

A Brief Analysis of English Film Subtitle Translation Based on Relevance Theory

-- A Case Study of the Film Green Book

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Abstract: As an art form, the film plays an important role in spreading national culture and enhancing cultural exchanges. Nowadays, more and more English movies are screened on the big screen in China and have received wide acclaim and lively discussions among audiences in China. In this context, a good translation of English movie subtitles is important for understanding foreign cultures. Based on the application of relevance theory in translation and combining with the characteristics of film subtitles, this paper makes a simple analysis of the subtitle translation of the film *Green Book* from the aspects of content and style, with a view of removing the barriers and providing a better experience for the target language audience. Besides, this paper believes that when translating, translators also master the basic subtitle translation theory and do more information checks in many aspects when translating to ensure the accuracy of the translation. This is responsible for both the movie and the audience.

Keywords: Relevance Theory, Movie Subtitle, Subtitle Translation

1. Introduction

Green Book is a film about racial issues in the United States. In a tragicomic plot, the plight faced by the colored race is presented to the audience, which prompts the audience to think further. After its release on the Chinese mainland, the film was a box office success, and it won several awards including Best Picture at the 91st Academy Awards. Chinese audiences can enjoy this film with strong American cultural flavor and can resonate with the plot of the film, which is inseparable from its excellent subtitle translation.

Different from other literary translations, film subtitle translation is limited by time and requires high language accessibility and translation flexibility. In subtitle translation, translators need to use various translation methods according to different contents, and the correlation theory, as a long-developed and constantly improved theory, can provide translators with a theoretical basis and flexible translation methods. In order to identify the deep meaning that cannot be understood via regular movie-watching, this paper primarily chooses the movie *Green Book* as a case study to investigate the application of relevance theory in it.

2. Relevance Theory in Translation

Sperber and Wilson first presented relevance theory as a cognitive-pragmatic communication strategy in the middle of the 1980s, which is based on an assumption that if the receivers think a statement is relevant, they will try to process it. They pointed out that on the one hand, the speaker should guide the audience to achieve their intended meaning without extra effort. On the other hand, listeners should process information until it gives them enough contextual effects to make the speaker's utterance sound [1].

As translation is also a cross-language communication, a decision-making process, and a communication behavior between language users, Gutt introduced relevance theory into the field of translation and created his own theory. Based on relevance theory, Gutt claimed that the translator plays two roles, which is the primary distinction between translation and ordinary communication. They serve as both the audience's speaker and the source language author's listener [2]. The context shift could have an impact on any text that is moved from its original context to another one. Yus asserts that the intended audience can have various social values and customs as well as some preconceived notions about other groups [3]. As a result, the task of the translator is to ensure the optimal relevance of the two contexts. In their research, Michael Kliffer and Magda Stroinska focused on the fundamentals of relevance theory's "pragmatic" component and explored how to use pragmatics to explain which translation or interpretation is best for a particular language expression in a particular language and foreign language environment [4].

Translation studies is a research field that has developed in the last two decades, during which screen translation has gradually become a new field of study [5]. Therefore, in this field, the analysis of relevance theory application has become a topic worth studying.

3. Movie Subtitles

Film translation, also known as audiovisual language transfer, refers to the process by which a target audience unfamiliar with the original language is able to understand a film or television program, and it plays a decisive role in the perception of the film to a certain extent.[6]. Its main form is subtitling, which basically means the display of non-visual content such as dialogue in television, film, and stage productions in the form of text.

3.1. Characters of Movie Subtitles Language

3.1.1. Colloquialism

Unlike the language in books, most viewers do not read movie subtitles backward and forward repeatedly when watching a movie. If the subtitles are too long or the language of the subtitles is too complex or obscure, it may cause the audience to fail to understand the subtitles in a short time, and even their attention will be drawn more to the subtitles than to the plot of the movie on the screen. Therefore, considering the audience's feelings, most of the movie subtitles are composed of relatively simple and colloquial language. In addition, English language films, especially those based on dialogue, tend to include slang.

3.1.2. Rhythmicity

The rhythm of the characters' dialogues as well as the narration is not constant as the film progresses. They usually have variations in length, speed, and sometimes some white space. This change in rhythm can bring a sense of intonation and cadence, so that the audience will not have aesthetic fatigue

and visual fatigue, and it is more conducive to the transmission of the film's theme and ideas in terms of both form and content.

3.2. Characters of Movie Subtitles Translation

The characteristics of translation that Gutt proposed were mentioned above in this paper, which indicates that the translator should be the listener of the author of the source language and the speaker of the audience of the target language. This requires that in the translation of movie subtitles, the translators should do their best to preserve the content and cultural characteristics of the source language, but also to be as close as possible to the context of the target language audience to arouse the resonance of the audience.

3.2.1. Understandability

A film is a popular form of art that is watched by people of all ages and educational backgrounds, so film subtitles need to ensure that the audience can understand the plot of the film to the greatest extent possible. This requires the subtitles to be translated as easily and clearly as possible, with the choice of words and the composition of sentences being as simple as possible, thus helping the audience to become more immersed in the film.

3.2.2. Flexibility

Different languages usually represent different cultures. Therefore, translating across languages also means moving from one culture to another. Inevitably, obstacles caused by cultural differences arise in this process. For example, things that exist in one culture do not have a counterpart in another, or the same thing has a completely different meaning in both cultures. This requires the translator to have an understanding of the cultural background of both the source language and the target language and to be flexible in the process of translation, which means translating not only the surface meaning of the statement but also its deeper meaning. Otherwise, the audience will not be able to understand the real meaning behind it just by the literal direct translation. For example, "It rains cats and dogs." actually means "It rains heavily." In this case, if a translator only translates the literal meaning, it will make the viewers confused. In addition, in the process of translation, translators also need to flexibly consider translation targets, target readers, and other factors to find the best translation skills[7].

4. Application of Relevance Theory in the Subtitle Translation of the Film *Green Book*

The main plot of the movie *Green Book* is that Tony, a white American, is hired as the world's best jazz pianist, Shirley Tang, an African American black man, to drive and start a concert tour from New York, gradually going south. The two of them are completely different from each other in terms of skin color, family environment, educational background, and social class, but the story of a friendship that crosses race and class unfolds during the trip.

4.1. Content

4.1.1. Changes Based on Different Cultural Backgrounds

Culture is a complex whole that includes a people's way of life, their thinking and emotions and beliefs, historical accumulations and so on[8]. In the process of subtitle translation, it is a difficult problem for translators to deal with culturally meaningful words. The relevance theory's solution to this problem is that if the target audience can understand the plot from the contextual background without knowing the exact meaning of the word, then the specific explanation can be omitted. If the

word is critical to expressing the tone and assumptions of the discourse, then a word with a similar cultural meaning can be sought from the target language as a solution. Otherwise, the audience cannot infer it from the context, and it will lead to a failure of communication[9].

Example 1:

Original text: It's the last show. Bottom of the ninth. Let's just get it over with.

Literal translation: 这是你的最后一场表演了。第九局的下半场，让我们把事情做完吧。

Subtitle translation: 这是你的最后一场表演了。现在是最后关头了，我们干完拉倒吧。

This line is what Tony said to Shirley on the last day of his tour. The phrase "bottom of the ninth" was originally used in baseball to refer to the last half inning of the last game of a baseball game, which means the last chance to win, and now the phrase is often used to refer to the last hurdle or last chance. Baseball is relatively new to Chinese audiences, and they have no idea what the second half of the ninth game means. This translation doesn't just translate literally, but points out the real meaning behind the phrase, which reduces the obstacles for viewers during the movie.

Example 2:

Original text: I turned down your bed, sir. Shall I unpack your luggage now?

Literal translation: 我把您的床放下来了，先生。我可以帮您打开行李吗？

Subtitle translation: 我已经帮您把床收拾好了，先生。现在可以帮您收拾您的行李吗？

"Turn down the bed" is a room service provided to guests in high-end Western hotels, mainly to prepare a cozier sleeping environment for guests, such as folding a 45-degree angle on one side of the bed, putting a piece of chocolate on the pillow or putting a flower by the bed. Therefore, when translated into Chinese, in the movie subtitles in order to save time, it can be simply translated as "把床收拾好了", rather than literally "把床调低了". Again, this requires the translator to have a certain understanding of etiquette and manners in different cultures.

Example 3:

Original text: "Good Luck! Break a Leg." "Thank you."

Literal translation: "祝你好运！断一条腿。" "谢谢你。"

Subtitle translation: "祝你好运！演出成功。" "谢谢你。"

This is what Tony says to Shirley when he is going to perform on stage. There are two different versions of this phrase. One suggests that since Shakespeare's time, actors were expected to bend their legs and curtsy after receiving a tip at the end of a successful stage performance. Therefore, "Break a leg" has become a figurative expression of hope for the success of the actor's performance. Another saying is that the genie always makes things go wrong, so people will deliberately say the opposite, "break a leg" to wish someone good luck. Either way, the phrase is culturally strong and cannot be directly translated. To avoid misunderstanding, the translator here directly translates the meaning of the blessing Tony wants to express.

4.1.2. Changes Based on the Plot of the Movie

Example:

Original text: So if you want me, it's a buck and a quarter a week. Or go hire the little Chink that just pranced out of here.

Subtitle translation: 所以如果你想雇我，一周付我 125 美元，要不你就雇那个刚离开的中国佬。

Chink is actually a word that is very insulting to Chinese people. It originally means crack, so some westerners use this word to satirize Chinese people's small eyes from their stereotypes. The main character of the film, Tony, is the person with a tendency to be racist at the beginning of the movie. At first, he shows a strong discrimination against black people, such as throwing away all

their used cups. Also, he chooses to use Chink, Cuban bastards and other words with discriminatory colors to show his superiority as a white American. But the translator does not explain and introduce too much in this place, but simply uses the word "中国佬" to complete the sentence. This is firstly to show respect to the Chinese audience; secondly, because in the film, Tony's disdain does not stem from hatred of other races, but more from his own stereotypes. And at the end of the film, he and his family are impressed by Shirley and accept and respect him, which shows that Tony is not an outright racist. Therefore, the translator's simple translation in this place is more in line with the meaning that the movie wants to express without causing misunderstanding and unnecessary trouble.

4.2. Style

In addition to translating the text itself and interpreting the cultural meaning behind it, the translator has the very important task of preserving the style of the text. This is because the style of the text plays a very important role in shaping the characters and serving the theme. Even words with the same meaning can be chosen differently to reflect the characters' personalities, backgrounds, etc. As Huang Jinhong points out, textual style is an important factor in the comprehensibility of the target audience[10].

4.2.1. The Use of Four-character Idioms

Example 1:

Original text: We gotta have some guarantee you're gonna finish the job.

Literal translation: 我们得保证你能完成任务。

Subtitle translation: 这样我们才放心你会有始有终。

Example 2:

Original text: I'm just saying, you have a marvelous way with words when describing food.

Literal translation: 我只是想说, 你描述食物的方式太棒了。

Subtitle translation: 我只是觉得, 你形容食物的时候实在是能说会道。

Example 3:

Original text: You wouldn't believe how beautiful nature is, it is as beautiful as they say.

Literal translation: 你不会相信自然是多么美丽, 它正如人们所说的一样美丽。

Subtitle translation: 大自然的美简直难以置信, 真就跟大家说的那样美。

In all three examples, the translator translate "finish the job"(完成工作), "Have a marvelous way with words" (有非凡的语言能力) and "You wouldn't believe" (你不会相信) translate into four-character idioms like "有始有终", "能说会道" and "难以置信" respectively. It is clear that it is leaning towards the cultural background of the Chinese audience, because four-character idioms are an important part of the traditional Chinese culture, and they are also a common way of expression chosen by the Chinese people in everyday expression. This is more natural and authentic than a literal translation.

4.2.2. The Use of a More Authentic Chinese Language

Example 1:

Original text: "Be respectful and watch your mouth." "Shut up! She wants it, Okay?"

Literal translation: "要有礼貌, 说话注意点。" "闭嘴! 这是她想要的, 好吗?"

Subtitle translation: "放尊重点, 嘴巴干净点。" "闭嘴! 是她卖弄风骚勾引我。"

Example 2:

Original text: "You were only thinking about yourself back there, because you know if I miss a show, it comes out of your pocket book." "Of course I don't want you to miss the show, you ungrateful bastard!"

Literal translation: "你刚才只考虑了你自己，因为你很清楚，要是我错过了一场演出，钱就会从你的口袋里溜走。""我当然不想让你错过演出，你这个忘恩负义的混蛋！"

Subtitle translation: "你刚才只考虑了你自己，因为你知道如果我错过了一场演出，你的收入也会损失。""我当然不想让你错过演出，你这个白眼狼！"

In these two examples, the semantic differences between literal translation and subtitle translation are not great, but the language chosen by the subtitle translator is obviously more appropriate to Chinese expression habits and more in line with Tony's identity and character. At the same time, words such as "白眼狼" are very authentic Chinese expressions, which can bring the audience closer than "忘恩负义的混蛋". It is as if Tony is a real person that audience might actually meet in life, someone who is grumpy, full of swear words and like to use force to solve the problem of people. This makes Tony's image fuller and more vivid on the paper. This makes Tony's image fuller and more vivid in the movie.

5. Translations to be Perfected in the Subtitle Translation of the Film *Green Book*

In the translation of subtitles for the film *Green Book*, there are also some inappropriate translations, either due to a lack of cultural knowledge or technical errors. In the process of watching the movie, the translator's improper translation may cause confusion to the audience.

Example 1: He doesn't play like a colored guy. He plays like Liberace, but better.

Subtitle translation: 他弹琴的感觉不像有色人种。他弹得像自由女神，但她更好。

This is an obvious translation error in the film. Liberace was a very famous American pianist and entertainer in the 1950s and 1970s, giving many concerts and releasing records. Obviously the Liberace here does not refer to "自由女神", Lady Liberty.

Example 2: Wait a minute, if you said all guineas like pizza and spaghetti and meatballs...等等，如果说所有的几内亚人都喜欢披萨、意大利面和肉丸...

In fact, guineas is the English slang term for Italians, as well as seeing pizza and spaghetti at the end of the sentence should make one think that this is a stereotype of Italians. It is possible that the translator made a mistake because the spelling is very much like Guinean.

6. Conclusion

According to the relevance theory, in the first stage of translation, the translator needs to preserve the cultural characteristics of the source language as much as possible, thus helping to achieve the purpose of film dissemination - enabling the culture of the source language to be introduced, exchanged and developed in other countries. In the second stage, the translator needs to put himself in the shoes of the target language audience's expression habits and expressions, and achieve a common and flexible translation.

How to accurately and appropriately translate movie subtitles is always a problem that translators and researchers strive to study, because movies are an important means for most people to satisfy their spiritual needs, and also to promote the spread of different cultures and languages. However, there is no one-size-fits-all formula for film subtitle translation, which always needs to be understood and figured out by translators. Through the subtitle translation of the film *The Green Book*, it can be seen how relevance theory can help translators to make corresponding changes in the original text according to different backgrounds in cross-cultural translation. A good use of relevance theory in translation can reduce the barriers brought by cultural differences in cultural communication. It can

also be seen that translators should keep learning different cultures, master basic subtitle translation theories, and make more multifaceted checks of information when translating, so as to avoid errors and ensure the accuracy of translation. In this way, the audience can have a better viewing experience since the translators are responsible for the film and the audience.

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