



Analysis of the Translation Characteristics of Movie Subtitles in the Perspective of Functional Equivalence Theory

Taking *The Grand Budapest Hotel* Movie Subtitles As an Example

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Abstract. With the development of media, movies are gaining more and more attention as a way of cultural communication. The translation of movie subtitles plays an important role in assisting people to better understand the culture and the delivery values, which has become an essential part of the translation field. The research goal of this thesis is to analyze the subtitle translation characteristics of the movie *The Grand Budapest Hotel* by applying Eugene A. Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory and combining it with translation strategies. The thesis further explores the positive impact and practical implications of the functional equivalence theory on subtitle translation. It was found that this movie accommodates the functional equivalence theory requirements in a comparatively flexible approach. The functional equivalency theory efficiently avoids the cumbersome language and format of subtitle translation in terms of the core structure of movie subtitle translation. Nida's functional equivalence theory contributes to the elimination of cultural disparities in terms of the underlying meanings of movie subtitle translation. From the perspective of the main function of movie subtitling, the application of functional equivalence theory facilitates the audience to be synchronized with the movie content.

Keywords: functional equivalence theory, domestication, foreignization, translation strategies, subtitle translation.

1 Introduction

1.1 Research Background

The initial exploration of movie subtitle translation in China appeared in the early 20th century. However, with the development of "Chinese dubbed film" in the late 1940s and the prevailing lack of education in China, subtitle translation in China declined gradually [1]. Since the 21st century, the rapid growth of the Internet, the enrichment of social life, and the improvement of the audience's linguistic abilities [1]. People began to watch movies as a major entertainment and a way of connecting with the world.

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So far, the position of movie subtitle translation in Chinese translation studies has been rising increasingly. Nowadays, subtitle translation is emphasized by researchers as an emerging field in translation studies.

1.2 The Properties of Movie Subtitles and the Characteristics of Translation

Time and space constraints limit the “diversity, popularity, and immediacy” of movie subtitle translation [2,3]. The functional equivalence theory of Eugene A. Nida is highly useful for subtitle translation. Subtitle translation requires not only the translator’s subjective interpretation, but also the use of effective translation strategies. For example: domestication or foreignization of the source text, omission of specific vocabulary, amplification of translation to reduce linguistic differences, etc [3]. It is the combination of these three aspects that can render the source text more in line with the linguistic style, linguistic conventions and linguistic connotations of the target text, minimizing the gap of differences in cultural exchanges in order to ensure a widespread audience for movie subtitles.

1.3 A Brief Plot of The Grand Budapest Hotel

The Grand Budapest Hotel is a film that takes place in Europe during the fascist government of the 1930s to 1960s and tells the story about Gustave, the hotel manager of this hotel [4]. Gustave always took care of the millionaire Madame D, a frequent visitor to the hotel, who left a famous painting to Gustave in her will after her death. This triggered an aggressive reaction from Madame D’s son. He assigned an assistant to arrest Gustave and attempted to retrieve the painting that Gustave had taken. Consequently, Gustav and the lobby “Zero” are forced into the struggle for Madame D’s family legacy. They begin their escapade, during which pursuits, escapes, and other intricacies keep coming [4].

2 Literature Review

2.1 Functional Equivalence Theory

Eugene A. Nida is an American linguist and translator who has been devoted to Bible-related translations as well as helping to translate the Bible into many languages [5]. In the translation of the Bible, he summarized a brand-new, systematic translation method by combining linguistics, sociology and other fields of study: dynamic equivalence. In the early stages of his research, Nida first introduced the concept of “formal equivalence”. Formal equivalence requires that the target language and the source language be as completely equivalent as possible. This suggests that in order to guarantee the accuracy of the translation and its faithfulness to the source language, the two are standardized in all areas of syntax, structure, and vocabulary during the translation process. However, the limitation of “formal equivalence” is that this requires the reader should

be familiar with both the source and target languages' cultural backgrounds and linguistic qualities. The audience does not usually be aware of other languages, which causes textual comprehension barriers for translation.

After recognizing the problem, Nida improved the theory of equivalence. He further introduced the theory of "dynamic equivalence" on the basis of "formal equivalence" [6]. His interpretation of "dynamic equivalence" is: "The fundamental aspect of dynamic equivalence is to ensure that the reader's emotional and psychological responses to the text in the target language are the same as those in the source text, based on formal equivalence" [7]. It means that the translator needs to focus on the identity of the reader in the translation. Readers are not familiar with the cultural background of the source language, so translators should make the appropriate linguistic adjustment for localization in translation. For instance, effective translation and omission of parts that are difficult to understand. Dynamic equivalence is more flexible in translation than formal equivalence. Translators are expected to have a comprehensive knowledge of both languages and cultures.

Since then, in order to simplify the distinction, Nida has formally re-titled "dynamic equivalence" to "functional equivalence". Functional equivalence can be categorized into semantic equivalence, paradigmatic equivalence, and stylistic equivalence in the application of translation studies [8]. Functional equivalence theory has also been widely practiced in movie subtitle translation. Movie subtitles require a shorter and more efficient target language than translations of books, newspapers, and periodicals: Subtitles should not be too lengthy or tedious [9]. At the same time, the optimum duration of subtitle display is less than 6 seconds. Otherwise, it will interfere with the audience's appreciation of the main image [9]. The formal requirements of functional equivalence and the appropriate and flexible translation choices can be effectively applied to movie subtitle translation.

2.2 Translation Strategies

American translation theorist Lawrence Venuti presented the translation strategies of domestication and foreignization. When a language gets domesticated, it means that it uses the target language as a foundation. The translation needs to adjust the structure of the source language to adequately adapt to the linguistic habits and cultural characteristics of the target text. To some extent, Domesticated translation adapts to the reading habits of readers. Therefore, it can effectively overcome the barriers to understanding and the gap caused by cultural differences. Additionally, domestication increases the spread of the source text in a country or region. Throughout the Chinese translation studies, Yan Fu's translation of *The Treatise of Heavenly Evolution* exemplifies the domestication translation approach. Yan Fu made some additions or supplements to the language of the source text to assist Chinese people in better understanding and absorbing the biological theories in the source text [10].

The goal of foreignization is to preserve the most similarities between the source text and the target language. When translating, keep the differences and peculiarities of the source language in order to show the cultural aspects of the source language. The

benefit of the foreignization translation strategy focuses on reflecting cultural differences, revealing regional and national traits, and showing a particular linguistic style. Meanwhile, the translation strategy of foreignization immerses the reader in another cultural context. That develops readers who are unfamiliar with another culture to create curiosity about different countries, and also helps readers who are more familiar with each other's cultures to create more comfortable reading contexts [10].

In movie subtitle translation, the translation strategies of domestication and foreignization are more demanding to be used in application and conversion. Because the features of movies are generally a reflection of a particular culture, language, and society. Therefore, movie subtitles bring audiences not only with simple information communication, but also with cultural exploration of different countries. One of the most significant aspects of the successful communication of culture is the use of translation strategies of domestication or foreignization. The goal of movie subtitle translation is to accurately convey the essence of the source text and at the same time reduce cultural conflicts by considering the characteristics of the original language.

3 The Grand Budapest Hotel Movie Subtitle Analysis

3.1 Semantic Equivalence

Semantic Equivalence is related to culture-loaded terms, which emphasize how the target text and the source text's lexical meanings match. Concerning equivalency, Semantic Equivalence is categorized into three parts: non-equivalence, partial equivalence, and full equivalence [11]. Full equivalence is impossible due to variations in language cultures and systems, and the different histories of human languages. Nida also points out that part of speech restricts the fluency of translation [11]. Although different vocabularies and sentence structures are different, the deeper connotations of the text are the same [11]. Therefore, when translators translate movie subtitles, they should appropriately adjust the definition of words to ensure translation accuracy. For the target language is Chinese, the source movie subtitles can be considered to be translated into Chinese idioms, local dialects, or even Chinese popular words.

Example 1:

Source Text: I had established a casual and bantering familiarity with the hotel's concierge a West-continental known only as Monsieur Jean.

Target Text: 我开始和来自西欧的饭店经理插科打诨、称兄道弟，我知道他叫尚先生。

The writer in the movie explains of the first time he visited the Grand Budapest Hotel: At this time the hotel was in the off-season, with only a small number of guests in residence, while everyone remained separate and indifferent from each other. So the writer developed a friendship with the hotel manager. Subtitles use the translation strategy of domestication and translate the phrase "casual and bantering familiarity" into the audience's familiar Chinese idiom "插科打诨" (a general term meaning humorous

language and gestures). The word “称兄道弟” (it means to address each other as brothers.) was also added to express the close relationship between the writer and the hotel manager. These two idioms also match the atmosphere of humor that is revealed to the audience throughout the movie.

Example 2:

Source Text: Yet here, in his own nearly empty hotel, he occupied a servant’s quarters?

Target Text: 可是在他自己门可罗雀的饭店里，他却只住在服务生房间。

Monsieur Jean, the manager of the hotel, gave the writer an explanation of Zero Moustafa, the proprietor of the Grand Budapest Hotel. The strange thing about Mr. Moustafa - he prefers to stay in a room with only a single bed that doesn’t have a bathroom included. In the subtitles, the phrase “nearly empty hotel” has been using translation strategy of domestication by the translator into the famous idiom of “门可罗雀” to describe a deserted hotel. This helps the reader to create intense contrasts and arouse their interest in the plot of the movie. At the same time, here’s the foreshadowing of this movie. The second half of the movie progressively explains why Zero Moustafa is keen on this room.

Example 3:

Source Text: So keep your mouth shut, Zero. -Yes, sir.

Target Text: 所以你要守口如瓶。——是的，先生。

Zero Moustafa has just joined the Grand Budapest Hotel as a Lobby Boy. Mr. Gustave told Zero about the work of the Lobby Boy and the requirements. He reminded Zero that a Lobby Boy needs to know each guest’s preferences and to keep the guest’s secrets and privacy. “Keep your mouth shut” doesn’t have a literal translation to the Chinese word “闭嘴” (this word is impolite in the Chinese context and people can feel offended). The translator adapts the translation strategy of domestication here to “守口如瓶” (that means the mouth is like a tightly capped bottle, indicating that no words are spoken). This idiom has a creative metaphorical meaning that accurately expresses the basic requirements for a Lobby Boy’s job. It is also in accordance with the concierge Gustave’s character traits of shrewd sophistication and rigorous seriousness in the movie.

3.2 Paradigmatic Equivalence

The definition of paradigmatic equivalency is the similarity in sentence structure and grammar between the source and destination languages [12]. There are some differences between the grammatical structure and expression of sentences in English and the format of Chinese. If the differences are ignored, literal translation of English subtitles will lead to problems such as confused phrases or incomplete components. Therefore, when translators translate the source text, they are required to pay attention to

adjusting the language sequence, and grammatical structure. For example, translators divide some English clauses and appropriately combine some short phrases [13].

Example 4:

Source Text: The identity of the owner of the hotel was unknown to all of us. Each month, his emissary, known as Deputy Kovacs, arrived.

Target Text: 我们没人知道饭店老板的身份。代理人柯瓦兹每个月会来一次。

This sentence is Zero's way of explaining his work routine to the audience. In addition, he provides the revelation that the true owner of the Grand Budapest Hotel was unknown at the time. The translator puts the attributive "unknown" and the object "to all of us" in the first half of the sentence. The Chinese translation is "我们没人知道" which is more in line with the sequence of the Chinese language. The last sentence arranges the adverbial of time "Each month" in the latter part of the Chinese-translated sentence, explaining the identity of Kovacs in advance. By properly modifying the source text, the Chinese audience will understand this sentence without doubt.

Example 5:

Source Text: There's really no point in doing anything in life, because it's all over in the blink of an eye... And, the next thing you know, rigor mortis sets in.

Target Text: 人生根本没什么意义，因为一切都是过眼云烟，转眼就成了一具僵硬的尸体。

Gustave is informed of Madame D's death and he decides to go to her funeral. This is what Gustave said to the Lobby Boy Zero on the train. He said that Madame D had a premonition that she was soon to pass away as well as the fact that Madame D had a bunch of hypocritical relatives. Gustav thus inspired his feelings about life. Instead of translating "really no point in doing anything" word by word, the translator simply simplified it to "根本没什么" (this just means "nothing at all" in Chinese). This avoids the complexity of the words used in the translation. The translator also paraphrased "over in the blink of an eye" as "过眼云烟". In Chinese, it means smoke that passes in front of the eyes, and is later used as a metaphor for things that are unworthy of concern. Additionally, the translator deleted the phrase "the next thing you know" and used "转眼" to connect the phrases. This maintains the logic of the source text's causal relationship while ensuring a more fluent connection between the sentences.

Example 6:

Source Text: What on God's earth possessed you to leave the homeland where you obviously belong and travel unspeakable distances to become a penniless immigrant.

Target Text: 你是为了什么才离开你归属的家乡千里迢迢成为身无分文的移民。

Gustave escapes from the jail, but Zero, who comes to meet him, not only does not find a place for them to hide, but he does not even bring Gustave's favorite perfume to help clean up his smell. Therefore, Gustave got a little angry and complained to him

about why Zero has to be a Lobby Boy. The translators omitted the specifics of “on God’s earth” and translated it with the translation strategy of domestication as “你是为什么才离开”. The translator used two Chinese idioms in the paraphrased translating “travel unspeakable distances” as “千里迢迢” and “penniless” as “身无分文”. These two Chinese idioms correspond to each other. It can bring the Chinese audience a sense of couplet. However, the translator did not omit the subject clause led by “what” and the adverbial clause led by “where”. This method not only avoided the problem of obstacles in the translation but also preserved the structure of the source text.

3.3 Stylistic Equivalence

Different movies have different languages and artistic styles. It is communicated to the audience through the syntax, tone, diction and literary devices of the subtitle language [8]. In translation studies, the linguistic style of the source text is also one of the elements that constitute the target language [14]. The source text’s and the target language’s cultural stylistic uniformity are necessary for stylistic equivalency. To a certain extent, it preserves the linguistic and cultural traits of different countries. In the translation of movie subtitles, the translator should use the translation strategies of domestication or foreignization to the source movie subtitles, so that the audience in the target language can have emotional empathy with the source subtitles.

Example 7:

Source Text: Keep it spotless and glorify it. Take extra special care of every little-bitty bit of it as if I were watching over you like a hawk with a horse whip in its talons, because I am.

Target Text: 让这里依旧完美无瑕，为之增光，请格外注意所有的小细节，因为我就像一只老鹰，爪上抓着马鞭监视各位。

Gustave was in jail because he was falsely accused of killing Madame D. He asked Zero to bring letters to the staff of the Grand Budapest Hotel. In the letter, Gustave states that even though he is in jail, he wants everyone to keep the hotel in order. The translator divided the sentence “Take extra...its talons”. At the same time, “because I am” is placed directly at the beginning of the sentence in the Chinese sentence structure, translating into “因为” to link the causal relationship. Using the translation strategy of domestication of “spotless and glorify it” into “完美无瑕，为之增光” fits Gustave’s traits of linguistic rigor and elegance and high personal authority. Meanwhile, it is consistent with the source text of the movie that used humor to depict the scene of Gustave’s unfortunate encounter.

Example 8:

Source Text: Call the police. We’re pressing charges.

Target Text: 叫警察，我要告他。

At Madame D’s funeral, the lawyer announced that Madame D had requested in her will that the valuable painting Boy with Apple be given to Gustave. This caused

Madame D's son, Dmitri, to be extremely dissatisfied. He told the people who came to the funeral that Gustave was a criminal. The translator takes a concise and literal translation of this subtitle. The Chinese translation is “叫警察，我要告他” to show Dmitri's ambition to monopolize the inheritance. The translation way adapts to the tension and conflict in the movie plot.

Example 9:

Source Text: Plus a change, am I right?

Target Text: 万变不离其宗，对吧？

The movie ends with Gustave and Zero and Agatha, the pastry chef at Mendl's bakery, taking the train to Lutz again. Zero is still being searched for documents because of his immigration background. Gustave the special travel authorization once reserved for Zero to a firing squad officer to check out. He tries to help Zero pass the inspection by saying this sentence to relieve the tension. The translator did not translate “Plus a change” as “加上一个变化” in Chinese. By combining the cultural background and the context, the translators used the translation strategy of domestication and translated the phrase into “万变不离其宗” which means that the exterior has changed but the essence remains the same in Chinese. Represented in the movie as whenever immigration documents need to be reviewed, it also implies that Zero's identity cannot go through.

4 Conclusion

The functional equivalency theory developed by Eugene A. Nida has a positive impact on movie subtitle translation. The subtitles of the movie *The Grand Budapest Hotel* completed a proficient transformation and application of the theory. The theory of functional equivalence combined with the domestication and foreignization translation strategies can effectively reduce the cultural gap and conflict due to cultural differences. Audiences can have a clear understanding of the language and meaning of the source text through more appropriate movie subtitle translations—further fulfillment of the “emotional empathy” requirement of the functional equivalence theory. From the perspective of translation studies, translators should become proficient in the concept of functional equivalence and apply translation strategies. Subtitling is convenient for the distribution of movies from different countries in various regions and enhances the audience's experience. In the future, it will further promote regional cultural exchanges and increase the value of humanities and arts.

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