

Relevance Theory in Subtitle Translation

--A Case Study on the American TV Series *Desperate Housewives*

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Abstract

As an embranchment of translation, subtitle translation has its own features and constraints. Thus, specific translation strategies need to be adopted in translating the subtitles. This thesis will give an in-depth analysis to the strategies of subtitle translation from the perspective of Relevance Theory. With a case study on the subtitle translation of the American TV series *Desperate Housewives*, a conclusion is drawn that Relevance Theory is a favorable theoretical guidance in subtitle translation.

Keywords

Relevance Theory; Subtitle Translation; *Desperate Housewives*.

1. Introduction

In modern society, globalization means the closer and closer relationships among countries around the world in terms of economy, politics, and culture and so on. Audiovisual products (AV), such as TV series, movies, which take up a large part of the culture in a country, are inevitably being transferred as a way of cultural communication. Owing to this, subtitle translation emerges as the times requires. Actually, AV, as a direct, efficient and influencing cultural communication, has found its way to people's daily life and becomes more and more popular. So is its by-product---subtitle translation, which is getting more and more attention from translators. Machine aided translation is no doubt a good choice to be used in subtitle translation. As is proofed by the scholar Wangshuhua and Liying: artificial intelligence enabled translation technology provides basic and global technical support for subtitle translation[1]. However, there is still a big gap between machine aided translation and human translation; only by combining the advantages of the two, can the development prospect of machine subtitle translation will be broader[2]. What machine translation cannot achieve still needs to be studied persistently. With a case study on the subtitle translation of the American TV series *Desperate Housewives*, this paper attempts to explain translation strategies that can be used in subtitle translation from a perspective of Relevance Theory. After a sufficient analysis, this paper concludes that Relevance Theory is a favorable theoretical guidance in subtitle translation.

2. Relevance Theory and Subtitle Translation

2.1. A Brief Introduction to Relevance Theory

Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson give a definition to relevance in their book *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*. It is defined as:

Every act of ostensive communication communicates the presumption of its own optimal relevance. [3]

"Ostensive communication" means that every speaker intends to make itself understood in the communication; while for the "presumption of its own optimal relevance", it can be understood from two aspects:

- a) The set of assumption {I} which the communicator intends to make manifest to the addressee is relevant enough to make it worth the addressee's while to process the ostensive stimulus.
- b) The ostensive stimulus is the most relevant one the communicator could have used to communicate {I}. [3]

From what mentioned above, we come to know that the speaker will always try its best to tell the hearer its intention by giving enough information. Actually, this information constructs the contextual background, through which the hearer processes what the speaker says and obtains the most information.

To further demonstrate this point of view, Gutt puts forward a formula:

$$\text{Relevance} = \text{contextual effect} / \text{processing effort} [4]$$

This formula shows that when the processing effort stays unchanged, the relevance becomes bigger while the contextual effect gets strong; however, when the contextual effect stays unchanged, the relevance becomes smaller while the processing effort gets more. And the optimal relevance refers that the hearer understands the speaker with the least effort since the contextual effect is the strongest.

2.2. A Brief Introduction to Subtitle Translation

2.2.1. Definition of subtitles

Subtitles are textual versions of the dialogues spoken in films and TV series, which are usually displayed at the bottom of the screen. This is just the general definition of subtitles. A more detailed and accurate definition will be from Georg Michael Luyken, who defines subtitles in this way, "subtitles are condensed written translations of original dialogues which appears as lines of text, usually positioned towards the foot to the screen, subtitles appear or disappear to coincide in time with the corresponding portion of the original dialogue and are almost added to the screen image at a later date as a post-production activity" [5].

2.2.2. Features of subtitles

According to Qian Shaochang, an experienced subtitler in China, who has made a practical research on audiovisual translation, AV languages have five distinctive features.

- 1. Listening.** Listening means that subtitles are received through hearing while translations of text are read through eyes.
- 2. Comprehensiveness.** Comprehensiveness refers that subtitles are always spoken out accompanied by expressions and movements of the actors. Differently, translations of text are just words on the paper.
- 3. Instantaneousness.** Subtitles on the screen are changing non-stop as the dialogues of the actors are flowing. But translations of text are fixed on the paper, readers are allowed to resume to them without limits.
- 4. Popularity.** As we know, watching audiovisual products is an entertainment for all sorts of people, regardless their age, gender, status and social backgrounds. Such a feature requires that subtitles should be popular.
- 5. No notes.** Notes are often seen on literary translation as a help for the reader to acquire background information. Yet translators should be careful enough to add notes to the subtitles since they will slow down the viewer's reading speed. [6]

Professor Qian does give a deep insight to the features of AV languages. As a sort of AV language, textual subtitle covers the last four features.

2.2.3. Technical constraints of subtitle translation

In virtue of the distinctive features, there inevitably exist technical constraints in the process of subtitle translating. According to Professor Li Yunxing, the technical constraints are as follow.

1. Time constraint. The translated subtitles should be shown on the speed at which the dialogue is spoken and this speed needs to accord with the viewer's reading speed, usually two or three seconds.

2 Space constraint. Translated subtitles should be limited to one or two lines with restrained number of words or characters. [7]

2.3. Subtitle Translation under Optimal Relevance

With regards to the distinctive features of the subtitle and the technical constraints of the subtitle translation, it is necessary that translators should adopt Optimal Relevance in translating subtitles, since it can instruct translators to create the strongest contextual effect so that the audience is able to understand the subtitle with the least effort and enjoys the TV series, movies and so on.

3. An Analysis of the Subtitle Translation of the TV Series *Desperate Housewives* in the Light of Relevance Theory

The following analyzed subtitles are extracted from the subtitle exchange website (www.shooter.com.cn) [8] and my transcription from the DVD, which are mainly translated by the YDY subtitle team (伊甸园字幕组) and the FR subtitle team (风软字幕组).

As mentioned previously, we have come to the presumption that translated subtitles should be short, simple but informative enough so as to help the viewers obtain the information of the dialogues in the minimum time. Now we will see how the translators, based on the features of the subtitle and the constraints of the subtitle translation, complete their subtitle translating job of the TV series *Desperate Housewives* under the framework of Optimal Relevance.

3.1. Implicit information to explicit information

Subtitle translation, like any form of translation, is conducted between two different languages. As is known to us all, every language has its unique way of using habits. Therefore to translate the dialogues straightly into the subtitles sometimes is unacceptable. Since the aim of subtitle translation is to help the viewers obtain the information in the minimum time with the least effort, the translators has to resort to the translation method of changing the implicit information to explicit information. Here is the example.

Example:

Victor: You didn't have any fun?

你玩得不开心?

Gabrielle: It was okay. You know, you told a few good jokes. You're sorta charming. You're not bad-looking. I just think I can do better.

还好啦, 要知道, 你讲了几个不错的笑话, 也蛮有魅力的, 长得也不赖, 但我觉得应该还能找到更好的。

Victor: Have you not noticed? I'm a catch.

你没有注意吗? 我可是个好对象。

Gabrielle: I have noticed, and I'm throwing you back.

我注意到了, 但我不想要。

Victor: Gaby, let me tell you something. For my whole life, whenever I've truly wanted something, I've always gotten it. And tonight, right around the time you were

calling me a manipulative jerk, I decided I truly want... you. So brace yourself. The chase is on.

Gaby, 告诉你吧,我这一辈子,要是真想要什么东西,就一定能得到。今天晚上就在我叫我“操纵狂”的时候,我更坚定了想.....要你。做好准备吧,追求已经开始了。

Gabrielle: You can chase me all you want, but trust me, I'm way too fast for you.

你想追当然可以追,但是相信我,你是追不到我的。

This dialogue happens at the dinner between Victor and Gabrielle. Victor is an arrogant man, so arrogant that Gabrielle refuses to go on dating with him by saying "I just think I can do better". To translate this sentence straightly into "我想我可以做得更好" is just to confuse the viewer. That why the translator chooses to give the sentence an explicit translation "我觉得应该还能找到更好的". In the following, analogously, the translator translates these two sentences "I'm throwing you back" and "I'm way too fast for you" into "我不想要" and "你是追不到我的" so as to make the viewers easily catch the idea of the dialogue.

3.2. Domestication

Under the framework of Optimal Relevance, the purpose in the whole subtitle translation process is to help the audiences easily understand dialogues and merrily appreciate the AV products. To realize that goal, translators always prefer to use the translation strategy of domestication. There are two indications that show translators apply domestication to their translating process: the frequent use of four-character words and phrases and the adoption of dialectal lexis.

3.2.1. Adoption of four-character words and phrases

Four-character words and phrases is a feature of Chinese writing, dating back to the ancient Chinese literary culture, lasting till today, and about to flourish in the future. Almost every Chinese is familiar with them. Undoubtedly, the frequent use of four-character words and phrases facilitates the viewers' reading process of the subtitles. Therefore, they can focus more of their attention on the moving pictures.

Example:

We all carry something with us.

Of course, it's nice if we travel with someone,
who can lighten the load.

But usually, it's easier to just drop what we have been carrying,
so that we can get home that much sooner.

Assuming, of course,
there will be someone waiting to greet us when we arrive.

Why do we clutch at this baggage,
even when we're desperate to move on?

Because we all know that there's a chance,
We might let go too soon.

我们都在负重前行。

当然能结伴同行会很幸福,

有人帮助分担重负。

但通常抛掉负担会更简单,
这样我们就能早日归家。
设想着,当然,
有人在家迎接我们的归来。
为什么仍然有人抓住行李不放,
即使我们不顾一切地向前看?
因为我们都知道,有的机会,
也许我们放弃得太快。

These are the monologues of the heroine – Mary Alice. Acting as a dead woman, she appears in every episode only by her voice, voice commenting what are happening among the ones she knows. It is a very important voice in *Desperate Housewives*, revealing to the audiences the inner world of the characters and the truth of life from the imaginatively expended sight of a dead person. Often, these dialogues are smoothly and calmly spoken by Mary Alice. To evoke tender resonance from the heart of the viewers, translators frequently match the original texts by adopting corresponding four-character Chinese expressions. For sure, this method is positively effective. Not only are the four-character words and phrases concise and to the point of the dialogues, they also conform to the Chinese syntactic structure, which helps the audiences more easily catch the information of the dialogues, as is required by the time-space constraints of subtitle translation.

3.2.2. Adoption of dialectal lexis

As two individual languages, English and Chinese both have their own dialectal lexis that is informal and oral, which are the characteristics of the dialogues in *Desperate Housewives*, since it is a series centered on domestic affairs. However different in forms, some dialectal lexis in both language may still share the same meaning. In such situations, it might be a good choice for the translators to adopt some Chinese dialectal lexis rather than render the source language into the target language word by word, because to read expressions of one's own cultural conventions, for the audiences, is much easier than to read those of other cultural conventions.

Example:

Lynette: How much of her crap do I have to put up with? First, it's the little drop-bys. Then she's inviting herself to dinner three times a week.

我还要忍受她多久?开始 只是随便串串门,然后就是一周三次不请自来地蹭饭。

The “she” in the above dialogue uttered by Lynette refers to Nora, who has an illegitimate daughter with Lynette's husband - Tom. After Tom admits and would like to take some responsibility of raising the illegitimate daughter, Nora takes this chance to intrude into his family. But Lynette can not stand by it and resists Nora's unexpected arrivals. Finally she pours out to Tom. That is how the above dialogue comes from. “Drop-bys” shares the same meaning with the dialectal Chinese expression “串串门”, so to translate it into “串串门” is very acceptable. “蹭饭”, according to Modern Chinese Dictionary, means “to have free meals by taking a certain chance”[9]. Thus to make such a translation vividly shows Lynette's anger, at the same time it is adapted to the Chinese conventions. Definitely, these familiar dialectal expressions pose no difficulty for the audiences to appreciate the moving pictures on the screen.

3.3. Addition

Every series, just like every novel, is set in some certain cultural background. Inevitably, there are culture-loaded words that we might meet. Since culture-loaded words are a way for the specific audiences to know about the other culture, the subtitler can not just replace them by the superficial meaning. For this reason, the translator turns to the translation strategy of addition.

Example:

Ian: Good evening, gentlemen.

晚上好,先生们。

Tom: Ian!

Ian!

Mike: Hey... Ian.

嗨.....Ian。

Ian: Nice to see you, Mike.

很高兴见到你,Mike。

Carlos: What is fish-and-chips doing here?

这英国佬跑来干什么? (**FISH AND CHIPS**, 炸鱼薯条, 英国快餐, 全球闻名)

Ian is a stranger to the brotherhood. His unexpected appearance at the poker game just makes everyone uncomfortable. Since he is an English, Carlos calls him “fish-and-chips”. To make the metonymy clear so that the viewers can catch up with the pots of the series, explanatory information is added.

3.4. Summary

Looking through all the translated subtitles in *Desperate Housewives*, the translation strategy of changing the implicit information to the explicit information is most adopted, and then is the strategy of domestication, and then addition. Whichever translation strategy is adopted, translators hope to create the strongest contextual effect for the audiences so that they can understand the dialogues with the least effort and have enough time to appreciate the pictures.

4. Conclusion

Subtitle translation, like other kinds of translations, observes the general translation theories, yet, with its unique features and constraints, it attaches more attention to the informative function of the subtitle, which demands particular translation approaches. By conducting a specific research on the subtitle translation of the concrete case *Desperate Housewives*, this thesis proves the applicability of Optimal Relevance in the process of subtitle translation.

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