



# Study on Variation in the Subtitle Translation of Films with Revolutionary Themes in Terms of Audiences' Reception

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**Abstract.** Film subtitle translation is of great significance for the outward publicity and dissemination of films, and audiences' reception of a film indirectly reflects the popularity of its subtitle translation. To maximize the target audiences' acceptance, translators may adopt some strategies or methods to enable audiences to understand information and culture behind lines with ease. Under the guidance of translation variation theory, this paper analyzes the variation in the subtitle translation of *The Battle at Lake Changjin* from the perspective of audiences' reception, including translation plus rewriting, translation plus explanation and selected translation, which might help remove barriers to foreign audiences' understanding, providing suggestions and methods for the subtitle translation of films with revolutionary themes in the process of going globally.

**Keywords:** films with revolutionary themes · subtitle translation · translation variation · variation methods · reception

## 1 Introduction

The Fifth Plenary Session of the 19th Central Committee of the CPC proposed the strategic task of developing a strong socialist culture in China. Therefore, it is pivotal to broaden the channels of spreading Chinese culture. The recent years have witnessed the continuous development of China's film-making industry, and more Chinese film productions have gone international.

Films play a vital role in promoting Chinese culture abroad. However, due to the differences in languages and cultural backgrounds, it is not easy to make Chinese culture understood by foreign audiences through films. So subtitle translation is extremely critical since translated subtitles can help target audiences get information in a short time and meet the needs of them to appreciate the original movie since foreign audiences' recognition of subtitle translation influences a film's promotion.

Belonging to mainstream films, films with revolutionary themes inevitably bear the important task of promoting revolutionary culture and Chinese culture. But there are some problems existing in the subtitle translation of films with revolutionary themes such as word-for-word translation, mistranslation and redundancy, which make subtitle translation strange and stiff. However, the film *The Battle at Lake Changjin* sets a good example. Translation variation methods are found to be fully reflected in its subtitle translation in order to make the translation authentic and easier to be understood, thus the subtitle translation can be accepted by target audiences.

Therefore, under the guidance of translation variation theory, this paper analyzes how variation methods applied in the subtitle translation of *The Battle at Lake Changjin* to improve the quality of the subtitle translation and then lead to audiences' reception of it, providing reference for the subtitle translation of films with revolutionary themes.

## 2 Translation Variations in Film Subtitle Translation

### 2.1 Translation Variations in Brief

Translation variation theory is a relatively completed theoretical system that reflects the regular nature and law of translation variation. Its definition is given by Huang Zhonglian: Translation variation theory is a theory aimed at deriving the contents concerned from the original text by means of addition, deletion, compilation, narration, condensation, combination and adaptation in the light of special needs of specific readers under different conditions [1]. Huang believes that translation variation can be understood from three aspects: first, it is relative to full translation and is one of forms of translation; second, the translator absorbs the main idea or one part of the original text to meet the special needs of readers through variation; third, translation variation is an objective translation activity with 12 variation methods [2].

Translation variation theory has identified eight adaptation techniques of addition, deletion, edition, narration, condensation, combination, adaptation and imitation, which constitute twelve translation methods in translation variation: selected translation, edited translation, narrated translation, condensed translation, summarized translation, summarized translation plus comment, translation plus comment, translation plus writing, translation plus explanation, translation plus rewriting, translation plus quotation, and translation plus imitation [3]. Huang Zhonglian believes that these variation methods empower translators to meet specific needs of readers [4].

The ultimate goal of translation variation theory is to make the target text satisfy the specific needs of different readers as much as possible. This requires a translator to use his wits to show high-level translation skills and unique creativity, and apply the approach of adaptation flexibly to maximize and optimize the translation version on the basis of meeting readers' requirements, producing a rendition of having key information and eliminating redundant contents.

### 2.2 Difficulties and Requirements of Film Subtitle Translation

Subtitlers must consider that viewers have to read the written subtitles at a given speed while watching the images at the same time. The constraining nature of the subtitling

environment has always been discussed, leading scholars in the past to label it as an example of ‘constrained translation’ [5].

Even though there is no absolute uniformity in the way subtitles are timed and positioned on screen, certain trends do enjoy a fair amount of currency and validity. Because of their intrusive nature, the idea that subtitles should attract as little attention as possible is deeply rooted in the industry. In practice, this means that they are typically pushed off to the bottom of the screen and displayed horizontally, having a maximum of two lines in a subtitle so as to minimize their impact on the image.

The other dimension that plays a crucial role is the temporal one. An easy convention for viewers to be able to identify who is saying what consists in timing the subtitles in such a way that they keep temporal synchrony with the utterances. Whenever possible, a subtitle may appear on screen at the precise moment the person starts speaking and leave the screen when the person stops speaking.

As with any other type of translation, subtitles are expected to provide a semantically adequate account of the original dialogue but with the added complication that they must at the same time respect the spatial and temporal specifications discussed above. One of the immediate and most visible results of these constraints is that the written subtitles tend to be nearly always a reduced form of the oral speech.

A good movie cannot be created without an excellent subtitle translation, which is not only a process of language conversion, but a process of transplantation between different cultures [6]. Subtitle translation is to build a bridge between two different cultures and achieve the goal of mutual understanding [7]. Naturally, excellent subtitle translations can improve audiences’ reception.

### **2.3 Variation in the Subtitle Translation of Films with Revolutionary Themes**

The essence of translation variation lies in the word “variation”, which refers to adaptation. Not bound by the regular strategies of complete translation, the translator brings his initiative into full play to adjust messages for reader’s demands. So when translators consider readers as center, the variation of the text is necessary.

Audiences’ understanding and reception are the starting point and destination of films’ subtitle translation, which is true for films with revolutionary themes. So when translating this kind of films, translators may focus on the needs of target audiences to make the subtitle translation meaningful. Films with revolutionary themes contain more cultural connotations, social background and historical knowledge than ordinary films, making it difficult for audiences to understand and accept the subtitle translation. Besides, as a way of promoting Chinese revolutionary culture, audiences’ reception of translated subtitles exerts great influence on the spread of culture. It is of paramount importance to resolve common problems and enable target audiences to understand the content in a short time by meeting their specific needs, so as to improve their reception of translated subtitles and effects of cultural communication.

Therefore, translation variation theory whose emphasis is on readers’ needs coincides with the audience-oriented subtitle translation of films with revolutionary themes. Its application in the subtitle translation of films with revolutionary themes is conducive to tackling common problems, improving the quality and finally leading to audiences’ reception of the subtitle translation.

### 3 Methodology

In the quantitative research, statistical analysis is adopted to know what variation methods are used in the subtitle translation of *The Battle at Lake Changjin*. In the qualitative research, 6 examples of the film are analyzed in detail to explain the application of variation methods in its subtitle translation.

#### 3.1 Statistical Analysis

Figures and achievements are found out and summarized to explain the popularity of the film and audiences' recognition of its subtitle translation. Then, 20 min of the film's subtitle translation is selected and analyzed sentence by sentence to count how many variation methods are used, and the statistics of the whole film is predicted.

Recently, the total ticket sales of the film have reached 902 million including 3 million abroad, successfully ranking as the No.1 in China's film history. Besides, the film wins 20 awards, has 38 nominations and receives many external reviews. In Internet Movie Database (IMDb), 95 user reviews of the film are presented, and most of users gave high evaluation. Compared with other films with revolutionary themes, *The Battle at Lake Changjin* is a great success in promoting revolutionary culture.

Through analysis of foreign audiences' reviews, no one doubted the translated subtitles and felt confused about the plot, which indirectly indicates that foreign audiences can follow and understand the film with the help of the translated subtitles. Besides, when searching "the subtitle translation of *The Battle at Lake Changjin*" in China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), 8 papers are presented that analyze the subtitle translation of the film from different perspectives, proving the value and quality of its subtitle translation. Therefore, it can be concluded that the subtitle translation of the film is received and recognized by most foreign audiences.

The film *The Battle at Lake Changjin* lasts for 177 min. 20 min from 00:21 to 00:41 of the film is selected to analyze the variation methods applied in the subtitle translation. The following table lists out sentences that use variation methods.

From Table 1, it is evident that among 12 translation variation methods, 7 variation methods are applied in the selected 20 min' subtitle translation, which helps to predict that the statistics of the whole film's subtitle translation of using variation methods is about 35%. Besides, translation plus rewriting, translation plus explanation, selected translation and narrated translation are used more frequently.

#### 3.2 Text Analysis

Based on the translation variation theory, 6 typical examples are analyzed which use translation plus rewriting, translation plus explanation and selected translation to solve common problems in the subtitle translation of films with revolutionary themes.

Translation plus rewriting is to localize the source language for target readers. It adopts expressions customarily used by the target readers to better convey the meaning contained in the source language, which can avoid mistranslation.

Example 1: We are in the same boat.

**Table 1.** Translation Examples and Corresponding Variation Methods

<b>Examples</b>	<b>Variation method</b>
a) The U.S. Army marched north and crossed the 38th Parallel.	translation plus quotation
b) We are in the same boat.	translation plus rewriting
c) A heavy blow will deter a hundred more.	selected translation
d) Send a telegram to Commander Peng explaining that Kanggte and the Lake Changjin should be taken care of by Song Shilun's 9 <sup>th</sup> Corps.	selected translation
e) You are really something.	translation plus rewriting
f) Wu Qianli, What are you doing?	translation plus explanation
g) We just triumphed over the entire nation. Before we even had time to rest...	narrated translation
h) Why? Are you shy?	translation plus writing
i) So my brother will take me seriously.	translation plus rewriting
j) He's too serious. Stop teasing him.	narrated translation
k) Come on, little brat.	translation plus rewriting
l) How's that?	narrated translation
m) Don't grab for a weapon.	translation plus explanation
n) You must regain the respect you lost on your own.	translation plus writing
o) Salute! At ease!	translation plus imitation
p) You're a seasoned comrade.	translation plus explanation
q) An egg that's been cracked from the outside is destined to be eaten. If you can crack the egg from the inside, you might be an eagle.	translation plus explanation

Analysis: The literal translation “The teeth will feel cold without lips” will make target audiences confused. Therefore, it is necessary to adopt English expressions with the same meaning in Chinese to help foreign audiences receive information.

Example 2: When this war is over, he will become my godson.

Analysis: In this example, the Chinese word is embedded with strong Chinese characteristics and thus hard to find its equivalence. It means men who are loved by non-relative elders for various reasons, while “godson” means a child that a godparent promises to be responsible for and to teach about Christian religion. Therefore, the word “godson” is close to the meaning of the Chinese word.

The above examples convey that sometimes translators have to change the original form or partial content, and replace the original text with equivalent expressions in target language so that the translation become more understandable and acceptable.

As we know, some Chinese words and sentences such as old sayings and connotations can't find their English counterparts. As a result, translators explain meanings of them to help target audiences understand rather than using word-for-word translation.

Example 3: I hope our next generation no longer has to live through war.

Analysis: The phrase in the source text is often used in China to describe a time when wars rage on. If it is translated literally as “the Age of Smoke”, foreign viewers may understand it as the age with smoke and feel confused. Why should the next generation live in an age where there is no smoke? So, the translator translates what the film actually tries to convey—the age of smoke refers to the war.

Example 4:

TT: An egg that’s been cracked from the outside is destined to be eaten. If you can crack the egg from the inside, you might be an eagle.

Analysis: This sentence is a good reflection of the Chinese people’s good quality of taking their initiative to challenge themselves. For them, being passive only gets the beat, and they need to be indomitable like the eagle. It is in this way that audiences can better understand the meaning of the line.

The translation of such lines can use translation plus explanation to translate its metaphorical meaning into the English language. When hoping to make target audiences understand the meaning of imageries in Chinese context and accept translated subtitles, translators can use translation plus explanation.

It is advisable that films fit into the guideline of language refinement and improve the readability of subtitles. Selected translation means translating only the refined points of the original information and even complete omission with no translation [8]. It reduces vocabulary as well as phrases to avoid redundancy.

Example 5:

TT1: Throw out one punch now to avoid a hundred punches in the future.

TT2: A heavy blow will deter a hundred more.

Analysis: The first translation follows the form of the original text and repeats “punch”. The second one substitutes “blow” for “punch” and replaces the second half of the Chinese sentence with “a hundred more”. By doing so, the core information is precisely conveyed and the length of the English subtitle is more suitable.

Example 6:

TT1: Some shots must be fired. Some shots can be saved.

TT2: Some shots are necessary, but some are not.

Analysis: The second translation uses “necessary” to cover the meaning of “must be fired” and uses “not” to replace “saved”, making it more concise and simpler.

It is easy to find that the Chinese language is concerned with paired phrases, which is difficult to be reproduced perfectly in the English context. Besides, the length of English sentences is slightly longer than that of Chinese sentences. Therefore, for audiences’ preference and reception, it is not only necessary to translate the meaning of the original sentence accurately, but also to avoid repetition and redundancy [9].

## 4 Results and Discussion

The results are concluded from the statistical analysis and text analysis of the subtitle translation of *The Battle at Lake Changjin*, and some suggestions are also referred for the subtitle translation of films with revolutionary themes in the future.

First, Table 1 shows that many variation methods are used to solve common problems and make the translation easier to be accepted, indicating the significance and practicality of applying variation theory in this kind of film's subtitle translation. The analysis of selected 20 min' subtitle translation deduces the statistics of the whole film, which supports the guidance of translation variations on the whole film.

Second, Table 1 also tells us that translation plus explanation, selected translation, translation plus rewriting and narrated translation are used more frequently than other variation methods, which can provide guidance on selecting variation methods for the subtitle translation of films with revolutionary themes and offer new perspectives for the research of translation variation theory.

Third, the text analysis further demonstrates the guidance of translation variation theory on the subtitle translation of films with revolutionary themes. Translation plus rewriting is used to avoid word-for-word translation when dealing with Chinese idioms and words with strong Chinese characteristics; translation plus explanation is applied to avoid mistranslation when coping with words and sentences which have specific meanings in Chinese context; selected translation is employed to address redundancy when faced with repeated expressions.

To sum up, translation variation theory plays a crucial role in the subtitle translation of films with revolutionary themes, which provides a new perspective and thinking mode on the relationship between films with revolutionary themes and audiences for us. The application of variation methods can effectively improve the acceptability of the subtitle translation of films with revolutionary themes, which is a new research direction for the subtitle translation of films with revolutionary themes.

## 5 Conclusion

To improve cultural soft power and promote the spread of Chinese revolutionary culture, the subtitle translation of films with revolutionary themes must be attached great attention. Therefore, the paper aims to study variation methods in the subtitle translation of films with revolutionary themes in terms of reception.

Main conclusions are as follows. First, the feasibility of applying variation methods in this kind of films is pointed out through connecting the core of variation theory with the ultimate goal of the subtitle translation of films with revolutionary themes. Then, the statistical analysis shows that variation methods are found to be used frequently in the subtitle translation of *The Battle at Lake Changjin*, which is beneficial to other films to produce excellent subtitle translation. Under the guidance of translation variation theory and in light of reception, translation methods are mainly translation plus explanation, selected translation, translation plus rewriting and narrated translation. Last, the text analysis proves the guidance of variation theory on the subtitle translation of films with revolutionary themes. The application of variation methods helps better convey cultural characteristics and connotations behind the source text, improves the quality of subtitle translation and empowers foreign audiences to accept messages, thus promoting cultural communication and exchanges.

The insights gained from this paper may be of assistance to the subtitle translation of films with revolutionary themes in the future, but also may be conducive to the future research of translation and variation theory.

With the rapid development of intercultural communication and the dawning realization of economic, political as well as cultural globalization, the subtitle translation of films with revolutionary themes will gather more attention and translation variations will play an increasingly important role in the subtitle translation of films with revolutionary themes.

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