible (Zhang, 2009). The author will analyze subtitles in *Lighting Up the Stars* at the cultural level from three aspects: jargon, cultural vocabulary with Chinese characteristics, and dialects.

3.1.1 Jargon

Jargon refers to words with specific meanings that are common in a certain industry. *Lighting Up the Stars* revolves around the funeral industry and Mo Sanmei, the protagonist, lives a life as a funeral master, so in this film, there are jargon in the funeral industry.

Example 1

English subtitle: The sun is setting. It's the old man's last day before cremation. Has everyone done their parts? Has the filial son been keeping vigil? Why am I the only one chanting here? How about we all make some noise?

Chinese subtitle: 日落西山了，嘿！老爷子最后一天了，嘿！众人帮忙了没有？嘿！孝子守灵了吗？嘿！老子一人喊号子，嘿！众人搭腔了吗？嘿！

In this excerpt, Mo Sanmei is chanting for someone's funeral. Foreign audiences can determine that there is a funeral happening through the word "cremation", but they do not understand why someone talks about the setting sun or filial son needs to keep vigil. Words with Chinese cultural characteristics such as "孝子" and "守夜" are translated as "filial son" and "keeping vigil" respectively. According to Collins Dictionary, filial means the duties, feelings, or relationships which exist between a son or daughter and his or her parents, and vigil means a purposeful watch maintained, especially at night, to guard, observe, pray, etc. The translator here follows the subtitle translation strategy proposed by Li Yunxing, who advises to do subtraction and reduction while translating literally (Li, 2001), to translate "孝子" and "守夜" literally into "filial son" and "keeping vigil", and omit the tone word "嘿", which is used here to show the rhythm of the enchant, without translation. Besides, when the scene changes between the far and near, the audience can see the scene of funeral masters carrying coffins and chanting with the deceased's relatives. Therefore, the captions, along with visual and audio images, work together to present audiences a traditional Chinese funeral ceremony.

Example 2

English subtitle: Step one, straighten out the tendons; Step two, put the bones back where they belong from toe to head, backwards we go; limbs come first, then the torso, where the internal organs must be in order; the face and the skull, 23 pieces in all, brows, eyes, nose and mouth are

158

firmly in the middle.

Chinese subtitle: 一顺筋，二拼骨，从脚到头往回数；先四肢，后躯干，五脏六腑不能乱；脑面颅骨二十三，眉眼鼻口在中间。

In the selected segments above, Old Mo, Mo Sanmei's father and a funeral master, taught Mo Sanmei to groom the portrait of the deceased. It's clear that there are sentences without subjects. Literal translation are adopted by the translator, rather than addition and transformation, which are panacea to the translation of sentences without subjects. Besides, cohesive devices, such as the phrase "step one", adverb "then", subordinate clauses are used to emphasize the order of bone splicing. As Old Mo is speaking and Mo Sanmei is piecing together bones, the audience can see the human body structure diagram held by Wang Jianren (Mo Sanmei's colleague) and the gloves Mo Sanmei was wearing are covered in bloodstains. The audience can also hear the sounds of set bones. Therefore, in this scene, the audience get to know the reason why Old Mo talk words about organs through the visual images and audio sounds, along with captions.

3.1.2 Cultural Vocabulary with Chinese Characteristics

Example 3

English subtitle: 5 craks makes the winning tile!

Chinese subtitle: 捉五魁

"捉五魁" is a term in Mahjong, a popular Chinese chess and card game, which means that the winning number of cards played is exactly five, such as five characters, five dots or five bamboos. In the English subtitle, crak means character, which is equivalent to "万" in Chinese, and tile refers to the cards in mahjong. At this time, the screen in the film presents that the winning card played by Wu Xiaowen is five character. The literal translation of "捉五魁" is 5 craks make the winning tile. The playing technique of mahjong is introduced briefly to the audience through the "winning tile" on the subtitles and the scene in the film, that is all fourteen cards are in the same color. Thus the visual image of tiles and the caption constitute a cross-linked relationship.

3.1.3 Dialects

The dialogues in *Lighting Up the Stars* are spoken in Mandarin, Sichuan dialect, and Wuhan dialect, and the subtitles are presented in Mandarin. Jacobson (1971) divides translation into intralingual translation, interlingual translation, and intersemiotic translation, Gottlieb (2005) further divides intralingual translation into diachronic translation, dialectal translation, diamesic translation, and transliteration. The main characters Mo Sanmei and Wu Xiaowen usually use Wuhan dialect and Sichuan dialect when talking to people, so there are some slang such as "莫比" and "神戳戳" during the conversation. Sichuan dialect and Wuhan dialect both belong to Southwest Mandarin, which is generally easier for Mandarin speaking audiences to understand. However, in subtitle translation, it's of necessity to present dialects in Mandarin through intralingual translation.

The following are some translations of Wuhan dialect and Sichuan dialect in the film.

159

Example 4

English subtitle: What were you doing?

Chinese subtitle: 你想干什么啊你

Wuhan Dialect: 你想搞莫子啊你

Example 5

English subtitle: So jumpy.

Chinese subtitle: 神经兮兮

Wuhan Dialect: 神戳戳的

Foreign audiences are not familiar with the specific differences between Wuhan dialect and Sichuan dialect, as well as the specific meanings of slang in dialects. The audience can rely on the speaker's tone, intonation, and expression on their faces to judge their attitude, mood, and so on. From the behavior of Mo Sanmei, who has always claimed to be "老子", swore profusely, and spit, it can be seen that he is an uneducated middle-aged man with an irritable temper. In dialogues, the auditory mode plays an auxiliary and reinforcing role in the subtitles, helping to characterization. In addition, the frequent appearance of dialects can leave an impression on foreign audiences of traditional Chinese dialects, have a subtle impact on the audience, and contribute to the dissemination of Chinese culture.

3.2 Contextual Level

According to Professor Hu Zhuanglin's viewpoint, context can be divided into contextual context and situational context (Hu, 2007).

3.2.1 Contextual Context

The contextual context refers to the internal environment of the discourse (Lv & Wu, 2012), taking the three translation versions of "人生大事" as an example.

"人生大事" appear three times in the film. It appears for the first time when Wu Xiaowen's Aunt (later referred to as Auntie) said, "这可是儿子一辈子的人生大事". Here, "人生大事" is translated as once in a lifetime chance to indicate the significance of something. In the subsequent plot, the aunt accuses her son Xiaowu of ranking last in the exam when he went to Beijing. It can be seen that in the auntie's eyes, Xiaowu's academic performance is a top priority. From aunt's aggressive and overly strict behavior in the film, it can tell that she is a "tiger mother", who push and encourage children to achieve high scores and accomplishment. For the second time, "人生大事" is acted as the title of the movie, translated as *LIGHTING UP THE STARS*. The protagonist of this film, Mo Sanmei, the funeral master, said to Wu Xiaowen, who had just lost her grandmother, "Your grandmother has drifted to the sky and turned into stars." From then on, Wu Xiaowen believed that Mo Sanmei was the star planter. Therefore, the translator combines the main theme of the entire film, Mo Sanmei's identity as a funeral master and all the characters at the end of the film looked at the stars in the sky, translating "人生大事" as *LIGHTING UP THE STARS*. The death and funeral are transformed and beautified by using the perspective of the little girl Wu Xiaowen while this translation also represents a change in Mo Sanmei's attitude towards life and his career. "人生大事" appeared for the third time when Mo Sanmei's father,

Old Mo, said, "人生除死无大事". The translator chose to translate it literally as "In life, nothing's bigger than death itself". The translator translates "大事" directly as big thing. In the previous plot, Old Mo told the most desperate thing about himself, and even shed a few tears deep down. The translator combines the scene of Old Mo lying in bed on the brink of death, the heavy expressions of Old Mo and Mo Sanmei, and Old Mo's heavy language. The combination of audiovisual modes and subtitles indicates that "人生除死无大事" is Old Mo's summary of his life before he was on the brink of death.

3.2.2 Situational Context

Funeral master Mo Sanmei and Wang Jianren have a colleague relationship. At the beginning of the film, Wang Jianren calls Mo Sanmei and says, "不行啊。还是你来吧。她硬了。" "硬了" in Chinese can mean tough in means, or hard in body. In this example, "硬了" is translated as "Her body's got stiff". Situational context refers to the surrounding situation, the nature of things, the relationships between participants, time, place, and manner in which a discourse occurs. When Wang Jianren called Mo Sanmei, someone passed by with yellow and white chrysanthemums, and a band was playing suona near Mo Sanmei. Although the subtitle conveys obscure meaning of what happened in the plot, the screen presents yellow and white chrysanthemums, wreaths, paper money, and gathered crowds, and the suona sound generally appears at wedding or funerals. In this scene, the textual mode is weak, and more attention is focused on the visual mode, presenting a typical Chinese funeral ceremony to the audience.

3.3 Content Level

The content level includes both semantic meaning and discourse form. Semantic meaning mainly refers to the conceptual meaning, interpersonal meaning, and discourse meaning of language (Zhang, 2009). The conceptual meaning is a more focused aspect of film subtitle translation, which is mainly used to explain the content of the film and convey the main meaning of the film; The interpersonal meaning is for communication, but the main purpose of movie subtitles is to convey information, and the communicative function accounts for a relatively small proportion; Discourse meaning refers to the role that a certain piece of text can play in a discourse. The formal level in movies is mainly reflected in visual and auditory forms. Visual forms refer to the presentation of the film's scene and subtitles, while auditory forms include background music, character communication, and so on.

Taking the translation of the title "人生大事" as an example. The title "人生大事" is translated as *Lighting Up the Stars*. "人生大事" appear in white brush style with a black background. From a formal perspective, black represents seriousness and solemnity, while white represents purity and sacredness, which indicates the overall tone of the film is serious and heavy. The title of the film is in Chinese at the top and English at the bottom. The English title *LIGHTING UP THE STARS* gives people a bright feeling, just like the Chinese title "人生大事" appear in white, occupying most of the black page, and can indeed illuminate the audience. From a semantic perspective, at this time, it's still unknown about the reference for "STAR". According to the subsequent plot, Wu Xiaowen believes that the funeral master Mo Sanmei is the person who plant stars, so the "STAR" is an image that runs through the entire

161

film, representing the deceased. This film focuses on depicting the deaths of three people: Wu Xiaowen's grandmother, a little girl, and Mo Sanmei's father. For Wu Xiaowen, who lost both parents, her grandmother is the star that illuminates her, and the little girl is the apple in her parents' eyes. Mo Sanmei turns his father's ashes into fireworks and sends them to the sky, turning them into "starlight" to illuminate Mo Sanmei. Therefore, the form and significance of *LIGHTING UP THE STARS* are in line with the overall theme and content of the movie.

3.4 Expression Level

There are two forms of media in movies: sound or text. At the formal level, it includes both verbal and nonverbal media. Language media includes pure language forms and companion language forms. Pure language forms include sound and text, and companion language forms are media forms that accompany language and play an auxiliary and complementary role in expressing discourse meaning. Nonverbal media, including the physical movements of participants, mainly include two aspects: tools and environment (Zhu, 2007).

In order to better express meaning, when translating subtitles, the translator not only needs to consider the content of the dialogue, but also needs to connect with the nonverbal means used by the characters in the film, such as changes in facial expressions, the use of actions, and changes in the environment. When Mo Sanmei sent Wu Xiaowen back to her mother, he warned Xiaowen's mother, "我警告你，你一定要对她好一点。监狱里我熟，我不介意再进去一回". The English subtitles is: "I'm warning you, you have to be good to her. I've been to prison, I don't mind going back again." In terms of language modality, the translator adopts literal translation, and foreign audiences can see Mo Sanmei's reluctance to part from Wu Xiaowen through words such as "warning" and "have to". As the plot shown in the screen, although Mo Sanmei sternly warned Wu Xiaowen's mother to care and cherish Xiaowen, after saying these words, Mo Sanmei lowered his eyes and couldn't help but look back at Wu Xiaowen. The expression changes on Mo Sanmei's face allow the audience to perceive his reluctance, feel his sharp tongue in the auditory aspect, and see his soft heart in the visual aspect, making people unable to resist being moved and feeling the warmth of this film.

4. Conclusion

This paper takes the Chinese and English subtitles of the popular summer film *Lighting Up the Stars* in 2022 as the research object. Based on Professor Zhang Delu's multimodal discourse analysis comprehensive theory, it analyzes how movie subtitles, through the interaction of multimodalities such as film images, film scenes, and background music, can jointly build discourse meaning, introduce China's funeral culture to foreign audiences, and demonstrate the subtle father-son relationship under the influence of Confucian culture.

Movies and other film and television works, as broadcasting media, can effectively showcase the spiritual life of Chinese people. A successfully translated film and television work can also help Chinese culture go global. In addition, filmmakers can also conduct comprehensive research on cultural

level, contextual level, content level, expression level, and other aspects when translating Chinese and English subtitles, in order to help audiences better understand the content of the film and gain a better viewing experience.

Fund Project

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