

# An Analysis of the Translation of Cultural Connotation in the English Film Subtitles

Jianhua Sun<sup>1,a</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Foreign Language, Dalian Neusoft University of Information, Dalian, Liaoning Province, China

<sup>a</sup>sunjianhua@neusoft.edu.cn

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**Abstract:** A language always contains cultural connotation, and serves for it during the process of communication. English and Chinese are different in their cultural backgrounds and developments. Therefore, in translating English subtitles into Chinese, the translation may be different from the original in their meanings and styles even if the language is translated correctly. The paper tries to analyze and discuss the features of translating the cultural connotation of English film subtitles and analyzes the practices of translating English film subtitles for representing the cultural connotation in translating English film subtitles, which is of great significance for the translation practice. To represent the cultural connotations, the translator should focus on the effect and the response of the audience for understanding and appreciating cultural connotations in target language instead of the literal translation of the source language, in which the functional equivalence between the source language and target language can be achieved.

## 1. Introduction

Translation has been conducted for a long time, especially in literature works; however, the translation related to films has not been conducted until in recent years. With more and more cultural exchanges between China and western countries, a large amount of films have been imported and exported for the audience worldwide. And the translation of films plays a more and more important role in the field of translation, and more studies are being carried out on film translation. [1]

Compared with literature translation, film translation experiences a relatively short history. As for subtitles translation, there are few theories to instruct the translation practice, and it is mainly based on experiences and understanding of the translators, which is in great shortage compared with the ever growing number of practices of translating English film subtitles into Chinese.

## 2. Features and Connotation in Film Subtitles

Subtitles are textual versions of the dialogues or comments in films, television programs, video games, and the like. They are usually displayed at the bottom of the screen. They can either be a form of written translation of a dialogue in a foreign language or a written rendering of the dialogue in the same language, with or without added information to help viewers who are deaf and hard-of-hearing to follow the dialogue, or people who cannot understand the spoken dialogue or who have accent recognition problems. [2]

Connotation is a commonly understood subjective cultural or emotional association that some word or phrase carries, in addition to the word or phrase's explicit or literal meaning, which is its denotation.

Connotation is frequently described as either positive or negative, with regards to its pleasing or displeasing emotional connection. Different countries form their own unique cultures with their long histories of development, and the cultures are mostly presented by the languages. [3] Therefore, the functions of cultural connotation should be presented in the target language to achieve the functional effects of the source language.

### 3. Cultural Connotation in Translating Film Subtitles

Culture is a complicated concept discussed by many scholars, who come out with different versions of definition. With the cultural connotation, the characters in the film are granted with vivid characteristics and cultural backgrounds, which is more appealing to the audience. However, cultural connotation is hard to figure out in another language, which is presented in different ways, like idioms and proverbs, similes and metaphors, or some expressions with specific referential meanings. [4] All these materials with cultural connotation require the translator with abundant knowledge about source language and society, as well as the awareness to cultural connotation. [5]

It is true that there are a lot of differences between English and Chinese due to their histories and development. As languages, English and Chinese share common foundations in essence, which makes the equivalence at lexical level feasible in translating English subtitles into Chinese. One important aspect lies in lexemes.

#### 3.1. Adding Components

The syntaxes of English and Chinese vary greatly in many aspects. In order to achieve similar effect to the source language, sometimes it is necessary to add some words or expression in the translation. For example, in English, when a word or phrase appears in the context for a second time, it is usually omitted in case of repetition or wording, especially in the answers to question, like “Yes, I am” or “I do”. However, in Chinese, sometimes the same word or phrase may appear for several times for completing the sentence or to emphasize the tone. Therefore, it is necessary to add the omitted the parts in translating the subtitles into Chinese accordingly.

Jenny: I wish I could've been there with you.

珍妮：我真希望那时和你在一起。

Forrest: You were.

阿甘：你是和我在一起的。

----Forrest Gump

The Chinese translation of “You were” by Shooter.cn is “你是的” (You were), which is quite confusing to the audience. With such translation, the audience cannot understand what Forrest Gump really means, and therefore the Chinese translation has lost the cultural connotation of the English conversation. In the conversation, Jenny hears the experience of Forrest, and she wishes she could have had been with him to experience all the beautiful scenery. Since Forrest was always thinking of Jenny while experiencing all the scenery, he tells her “you were with me there”. In the sentence “I wish I could've been there with you”, Jenny applies the subjunctive mood to express her wish for the past. In Chinese there is no correspondent mood with the same effect. Therefore, in translating it into Chinese, the words “那时” are added so that the audience can understanding it is the wish for the past. By using the subjunctive mood, Jenny conveys a strong pity for not being with Forrest in the past. To achieve similar effect, the word “真” (really) is added in front of “希望” (wish) to achieve the strong feeling. Since “with you there” has been said by Jenny, Forrest omits it without causing any misunderstanding. When it is translated into Chinese, the omitted part should be added to make it complete, and be translated into “你是和我在一起的”. And with this approach, it also emphasizes the strong emotion of Forrest to Jenny with the repetition of the previous words.

#### 3.2. Deleting Components

In English, the sentence structures follow certain rules, with which some words are necessary to make the sentences complete, such as some pronouns, articles and auxiliary verbs. However, the Chinese sentences attach little importance to these words, and therefore, they need be deleted while being translated into Chinese according to the needs of Chinese sentences.

Forrest: I don't know if we each have a destiny, or if we're all just floating around accidentally—like on a breeze.

阿甘：我不知道我们是否有着各自的命运，还是只是随风到处飘荡。

----Forrest Gump

The sentence is translated into Chinese by Shooter.cn as follows, “我不知道是否我们每个人都有注定的命运，还是我们的生命中只有偶然像在风中飘。” In the English sentence, the word “accidentally” which means “by chance, as the result of an accident”, is used to emphasize the uncertainty of life. And the phrase “like on a breeze” is a simile, means life of each person is like a feather which can be taken anywhere by the breeze. In the Chinese translation, “偶然” and “像在风中飘” reflect the same meaning with different expressions, and become wordy in Chinese. Therefore, it is not necessary to keep both of them. With the translation “随风”, it not only conveys the meanings of “accidentally” and “like on a breeze”, but also deletes the unnecessary components in Chinese.

### 3.3. Changing Components

English and Chinese sentence structures share some common grounds in the declarative sentences and imperative sentences, but they also differ greatly in interrogative sentences and exclamatory sentence. Therefore, the orders of the sentence components may be changed in order to achieve the functional equivalence.

Sarah: She has your laugh.

萨拉：她笑得真像你。

Lennox: She laughed?

雷诺士：她笑了？

Sarah: Her first one, yeah.

萨拉：她第一次笑呢。

----*Transformers*

FRM Fansub has translated the first sentence into “她有你的微笑”. The translators has translated the sentence directly in the English sentence structure, which is not only hard to understand, but also inconsistent with Chinese habits of expressing ideas. In English, when we discuss the appearance, look, or personality of a child, we usually compare them with those of the parents. If they are similar in one aspect, we will usually say, “He/She has your eyes/nose/laugh”. In translating such sentences into Chinese in subtitles, if we translate that literally like “她有你的眼睛/鼻子/微笑”, it will be confusing the audience. Therefore, some parts of the sentence structure are needed to change. The sentence “She has your laugh.” can be translated as “她笑得真像你”. With the changing some parts of the sentence, the translation renders the original meaning and appeal of the source language.

### 4. Conclusion

The cultural factors in film subtitles lead to the differences which block the understanding of films, however, they share much in common, which means the functional equivalence can be found. Therefore, when translating English film subtitles into Chinese, the translator should pay enough attention to cultural connotation in different languages.

In the process of translating English film subtitles, one of the greatest barriers is the translation of cultural connotations. As the direct reflections of a certain cultural features, the translation of cultural connotations plays a very crucial role in understanding the contents of the English film and English culture. This thesis has proved that under the framework of the Functional Equivalence theory, the problem of the losses of cultural connotation in the translation of subtitles can be handled through the translator’s choices of different translating methods, as is evidenced by the examples used to illustrate the translation of cultural connotations in this research. To represent the cultural connotations, the translator should first fully understand the source language from literal meaning to the implied cultural connotation, and then find out the equivalence with similar functions, and focus on the effect and the response of the audience in target language in translation instead of the literal translation of the source language.

It is no doubt that translation of cultural connotations in English film subtitles is of great importance to cross-cultural communication. With the active efforts of translators, the barriers in

cultural translation will, to a large extent, be overcome. And the translation of English film subtitles will play a more important role in the cultural exchanges between China and English-speaking countries.

With these issues to be considered in the further study, the study of cultural connotations in English film subtitles is supposed to be widespread, which will surely bring more benefits to language development and cultural communication.

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