

The Application of Functional Equivalence Theory in Russian Movie Subtitle Translation —Using I am Dragon as an Example

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Abstract. Film subtitle translation serves as a crucial vehicle for cross-cultural communication. High-quality subtitle translation plays a vital role in the dissemination of Russian culture. This study explores the application of Functional Equivalence Theory in the English subtitle translation of the Russian film *I am Dragon*, using official subtitles as reference material. The main object of the study is to analyze Russian-English subtitles through a multidimensional analysis—semantic, stylistic, and cultural and to solve the problem of English subtitle translation in the Russian film industry. The research finds that problems like cultural gaps, grammatical information loss in translation can be effectively mitigated through strategies such as semantic amplification, stylistic rhetoric retention, and cultural concept reconstruction guided by the theory. These approaches help the translated subtitles stay closer to the original in meaning and style, enabling target audiences to achieve a viewing experience and understanding analogous to native Russian viewers. This study provides practical methodological support for enhancing Russian film subtitle translation quality and promoting Russian cultural export via cinematic art.

Keywords: Functional Equivalence Theory, Russian-English subtitle translation, Russian film, *I am Dragon*

1. Introduction

Driven by the attention of the Government of the Russian Federation and the systematic support of the media industry, local Russian films have made steady progress in the country, and their share in the domestic market has been continuously increasing. Art films such as *Leviathan* and *Leto* have won many awards at international film festivals and are shining on the international stage. It is worth noting that contemporary Russian films not only continue the Soviet tradition of interpreting the core of the national spirit at the level of narrative themes and visual aesthetics, but also shoulder the mission of “cultural export” in the context of global culture-to spread Russian culture through the medium of film and tell Russian stories [1].

In the context of media globalization, film subtitle translation is an important carrier of cross-cultural communication, which directly affects the effect of cultural communication and audience acceptance [2].

High-quality subtitle translation plays a vital role in the dissemination of Russian culture. From an industry perspective, achieving sustainable international distribution and industrial upgrading for Russian films is inseparable from systematic and professional high-quality subtitle translation. Inaccurate translations can severely restrict a film's overseas box office and even lead to cultural misinterpretation, damaging the national image. From the perspective of translation value, subtitles serve as a vehicle for cultural adaptation and artistic representation. If the cultural background, historical context, emotional expressions, and linguistic style embedded in a film cannot be accurately conveyed through translation, it will greatly limit international audiences' understanding and acceptance, thereby hindering the "cultural export" of Russian film. Therefore, high-quality subtitle translation has become a crucial means of breaking down barriers in international communication. It is not merely a tool for language conversion but also a bridge for cross-cultural understanding and empathy.

Current academic research on Russian films primarily focuses on aspects such as character portrayal, national image building, social themes, film production, cinematic creation, and film narrative. Most scholarly achievements revolve around studies related to filmmaking and artistic dimensions [3-5]. The research on the transnational communication of Russian films from a systematic interdisciplinary perspective is still relatively weak. Especially in the specific field of English translation of subtitles, in-depth analysis of the practice of multilingual translation of Russian films, audience acceptance effects, cultural communication and other issues is particularly scarce. This imbalance of academic attention and insufficient methodology have led to the lack of effective theoretical support and translation norms for Russian films in the process of "cultural export". Therefore, at present, the research on film and television subtitles in the Russian film industry has great research depth and rising prospects.

This research analyzes the English subtitle translation of *I am Dragon*. Based on Functional Equivalence Theory of American linguist Eugene Nida, the analysis and research of the English subtitle translation of *I am Dragon* aims to answer how to improve the quality of English translation of Russian film subtitles in terms of semantics, style and cultural dimensions, and promote the international dissemination of Russian culture. The study will use the official subtitles from YouTube's film channel as a reference. In the translation market, which varies greatly, YouTube Film and television, as the official website for watching film and television dramas, English subtitle translation is more authoritative and suitable for research. It is hoped that this will address some problems in the English translation of Russian film subtitles, contribute to improving the quality of such translations, and promote Russian culture to the world through the channel of cinematic art, enabling global audiences to better understand Russian cinema and culture.

2. Existing problems in the translation of Russian movie subtitles

Existing studies tend to concentrate narrowly on the applicability of subtitle translation as well as corresponding strategies primarily from the perspectives of length, content, and cultural elements. By systematically reviewing the existing literature, this study summarizes three core issues prevalent in the English subtitle translation of Russian films.

First, there exists the issue of cultural disparities in Russian-English translation [6]. Throughout the course of cultural development, every country evolves unique cultural motifs and symbols that are intrinsic to its identity. Consequently, when translating between languages, the emergence of "cultural voids" or cultural shock is inevitable. During the translation process, if the translator lacks understanding of the profound cultural meanings behind the source language or encounters unfamiliar expressions, such as culture-loaded terms, words or phrases with context-specific

meanings, the resulting translation may appear rigid and difficult to comprehend. This may prevent the audience from understanding the meaning of the translation and make it challenging for them to immerse themselves in the emotional experience of the film. Consequently, Russian-English translation involves language conversion, and needs to cross the barriers of cultural differences.

Secondly, there will be a certain amount of information loss when Russian grammar is converted into English [7]. one of the world's most complex languages, Russian grammar is highly intricate, such as Russian nouns, adjectives, pronouns are clearly and compulsorily expressed the grammatical function of the word in the sentence and the specific semantic relationship with other words through the endings of six cases. Verbs have tense, personal conjugation, change of aspect. Russian reflects the grammatical function of sentence elements mainly through inflection, which leads to the differences between different English grammatical systems. Hence, the simplification of grammatical structure, the simplification of appellation and the loss of verb aspect will inevitably lead to the phenomenon of information compression between the original Russian text and the translated English content.

Finally, the problem of ideological inequality cannot be ignored. With the globalization of the film industry, Western countries have gradually spread their own culture and ideology on a global scale through movies. This is intended to maintain the stability of the social system of capitalist countries, as well as to maintain their hegemonic position in the world and expand the influence of capitalism. Hollywood, with its unparalleled global distribution channels, mature narrative mode and huge capital advantages, has become the most effective carrier of Western ideology. The process of Western ideological export is a complex interplay of political, economic, and cultural factors, which relies on strong communication and capital advantages, making the ideological contest always in a structural imbalance. Ideology has brought about multiple influences, including the infiltration of social trends of thought, especially the influence of hedonism and individualism on Russia. This kind of infiltration often appears in the form of entertainment and depoliticization, which imperceptibly changes the values of the audience and weakens the traditional culture and social cohesion. So in the process of Russian-English translation, it is easy to exaggerate and distort the content of Western ideology, and the content is not equal.

3. Functional equivalence theory

Functional Equivalence Theory was proposed by the American linguist Eugene Nida [8]. From a linguistic perspective, this theory provides a translation criterion for the conversion between source and target languages "dynamic equivalence" also known as the "Functional Equivalence Theory". It posits that the translated content should elicit a response and level of comprehension in the target-language reader that is essentially equivalent to that of the source-language reader. Nida believed that "form" is secondary, while "meaning" is of utmost importance. He argued that "translation consists in reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source-language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style. The dimensions of functional equivalence include semantic equivalence, stylistic equivalence, and cultural equivalence. It is impossible to fully restore the cultural connotations of the source language; translators can only approximate them to the greatest extent possible. If a conflict arises between meaning and form, it is necessary to abandon the form and adapt the structure of the translation to achieve the restoration of the source language's cultural connotations.

At present, functional equivalence theory has been widely applied to literary translation, film translation and intercultural communication studies. Gulkhara and Kamran applied this theory and highlights the translator's role as a cultural mediator and emphasizes the ethical and communicative

importance of preserving scene language in translation [9]. Aliyev applied this theory to focus on Arabic and Azerbaijani translation of Legal Terms and evaluate how functional equivalence promotes legal accuracy and cross-cultural clarity by preserving the function and effect of terms, rather than their literal words [10]. Meng applied this theory to study the translation of key cultural terms in the promotional materials for Xi'an's cultural heritage sites [11]. He divides the omissions and mistranslations of cultural terms into three general types and addressed those problems to avoid different meanings of cultural concepts, retaining only the literal meanings and ignoring cultural concepts in specific contexts. Therefore in film and television productions, literary works, or legal documents, the methods of functional equivalence theory are employed to make the translated text more aligned with the original, preserving the intended meaning while appropriately retaining certain culture-loaded terms. Additionally, cultural connotations are conveyed through annotations or explanations. Therefore, this theory is applicable to the translation of Russian film subtitles in this study, as it meets the research's objective: to make the English translation more faithful to the Russian original while preserving specific Russian vocabulary to better disseminate native Russian culture.

This study selects functional equivalence theory as the core analytical framework, primarily due to its emphasis on meaning prioritization over form, while also accounting for cultural transmission and reader response. This makes it particularly suitable for addressing translation and cultural communication issues from a cross-cultural perspective. The research focuses on the English translation of Russian film subtitles, aiming to systematically examine how dynamic coordination across semantic, stylistic, and cultural dimensions can achieve effective functional equivalence in cross-language transformation.

In terms of specific applications, this research focuses on the following aspects. On the semantic level, it emphasizes the analysis of how functional equivalence theory is applied in the translation of vocabulary and grammar from the source language, and investigates which translation strategies are employed. In terms of style, it focuses on special stylistic forms in the source language and examines whether their functions are accurately conveyed during the translation process. Culturally, it addresses the issue of cultural differences between the source and target languages, exploring whether translation strategies such as "cultural substitution" or "generalization" are adopted in the subtitling to maximally preserve the cultural connotations of the original language while avoiding cultural misunderstandings.

3.1. Semantic equivalence

Semantic equivalence refers to the translator's need to find the closest corresponding words in the target language to ensure the accuracy of meaning transmission [12]. It is the most fundamental principle of equivalence in functional equivalence theory. While remaining faithful to the original text, translators must flexibly interpret meanings and employ appropriate translation techniques.

In translation studies, achieving complete and absolute semantic equivalence is often difficult, particularly with culturally loaded terms, idioms, metaphors, or polysemous words, as different language systems frequently exhibit "lexical gaps" or "semantic mismatches". Because the meanings of vocabulary in different languages are diverse, translators need to delve into the source language and the object language, delve into the differences in meaning, and find the most appropriate words.

3.2. Stylistic equivalence

Stylistic equivalence refers to the translator's intention to reflect the stylistic characteristics, language style or specific rhetorical techniques of the original text in the translation process, so that the translation will produce the same reaction effect as the source language when facing the recipient [13]. Translators need to make appropriate style choices according to different locales, audiences, etc. Its core principles include, first, ensuring that the style of the translation remains consistent with the original text. For instance, the language used in legal documents or formal settings should be official and solemn, while dialogues between friends should be relaxed and humorous. Secondly, the style needs to consider the specific scenarios and functions of the text, the identity, status, emotions, and era background of the characters in the film. In the field of translation research, style equivalence has become an important criterion for judging the quality of translations, especially for literature, film and television, and other text types that emphasize language artistry and functional diversity.

3.3. Cultural equivalence

Cultural equivalence refers to the translator's need to transform culture-specific terms in the source language so that they can be understood by the target language audience without causing cultural deviation or misunderstanding [13]. It advocates that the main task of translation is not mechanical language transformation, but the re-creation of meaning across cultures.

Prioritizing meaning over form is the most fundamental tenet of cultural equivalence. Sacrificing formal similarity to preserve equivalence in meaning is often necessary in translation. Moreover, "equivalence" here is not "static equivalence" but "dynamic equivalence", which centers on the reader's response. In translation studies, cultural equivalence has become a key concept in cross-cultural translation research and criticism.

4. Translation strategies of Russian film subtitles

Based on Functional equivalence theory, this study analyzes the English subtitle translation of the YouTube film I am Dragon from three dimensions.

4.1. Semantic equivalence

For semantic equivalence, the common translation strategies are literal translation, amplification and subtraction. At the same time, we should consider the different grammatical structures of different languages and adjust the sentence pattern or word order. For Russian, a language with complex grammatical rules and sentence structures, it is often necessary to pay attention to amplification, simplification when translating, while literal translation has a relatively narrow scope for translating Russian into English.

Example 1

Source Text (ST): Мира,ты мне какое имя придумала?

Target Text (TT): Mira,What name did you choose for me?

When Mira and Arman first met, Arman (originally a dragon) hid in a cave, but chose to forget his name because he had not used it for a long time. At this point, Mira wanted to know him and make friends with him, so she gave Arman name. Arman was curious about what kind of name Mira had given to him, so he asked her. "придумала" means "think, think out" in Russian, and the translator here chose "choose" instead of "think" or "give". The choice of "think" or "give" would

sound strange to a native English speaker, but the word “choose” conveys the idea that Arman’s name was “chosen” by Mira for him, and does not sound incorrect to a native speaker.

Example 2

ST: Верь в меня!Верь! Еще рано...

TT: Trust me!Trust me! It’s not time yet!

After Mira and Arman introduced each other, Mira wanted to shake his hand. At the moment Arman touched Mira’s hand, the dragon shape in his body was about to appear. Mira ran all the way to the edge of the cliff, thinking that Arman had deceived herself, but accidentally fell off the cliff. Arman jumped down to save her and told Mira to trust him. “Еще рано” was translated as “It’s not time yet!”. The original meaning is “still too early”, Arman means that it is not yet the time to become a dragon, and “It’s not time yet!” just translated exactly. If it is replaced by “We still have time!” or “It is too early!”, the audience will not understand “We still have time for what?”, which will lose the meaning that the original text has not yet reached the moment of becoming a dragon. There are many examples of such conversions to Russian in the subtitles of the movie I am Dragon. By choosing appropriate words in English, the audience can better understand the meaning of the translation. This kind of transformation of words and sentence patterns effectively solves the problem of simplification of grammar and meaning in Russian translation.

4.2. Stylistic equivalence

The style of language varies greatly in different contexts, such as metaphor, parallelism and hyperbole are used in the original text, and the translation should correspond to them in a clear form, rather than a simple literal translation. The author’s unique sentence features (including long sentences, short sentences, fragmented sentences, repetitive structures, etc.) should be retained as much as possible. The original text is the style and form of poetry, and the translation should also correspond to it and form a specific form.

In this film, there are a large number of recitations describing the ancient Russian sacrificial tradition, most of which take the form of parallelism, and there are certain requirements for the transformation between the source language and the target language.

Example 3

ST: Там, где свет обжигает сердце

Там, где прячется моя тайна

Там, где тени стремятся к людям

Начинается моя история.

TT: Where the light burns the heart.

Where my secret lies hidden.

Where shadows, seek after people.

That is where my story begins.

The film begins with a mysterious and philosophical narration, and the original uses the rhetorical device of parallelism to bring people’s minds back to the ancient Slavic mysterious ritual. The translation also retains the form of parallelism and adjusts the word order appropriately, so that the native English speaker is personally on the scene when he hears the narration at the beginning of the film. Moreover, the length of the translation is comparable to that of the original text, which is in line with the audience’s viewing habits and feelings.

Example 4

ST: Вместо глаз, у них были слезы.

Вместо сердца, у них был ужас.

Вместо неба, у них была гибель.

TT: They had tears where their eyes should have been.

They had fear where their hearts should have been.

They had death where the sky should have been.

These lines also appear at the beginning of the film, and the translator cleverly translates the structure of “Вместо” as “where...should have been” instead of simply “with”. In style, it is unified with the original style and full of poetry. The translator of *I am Dragon* tried his best to retain the form of the original text when translating the English subtitles, and also retained the somewhat mysterious and literary feeling of the original text in terms of language style. The strategy of peer-to-peer style can effectively reduce the gap in translation at the language style level, so that the audience can be immersed in it.

4.3. Cultural equivalence

The most important thing in cultural equivalence is not form but meaning. If there is a choice between form and meaning, it must be meaning. There is a certain meaning of formal equivalence in the original text, but if the target language is difficult to convey effective information on the basis of formal equivalence, it is necessary to abandon formal equivalence and reshape the language.

Example 5

ST: —несите ожерелье и платье,пока она ворон считает.

—Я не считаю,я думаю.

TT: —Get her dress and the necklace where she’s counting cross.

—I am not counting anything.I’m thinking.

Mira is getting ready for the wedding ceremony. Her sister helps her dress up, but Mira is always playing with her toys and doesn’t pay attention to what her sister does to her. The elder sister said that she was in daze, and “считает” in the first sentence of the original text corresponds to “считаю”. In Russian, “crow” means to be in a daze or to be distracted, but in English, there is no use of crow to mean to be in a daze or to be distracted. The translator still gives the expression of “counting cross” when translating, in my opinion, it is necessary to abandon the form which matches the original text, and to express the meaning of “daze” in a deeper way, which is of great significance to shape the characters and restore the content of the film.

Example 6

ST: —Может сердце твоё молчит, потому что у тебя его нет?

TT: —Perhaps you are heartless because you don’t have one.

This sentence was said to Mira by her sister. In the previous article, Mira said to her because she was angry “Отстань, ты мне не мать!” (Let me go, you are not my mother!). My sister said she was “сердце молчит”, which literally means “the heart is quiet” but in fact “сердце молчит” means “cold-blood” or “heartless”. Therefore, the translator did not directly translate the literal meaning “Heart is silent”. At the same time, it corresponds to “you don’t have one”. The subtitle translator of *I am Dragon* explained and replaced the special “cultural based words” in Russian, which can make the audience’s understanding of the original text more accurate and close.

5. Conclusion

Russian film, with its profound cultural heritage, unique national aesthetics, and profound artistic expression, has become an indispensable vehicle for cross-cultural communication. Subtitle translation, serving as a bridge connecting source-language and target-language audiences, directly

influences the transmission and reception of cultural imagery. This is particularly true for translations between languages with significant cultural differences, such as Russian and English, where the importance and complexity of subtitle translation are even more pronounced. Guided by the theory of functional equivalence, this study takes the official English subtitles of the Russian fantasy film *I am Dragon* as its research subject and systematically analyzes its translation strategies and effectiveness across three dimensions, including semantic, stylistic, and cultural.

This research indicates that the Functional Equivalence Theory provides a solid theoretical foundation and methodological guidance for the English translation of Russian audiovisual subtitles. It is particularly suitable for addressing the significant differences between Russian and English in terms of structure, rhetoric, and culture. To tackle the issues of cultural gaps and grammatical information loss in Russian film subtitle translation, this research recommends the use of strategies such as amplification, simplification, transformation and interpretation of functional equivalence theory. These methods not only enhance the accuracy of Russian film translations but also offer practical insights for the international dissemination and cross-cultural translation of Russian cinema. However, the scope of the case study in this research is narrowly defined, limiting the broader relevance of the conclusions. Therefore, further in-depth research in the future should expand the research samples in order to explore other genres of films.

In conclusion, the study of Russian film subtitle translation remains rich in academic potential and practical significance. Only through multidimensional, cross-methodological, and empirical continuous exploration can it truly evolve into an effective medium for cross-cultural dialogue.

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