

Subtitling in Audiovisual Translation from the Functionalist Perspective

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Abstract. Nowadays, watching films is an effective way of enhancing culture communication and exchange. In order to help the audience appreciate foreign films easily and understand the foreign cultural elements clearly, audiovisual translation is researched extensively. With a view to improve the quality of English-Chinese audiovisual translation, functionalist theory can be applied to audiovisual translation. In addition, subtitling aims at pleasing the audience in the most unconstructive way. The proper translation principle and strategy for audiovisual translation are determined by their respective purposes. However, there is no perfect translation; audiovisual translation is a purpose-clear translation action involving different strategies.

1. Introduction

Audiovisual work, as one of the effective ways of entertainment, also carries the function of cultural communication. It affords audience opportunities to understand the foreign culture just as other types of literary works. When appreciating a film or TV play, audience enjoy a journey to get to know the foreign elements in the audiovisual work. Thus audiovisual translation is expected to fulfill the communication and entertainment purpose of audiovisual works.

In 1970s, Katharina Reiss put forward a model of translation criticism based on the functional connection between source and target texts. At the same time Reiss pointed that there do exist situations “where equivalence is not possible and in some cases, not even desired” and there are “certain exceptions from the equivalence requirement” (Nord, 2001). One exception is when the target text intends to achieve a different communicative function from the source text. Another exception is when the target text faces the audience different from the intended readership of the original. Later, Hans J. Vermeer, a student of Reiss, defined translation as a purposeful human activity that takes place in a given situation. Vermeer uses “skopos” as the technical term as the aim or purpose of a translation. One important factor determining the purpose of a translation is the intended receiver or audience of the target-text. According to Skopostheorie, every translation is directed at an intended audience, since to translate means to produce a text in a target setting for a target purpose and target addressees in target circumstances (Vermeer, 1989).

Functionalist has three basic rules: the skopos rule, the coherence rule and the fidelity rule. Skopos rule is the most influential part of German functionalist translation theory. Skopos rule requires that the purpose of translation decides the translating action. The purpose of translation is that translation will work in the target language context and culture according to the target language recipients' expectation. Translation purpose determines the translation process, which is the highest rule among the three rules. The coherence rule means the target receiver should be able to understand the target text, which should make sense in the communicative situation and culture where it is received. The fidelity rule states that there must be coherence between the target text and the source text. It requires translation should be faithful to the source text. Of these three rules, the top-ranking role for translation is Skopos rule. Thus translation action under the perspective of functionalist places skopos at the first place in the process of translating.

2. Functionalist Translation Theory in Audiovisual Translation

2.1 Audiovisual Translation

Different kinds of discourse reflect different linguistic characteristics, which consequently leads to various principles and strategies. Commercial films are produced for the purpose of entertainment and profitable box income. Business films demand catering to the taste of the public – need to be orally and easily digest. Artistic films are quite characteristic and featured by director's own pursue of the art. In order to fulfill these different purposes of audiovisual works, translator's task is to apply suitable principles and strategies of translation, to provide audience with the clear and concise translation. However, no matter what genre a film belongs to, and what linguistic characteristic it has, there must be a clear purpose for its translation. And it is translator's task to ascertain and apply the suitable principles and strategies to reach the purpose.

As for the application of the functionalist theory in audiovisual translation, the translator should bear in mind the end purpose in the process of translating. The translator must help the audience with well-translated content, which can contribute to good understanding of what is happening on the screen and create a smooth communication between the film and the target audience. At the same time, the translator should achieve the goal of audiovisual translation, namely, to help the target language audience understand the plot.

2.2 Subtitling

Films have specific functions such as entertainment, cultural exchanges, education and so on, but the success of a film is determined by the popularization among audience. The mass audience plays the most important and crucial role in developing of audiovisual works. In audiovisual translation, the foremost goal is to make films understood, entertained and appreciated by the mass audience. Subtitling, as an audiovisual translation form, is quite popular and necessarily a target-oriented activity. Compared with dubbing, the audiences of subtitling are those who have better understanding of foreign language and culture. They are willing to learn more about foreign culture. Therefore, the purpose of subtitling is considered to facilitate the comprehension of foreign film by remaining the exotic elements but not alter the enjoyment of audience. It should be done in a way that does not require extra effort to understand the plot and achieve optimal translation quality and maximum viewer acceptance. For the purpose of helping target audience understanding and appreciating the film better, the linguistic and cultural aspect in subtitling should be taken into consideration.

3. Strategies of Subtitling

3.1 Domestication and Foreignization

Audiovisual translation is a mode of intercultural exchange. With regard to the cultural factors in the process of translating, two fundamental strategies are always under discussion: domestication and foreignization.

These two ways of translation was put forward by Lawrence Venuti, the American translation theorist. "Domestication means bring the foreign culture closer to the reader in the target culture, making the text recognizable and familiar"; and "foreignization, on the other hands, means taking the reader over to the foreign culture, making him or her see the cultural and linguistic differences" . (Venuti, 1995) In his definition, the two strategies are directed by the translator's cultural attitudes. Domestication refers to a translation strategy in which a transparent, fluent style is adopted in order to minimize the strangeness of the foreign text for target language readers. Foreignization designates the type of translation by retaining something of the foreignness of the original.

In view of the special characteristics of film language and translation, when dealing with linguistic discrepancies in audiovisual translation, translators may employ the strategy of domestication to ensure naturalness, vividness and easy comprehensibility of the translated dialogues. However, when

handling cultural discrepancies, the translators may turn to the foreignization for the sake of more efficient cultural exchanges.

Here are some examples of American Sitcom *Friends*:

1) Monica is standing there wrapped in a towel, with her hair stuck in the shower curtain.

Monica: Well, I was dancing around, and singing “No Woman, No Cry” and I got stuck.

莫妮卡：好吧，我唱着《No Woman, No Cry》跳舞……然后就挂住了。

2) Monica: Do you have a plan?

Phoebe: I don't even have a 'pl'.

莫妮卡：你有计划么？

菲比：我八字还没一撇呢？

3) Chandler: My diary! My diary, that's brilliant. I should have told her it was my diary; she never would have made me read her my diary.

Monica: You know, that's true. You'd be a great person to have around the day after an emergency.

钱德勒：我的日记！太聪明了。我应该说那是我的日记，她绝对不会逼我念我的日记。

莫妮卡：那倒是真的，你很适合在突发状况的第二天放马后炮。

4) Rachel: So un, what are you guys doing for dinner tonight?

Joey: Well I guess I gotta start savin' up for Ross's birthday, so I guess I'll just stay home and eat dust bunnies.

Phoebe: Can you believe how much this gonna cost?

瑞秋：你们晚上吃什么？

乔伊：我该为罗斯的生日存钱了。我的菜单是在家里吃西北风。

菲比：这个得花多少钱啊？

From the above examples, we can find the subtitles are full of familiar Chinese expressions such as: 挂住了，八字没一撇，放马后炮，西北风. All of the translations meet the needs of humorous lines, as well render clearly expression of original dialogue.

Translation should be expressed in a manner which yields the intended interpretation but not put the audience to unnecessary processing effort. In subtitling, domestication and foreignization are both helpful for cross-culture communication. What strategy is suitable for the translation is determined by the audience's English level and the purpose of subtitling.

3.2 Implicit and Explicit Information

Another factor concerning the strategy for language re-creation in subtitling is the translation of implicit and explicit information. Sometimes the translators translate all the words in the source text and pick out necessary information for a denser expression, but the subtitle seems totally irrelevant to the whole situation.

Examples from the film *The Day After Tomorrow*

1) What were you thinking?

(译文一) 你脑子里在想什么呢？

(译文二) 你疯了么？

2) –Six to eight months? That can't be.

–That time scale isn't in months. It's in weeks.

–六到八个月，不可能。

(译文一) –那个时间不是按月来计算的，是按周。

(译文二) –不是八个月，是八个星期。

In the first example, ‘你脑子里在想什么呢？’ is a question expecting an informative answer. However, the original question is to express the speaker's blame and care, rather than expecting any answer. For this purpose ‘你疯了么’ is a better translation in target language. However in the second example the implicit information is making explicit ‘不是八个月，是八个星期’，that is

the indirect references is made direct. In film dialogues, when there is a deeper meaning underlying the superficial one, to identify the implied meaning can always facilitate the audience's understanding, as the above examples show.

4. Summary

From the perspective of functionalist theory, audiovisual translation is a purposeful activity. Skopos is the nucleus of the functional translation theory. The task of the translator is to produce a new text which can meet the cultural expectations of the receivers on the basis of the source-text, with a specific function. The traditional theories regard the source text as the starting point for complete translation which is required to completely reproduce the original. While functionalist theory involves a top-down procedure in translation, all the translation actions sever the purpose of translation.

According to the features of film language and constraints in audiovisual translation, audiovisual translation needs compromise and decision-makings. There are translations more adequate to the purpose of audiovisual translation task, but not ideally perfect ones universally. Different translation purposes for the same source text translation produce different results. In order to translate purposefully fulfilling the purpose of translation, certain principles and strategies should be followed in the process of audiovisual translation. Besides, special emphasis should be put on cultural difference. As a specific translation category, audiovisual translation is a purpose-clear translation action. Thus the translation strategies under the rules and principles of functionalist theory will be more suitable for language re-creation in audiovisual translation.

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