The Analysis of Film Subtitling Translation in the Cross-Cultural Communication Between America and China

Name: Jianrui Hu

Affiliation: Harbin University of Science and Technology

Tel: 15235464357

Email: 15235464357@163.com
The Analysis of Film Subtitling Translation in the Cross-Cultural Communication Between America and China

Abstract

Reform and opening up boosts the increasing internationalism of the film, which makes the film subtitling translation more important. Based on translation adaptive conversion theory, this paper explores the adaptive election in film subtitling translation from three levels: language, culture and communication. The author hopes this translation strategies can be used to create more perfect film translation versions available to the common people and further speed up the process of communication between America and China.

Key words: film subtitling translation language dimension cultural dimension communicative dimension

1. Introduction

At the sound of international communication between America and China, we may imagine the diplomacy of the leaders and the exchanges of the students. Nevertheless, the essential communication comes from the ordinary people who are the root of the country. Film tends to be more popular media to make
Americans and Chinese know each other, which makes the film subtitling translation more important.

Nowadays, Chinese films sweep European market, while European films hit China, in the process of which translators play a dispensable role. Therefore, in order to transmit the culture and make the globe to be an “earth village”, film subtitling translation is supposed to be a powerful impetus.

This paper aims to expound general considerations in film subtitling translation under translation adaptive conversion theory from language, cultural and communicative dimension.

2. Cases Study on Basis of Translation Adaptive Conversion Theory

“Translation adaptive conversion theory”, put forward by professor Gengshen Hu, is a new ecological translation theory, which guided by the basic thought of “adaption/choice” doctrine in Biological Evolution written by Darwin. Professor Hu pointed translation as the choice of translators answering to translation ecological circumstance which means the world presented by the source language, that is language, communication, culture, society and the integration of author, reader and consignor.

2.1 Adaptive conversion in language dimension

Adaptive conversion in language dimension means although translators are invisible, they carry the responsibility to bridge the movie and the audience. Therefore, film subtitle translation requires the adaptive conversion in language style, rhetorical feature and sentence structure[2]. Examples as follow:

II
1) Excerpt from *The Flowers of War*

“都怪我!” “怎么能怪你呢？” “我看就是怪你。”

“It is my fault!” “It is not your fault.” “It is your fault.”

It is noticed that the second sentence is disjunctive question. However, its real purpose is to convey negative meaning. If the literal translation “How can it be your fault?” were adopted, it to some extent would break the sentence structure. The above translation version not only convey the purpose of the speaker, but also maintain the uniform sentence structure and style[^3].

2) Excerpt from *The Big Bang Theory*

So, how do you feel? Nice and loose? Come to play? Got your game face on?

感觉如何？严阵以待？一鼓作气？士气如虹？

This sentence is what Penny says to cheer for Leonard and Sheldon, when they prepare to enter the physics bow. If the literal translation “放轻松” “准备好了吗?” were used, we would fail to feel the expression effect that the competition atmosphere is so fierce that the audience immerse in the competition. And here, four-character phrase is typical Chinese[^4].

### 2.2 Adaptive Conversion in Cultural Dimension

Adaptive Conversion in Cultural Dimension means that translators focus on the transition and explanation of cultural connotation in the process of the translation[^5]. There exist many differences between Chinese culture and American culture, which is reflected in characters. The dialogues in film show the particular cultural connotation of one nation, therefore, in film subtitling...
translation, translators are required not only to concentrate on the language conversion of the source language, but also to adapt to the whole cultural system and to pay attention to the transition of cultural connotation between two languages\textsuperscript{[6]}. Examples as follow:

1) Excerpt form *The Flowers of War*

南京死了这么多人，阎王都来不及收。

So many people have died, even the hell is packed.

Chinese believe that one after death will go to Yinjian accept the trial from Yan Wang. In western country, the Christians claim that the evil will be punished in hell after Armageddon. The hell (or Yinjian) is viewed as the place that the souls exist after the death of people. Therefore, “the hell” and “Yinjian” share the similar meaning in different culture.

2) Excerpt from *The Big Bang Theory*

(1) No guts, no glory, man.

人有多大胆，地有多大产。

“No guts, no glory” is a folk adage. if literal translation were used, it would be “没有勇气就没有荣耀”， which is very awkward-sounding. In fact, the translation version “不入虎穴焉得虎子” has been perfect. However, the above translation no doubt closely connect the TV series and the Chinese audience, making the expected effect of comedy.

(2) We need a fourth for our team.

我们队现在三缺一。
This conversation occurred on the occasion when Leonard invited his colleague Leslie to join their contest of physics bowl. “三缺一” is also a common saying, representing an occasion when there are three persons while playing mahjong (one kind of entertainment in China) demands four persons. Now, it can be used to refer that the absence of people leads to the failure to continue an event. Hence, this translation version is a stroke of genius enough to make the audience in China, a country with the popularity of mahjong, resonate with American audience.

3) Excerpt from *Black Books*

Fran: If I told you that wall of my flat were actually moving in, would you think I was strange?

弗兰：如果我告诉你，我公寓的墙壁确实在移动，你会不会认为我在异想天开。

Bernard: No, I’d ask you to come round and look after my small children.

伯纳德：不会，我会让你和我的孩子一起玩。

This conversation occurs on the occasion when the host moves the wall of Fran’s flat to diminish the room area. Fran tells his doubt to Bernard while the latter mocks at her rich imagination through the words ‘ask you to come around and look after my small children.’ This plot is typical English humor, therefore, Chinese may have difficulties in understanding it immediately. Two parties in different cultural backgrounds hold different reaction to the same humor. Western-style humor is showed in direct way, which reflects their cultural
features of pursuing individualism and liberation; while Chines-style in tactful way, embodying cultural ideology that do not do unto others what you would not have them do unto you.

2.3 Adaptive Conversion in Communicative Dimension

It is useless for the message to fail to the function of communication. The final target of every language is for communication. To a large extent films depend on the dialogues of actors or actresses, which can reflect the characteristics of actors and the unique function of communication. Adaptive Conversion in Communicative Dimension means translators focus on whether the communicative purpose of the original text is expressed in translation version or not[^9]. Examples as follow:

1) Excerpt from The Flowers of War

(1) 当兵的躲在这里，算什么东西！

But if he hides here, he is a coward.

Here, the speaker misunderstands the soldier with the belief that he is scared of the death, the sentence of “算什么东西” is about to show the scorn of the speaker. The translation version “coward” conveys the communicative purpose in a better way.

(2) 我们要珍惜我们的命。

Life is a sacred gift.

In Chinese, there are many sentences embodying the word “要”, such as the city slogan “我们要做文明的城市人”. Chinese are accustomed to this kind of
expression which can be seen as a caution. However, if literal translation were used, it would be unavoidable to utilize ‘should’ ‘need’ and other modal verbs. For example, “We should be civilians in the city”. Foreigners can not understand this kind of expression for which the original dialogue means the kind remind and care, while the translation version feels like an order. Foreigners may ask, “Do we behave like barbarians?”

In the film, students would rather die than perform for the Japanese with the choice of committing suicide. The speaker aims to persuade them to give up the negative thought. Therefore, “Life is a sacred gift” perfectly convey the communicative purpose: cherishing the life.

2) Excerpt from The Big Bang Theory

A well-known folk cure for insomnia is to break in your neighbor’s apartment and clean.

失眠的灵丹妙药就是闯到邻居家打 扫。

This conversation occurred at the occasion when Sheldon accidentally found that Penny messed her house up beyond his endurance, so he helped do the clean when Penny fell asleep. Leonard thought that the behavior of his roommate is inappropriate, so he booed Sheldon. The translation “灵丹妙药” wonderfully delivered the communicative purpose, sneering at Sheldon.

The process of film translation can be seen as an integrated whole among translator, source language and audience. Moreover, translator - translation of film subtitle, playing a central role, must make adaption and conversion in
language dimension, cultural dimension and communicative dimension on basis of the characteristics of film subtitle and the acceptability of the audiences.

3. Conclusion

This paper analyzes the translation strategies of *The Flowers of War, The Big Bang Theory* and *Black Books* based on translation adaptive conversion theory through which we can achieve the adaption and conversion in language, cultural and communicative dimension. Professional film subtitling translation requires first the knowledge of both Chinese and American culture. Second, the ability to create a version available to common audiences proves to be the quality of most successful translators.

4. References


