

Original Paper

A Study on the Subtitle Translation of *Farewell My Concubine* from the Perspective of Relevance Translation Theory

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Received: July 20, 2024 Accepted: September 1, 2024 Online Published: September 5, 2024

doi:10.22158/selt.v12n3p82

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/selt.v12n3p82>

Abstract

The subtitle translation of film and television works has been an important topic in the field of translation research because of its great market demand and its significance in cultural communication. The subtitle translation strategy of Farewell My Concubine, a world-renowned Chinese movie, has been studied by scholars in China, but no one has yet explored the contextual effects, information relevance and audience information processing efforts of its subtitle translation in relation to Relevance Translation Theory. A translation achieves optimal relevance when it enables the viewer to discover the meaning intended by the lines without effort and the meaning conveyed is worth the effort of the audience to achieve the appropriate effect. Based on the English translations of film clips by the MTI students in the Class of 2022 of the School of Foreign Languages at Hubei University of Technology, this paper analyses how different English translation strategies affect information transmission, contextual presuppositions, readers' reactions, and the artistic effect of the film in the light of Relevance Translation Theory. Finally, the paper summarizes the students' translation problems and draws lessons from this practice, aiming to contribute to the progress of subtitle translation in China, especially for cultural and artistic films.

Keywords

subtitle translation, Farewell My Concubine, Relevance Translation Theory, translation strategy

1. Introduction

According to Translators Association of China, the domestic translation market has been developing rapidly in recent years. The team of translation talents has continued to grow, and the evaluation system of translation talents has been continuously improved. Subtitle translation is not only the main business of the translation market, but also an important means of communication of excellent film and television cultural works at home and abroad. Improving the quality of subtitle translation is not only

an inevitable requirement for the development of translation market, but also an important means for the overseas dissemination of excellent Chinese film and television cultural products.

As one of the most classic works in Chinese film history, *Farewell My Concubine* has won many international awards, and some domestic scholars have studied its subtitle translation. As of August 31, 2024, there are 51 papers on the relevant subjects on CNKI. Huang Ming has evaluated the English translation quality of *Farewell My Concubine* from the perspective of eco-translatology. It comes to a conclusion that translators need to fully adapt to the ecological environment of translation between the original text and the target text, make choices while balancing various constraints of subtitle translation, and then adjust the selection of information in linguistic, cultural and communicative dimensions according to different subtitle types of content. Only in these ways can the translation be produced with a high degree of "integration, adaptation and selection" (Huang Ming, 2019). Wang Nan once took the subtitle translation of *Farewell My Concubine* as an example to discuss how to choose the appropriate translation method under the guidance of symbol modality, and proved that multimodal discourse analysis can be used in the field of translation (Wang Nan, 2022). In addition, Gong Juan has analyzed the English translation strategy of the film from the perspective of translation function; Li Na has explored film translation strategies from the perspective of contextual adaptation theory.

Relevance translation theory defines translation as a kind of communicative behavior and interprets translation phenomenon with cognitive communicative competence as the center. Among the 51 search results mentioned above, no scholars have analyzed the English translation of film subtitles based on relevance theory. This paper will take the English translation of film clips by MTI students from the School of Foreign Languages of Hubei University of Technology in grade 2022 as an example, and based on relevance translation theory and the criterion of optimal relevance, analyze the translation difficulties and translation strategies of film subtitles.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Relevance Theory

In the late 20th century, a "pragmatic turn of semantics" took place in the field of linguistics. Relevance theory is a theory of linguistic communication, which belongs to cognitive pragmatics. It was systematically elaborated by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson in their book *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* in 1986. The theory holds that language communication is a process of ostension and inference process. Firstly, from the perspective of the speaker, communication is to express one's intention clearly with clear and unmistakable words. From the listener's point of view, communication is a kind of reasoning, which needs to infer the speaker's communicative intention from the speaker's explicit information according to the utterance information and context. Relevance theory holds that human cognition takes maximum relevance as the criterion, while language communication takes optimal relevance as the orientation. In information transmission, speakers generally express information to the maximum extent, and show their information intention and communicative intention

to the listener, so as to provide basis for reasoning. The listener makes inferences based on the explicit behavior of the speaker, looking for relevance and implication, and always obtains the maximum contextual effect and deduces the speaker's intention with minimal cognitive effort. Successful communication depends on the user's understanding of the context of the speaker's intention, and the wrong use of context. Information will inevitably lead to communication failure (Liu Junping, 2009).

2.2 Relevance Translation Theory

After Sperber and Wilson proposed relevance theory, Gutt applied it to the field of translation, proposing relevance translation theory in *Translation and Relevance: Cognition and Context*. From the perspective of relevance translation theory, Gutt argues that translation is an interlingual, text-and-context intervention that establishes a relationship between the author's intention and the translation receiver's intention (the receiver's intention is interpretative similar to the speaker's intention). Translation is the intention of the author of the source text. The intention can both be implicit and explicit. The most important principle to distinguish what information can or may be stated is the relevance. If the translator provides explicit information that the reader (or listener) does not need, it will cost the reader more "processing effort".

The purpose of relevance translation theory is to explain translation phenomena by focusing on people's cognitive and communicative competence. Therefore, relevance translation theory is not a descriptive method of translation. It tries to understand and explain the causality and inferential relationships that occur in translation communication activities.

The relational process of translation is a cognitive and inferential communication process with tripartite interaction, which includes two levels of ostension & inference communication activities. The first process is intralingual explicit reasoning, in which the translator and the author communicate in the first language (the source language). The author of the source language conveys its communicative intention to the translator through the text, and the translator deduces the author's intention according to the principles of the source text information, context and relevance, understands the implied meaning provided in the first level of communication, and seeks the optimal relevance. The second process is the communication between the translator and the target language reader (the second reader). According to the information in the text and the author's communicative intention, the translator transmits the information to the target language readers, and the target language readers then deduce the information provided by the translator to find the optimal relevance. Optimal relevance is what translators strive to achieve, and it is also the criterion of translation studies. The translator's responsibility is to try to match the original author's intention with the expectations of the target reader.

3. Case Analysis

Adapted from Li Bihua's novel, *Farewell My Concubine* is directed by Chen Kaige and stars Leslie Cheung, Gong Li and Zhang Fengyi. The film is about the grief and joy of two Peking Opera actors over half a century, reflecting traditional culture, human existence and human nature. The lines of this

play are concise and rich in emotion, which has outstanding effects in characterizing characters, creating an aesthetic atmosphere and promoting the development of the plot. Besides, it involves dialects, dramas and cultural phenomena. This chapter will evaluate the subtitle translation of students in a translation class practice from levels of semantics, syntax and context.

3.1 Analysis from the Semantic Level

[Example 1] Source Text: 听说你在八大胡同打出了名来了?

Translation 1: I heard you got into a fight at the Eight Alleyway.

Translation 2: It was heard that you had a big fight in the Eight Hutongs? (red-light district in old Beijing)

Translation 3: I heard you got into a fight at the House of Blossoms.

This line comes from Cheng Dieyi after hearing that Duan Xiaolou has helped a prostitute named Juxian in “八大胡同” (red-light district). Here, the “八大胡同” is the red-light district of old Beijing in the late Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China. It does not refer to eight streets and alleys, but means the area outside the Zhengyang Gate of old Beijing. The three translations applied methods of transliteration, transliteration with annotation, and free translation respectively. Although translation 1 presents the word “八大胡同” in the form of proper geographical terms, for foreign audiences lacking knowledge of Chinese historical background, “Eight alleyways” cannot convey the semantics of the original text intuitively, requiring the audience to process a lot of information and not achieving the “optimal relevance”. Translation 2 introduces the meaning of “八大胡同” by using the annotation. “Red-light district” is an equivalent expression in English, and the target audience can understand the connotation of the original text. Based on the plot, translation 3 replaces “八大胡同” with “House of Blossoms”, which is the brothel Duan Xiaolou went to. It is easier for the audience to understand “House of Blossoms” after watching the previous plot, and compared with translation 2, it is shorter and more coordinated in the picture. Although translation 3 does not directly point out “八大胡同” means brothel like translation 2, so that the audience can associate with the processing information of the previous text, extra efforts to process information have increased the aesthetic experience of foreign audiences for such art films with profound meaning as *Farewell My Concubine*. Translation 3 has achieved the optimal relevance.

[Example 2] Source Text: 这武二郎碰上西门庆。不打，不打能成吗?

Translation 1: Well, Wuerlang met Ximen Qing, how can they not fight?

Translation 2: It's like Wu Erlang (Pan Jinliang's brother-in-law) running into Ximen Qing (her lover), I have no choice except to fight.

Translation 3: You know the old story about Pan Jinlian's husband right? I have to fight.

This line occurs when Duan Xiaolou is explaining to Cheng Dieyi why he picked a fight in red-light district. The original text cites the story of Pan Jinlian's adultery with Ximenqing in the *Water Margin*. When dealing with the pragmatic “implication” of Chinese discourse involving rich cultural phenomena, such as various figurative expressions, the cultural exclusion and tolerance of the cognitive

context of the target reader should be considered at the same time (Fan Yong, 2000). Translation 1 not only fails to clarify the plot of allusions by providing the audience with clues, but also mistranslates the subject of "打" from Wu Erlang or the speaker Duan Xiaolou into "they", which greatly increases the audience's understanding burden and fails to achieve communicative effect. Translation 2 uses the method of adding notes to introduce the background of Pan Jinlian's story and correctly convey the semantic information. However, the pause time of this line in the film is very short, and long subtitle translation will weaken the audience's aesthetic experience of the film composition and characters' expressions. Although the information processing burden of the audience is reduced, it fails to achieve the "optimal relevance". Translation 3 does not translate the plot of the allusions, but uses "old story" to show Duan Xiaolou's way of speaking. Although the translation of "I have to fight" reduces the semantic information, it realizes the communicative intention of the original line and meets the requirements of "optimal relevance".

[Example 3] Source Text: 不由人心急似火，奴把袈裟扯破！

Translation 1: Despite myself, desire burns in my heart, I tear my cassock.

Translation 2: Despite myself, desire burns in my heart...and I rend my Buddhist gown!

This line comes from the script recited by Little Bean in the early scene. The "袈裟" is the vestment worn by Buddhist monks. Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism are the backbone of Chinese traditional culture, and many expressions in Chinese are also influenced by religion. English-speaking countries are predominantly Christian, so the concept of "袈裟" may be unfamiliar to foreign language readers. Given the religious background, Translation 1 applied the translation strategy of domestication. Although the translator has correctly reasoned the lines of the source language, he has not created suitable reasoning conditions for the target text readers. According to Webster's Dictionary, "cassock" means "a close-fitting ankle-length garment worn especially in Roman Catholic and Anglican churches by the clergy and by laypersons assisting in services". It is a robe worn by Christian priests, which does not harmonize with the plot, but increases the information processing burden of the audience. Moreover, religion is a relatively serious topic, so translators should use the naturalization strategy carefully. In comparison, "Buddhist gown" in translation 2 can accurately and intuitively convey the semantic information of the original text and achieve "optimal correlation".

3.2 Analysis from the Syntactic Level

[Example 4] Source Text: 唱戏得疯魔，不假，可要是活着也疯魔，在这人世上，在这凡人堆里，咱们可怎么活哟？

Translation 1: It's okay to be crazy on stage, but how do we survive in the real world, get along with the ordinary people, if bringing the craziness into real life?

Translation 2: It's necessary for opera singing, but we can't lead a real life with so many ordinary people in this manner.

The story background of this line is Duan Xiaolou persuading Cheng Dieyi not to mix drama with real life. Translation 1 retains the interrogative form, and removes "可要是活着也疯魔 (if bringing the

craziness into real life)" to the end of the sentence as an adverbial clause of the condition. Although it is in line with the grammatical characteristics of English, words like "crazy", "craziness", "real world" and "real life" are suspected of being an overly literal translation. Moreover, the translation is redundant in meaning and long in length, not "explicit" enough for target audience. In contrast, translation 2 reduces the scattered oral features of the lines, integrates the information, and changes the interrogative sentence into a declarative sentence according to the context, highlighting Duan Xiaolou's negative attitude towards Cheng Dieyi's life view of "no distinction between real person and character". The "ostension-inferential" derivation process in relevance theory means that the discourse in communication is mostly fragmented, and to avoid ambiguity and misunderstanding, the listener should supplement the fragmented discourse into a complete propositional form at first, which is transforming the sentences with incomplete surface structure into complete deep structure (Fan Yong, 2000). Translation 2 converts the original lines into a complete deep structure, explains the attitude of the characters in the play, and thus achieves the "optimal relevance".

[Example 5] Source Text: 来!给师哥勾勾脸!

Translation 1: Will you give me a hand to make up?

Translation 2: Give me a hand with my makeup, will you?

Translation 3: Come on, give me a hand with my makeup!

The line follows the scene in Example 4, in which Duan Xiaolou ends Cheng Dieyi's blame for the brothel fight by asking for drawing opera makeup. The original is an imperative sentence. Translation 1 is in question form, while translation 2 is an antisense question. Although translation 2 conveys the semantic information of the original text, it is inconsistent with the expression and tone of the characters, which greatly reduces the aesthetic experience of the target audience. Translation 3 retains the form of imperative sentence while conveying the information accurately. It fits the film picture, and achieves the optimal relevance in the ostension & inference process between the translator and the target audience.

3.3 Analysis from the Contextual Level

[Example 6] Source Text: 从一而终!

Translation 1: Be faithful to work till death.

Translation 2: Be faithful to one thing till the day we die.

Translation 3: Stick together till the end!

Translation 4: Stick together until the day you die!

This scene is Cheng Dieyi rebuking Duan Xiaolou forgetting their master's words, failing to meet the original mission. Said by their master, "从一而终 (from one to the end)" means that Cheng and Duan should not forget their original aspirations, adhere to professional ethics, and take opera as a lifelong career. In combination with the plot of the film, Cheng Dieyi cannot distinguish himself from his character Yuji, and keeps infatuated with Duan Xiaolou who plays Yuji's lover in the opera. In this case, Cheng Dieyi implicitly emphasizes that he and Duan Xiaolou should be together for a lifetime like Yuji

and her lover. Chinese is meaning-oriented rather than form-oriented. In some high-context cases, one word or phrase can be interpreted in many ways. This case is a good example for high context interpretation. Descriptive translation method would ruin the original context. According to relevance theory, implicit information in discourse is mainly produced by deductive reasoning in a cognitive context. The hidden inference in translation is more complex and irregular than the explicit inference. And the cognitive context disorder in translation process needs to be adjusted and compensated by a variety of flexible means. The translation of "一(one)" into "work" in translation 1 does not conform to the two meanings discussed above, while translations 3 and 4 emphasize the second meaning. In addition, translation 2 can restore the contextual effect more comprehensively. First of all, "one thing" can refer to the career of the opera. Moreover, "one thing" can refer to the role, that is, Cheng Dieyi plays the role of Yuji in life, so Duan Xiaolou should still be King Chu in life. Cheng and Duan should love each other until death like Yuji and King Chu.

[Example 7] Source Text: 为何腰系黄绦，身穿直裰

Translation 1: Why must I wear these sexless robes and yellow ribbons around my waist...

Translation 2: why am I wearing a yellow belt and long robe, dressing like a boy.

This line comes from the Kun Opera *Sifan*. "直裰" is a kind of male monk's dress, through which the character named Sekong in *Sifan* expresses her desire to break rules and dress as a girl. Due to the social and cultural differences between the cognitive context of the target readers and that of the original readers, in order to achieve the same contextual effect, the translator should make certain adjustments, compensations and adaptations to make the target text and the original text equivalent in relevance. These ways would help the target readers understand the meaning and intention of the original author as much as possible. The character in *Sifan* is trapped in gender cognition as she is born a girl but lives like a man. Little Bean, who sings the *Sifan* in this film, is also trapped in gender cognition. The translator needs to translate this background information to provide reasoning conditions for the target language audience. Translation 1 adopts the literal translation method. Although the word "sexless" is used, it is not "explicit" enough to indicate the emotion in the original language. Captions are passed along with scenes, so imprecise translation is a burden of information processing for the audience and can not successfully complete the reasoning. By contrast, translation 2 complements "dressing like a boy" by connecting the word "直裰" directly to gender, allowing the viewer to infer that Little Bean is as entangled in gender identity as Sekong in *Sifan*. From the perspective of relevance translation theory, a good translation should ensure that the contextual effects obtained by the target readers from the target text are the same as those obtained by the original readers from the source text (Fan Yong, 2000). Translation 2 reproduces the contextual effects in the source text, achieves the optimal cognitive relevance, and restores the communicative intention of the source text author.

4. Conclusion

Based on relevance translation theory, this paper evaluates the performance of MTI students from Hubei University of Technology in the subtitle translation practice about *Farewell My Concubine*. On the whole, there is some progress to be made in the translation. Students need to improve the understanding on original text, word selection, syntactic adjustment, cultural information compensation, and subtitle format. For classic films such as *Farewell My Concubine*, which are rich in cultural connotation and have special times background, subtitle translation should not only be clear and straightforward, but also reflect the author's intention, create cognitive context for the audience and avoid obscurity. At the same time, subtitle translation needs to retain the charm of the lines, and reproduce the artistic effect. For the cultural background involved in the lines, especially religious and political topics, the translator should carefully choose the domestication translation strategy and retain the high context of original words. If not, the translation would distort the original text, destroy the preset context, and make the translation unable to achieve the "optimal relevance".

Fund Project

This paper is part of the research results of the No. 20D042 Philosophy and Social Science project named "*Multidimensional Analysis of the Ecological Transformation of Translation Studies*" which is funded by Department of Education of Hubei Province.

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