



The Cognitive Equivalence in the Subtitle Translation of *The Pursuit of Happyness*

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Abstract. With the rapid development, the film market is growing bigger and bigger. How to transfer what the director and screenwriter want to convey in the film and let the people who are overseas comprehend it are becoming more and more severe. This paper aims to discuss cognitive equivalence used in the subtitle translation of *The Pursuit of Happyness* and deeply analyze how this application let different culture's people easily understand some special things which different between them. Guided by cognitive linguistic theories of Eugene Nida's dynamic equivalence theory and Sweller's Cognitive load theory, this paper will be divided into three dimensions: semantic equivalence, cultural equivalence, and cognitive load equivalence to showcase how *The Pursuit of Happyness* achieves cognitive equivalence and won a huge success in overseas box office. This paper finds several useful advises for film subtitle's translators, like try to obey meaning's dynamic equivalence, integrating into target language's culture and considering cognitive load.

Keywords: Cognitive; Equivalence; *The Pursuit of Happyness*; subtitle; translation

1 Introduction

The Pursuit of Happyness is a famous movie directed by Gabriele Muccino, and obtained numerous awards like Golden Globus's Nominations Award, Academy Award nominations. Besides the surface of the inspirational plot, *The Pursuit of Happyness* also explores the deep themes of personal growth, family responsibility and self-realization, which makes the audience deeply think about life, family and social problems [1]. Until April 4th, 2024, China box office of this film had gained 1,370,000 USD [2].

The translation of the subtitle is the most important thing to let the country people fully comprehend the theme. The cognitive equivalence is the best method to deliver the core of the movie. The good use of cognitive equivalence is the vital thing for the triumph of this movie in the Chinese market.

This paper will focus on the topic of subtitle translation in the cognitive equivalence aspect, trying to analyze its usage and find out how to let audiences who are in different countries get almost the same understanding and watching experience of the same movie.

Cognitive linguistics is a crucial part of literature, which, from a cognitive perspective, aims to make a consistent and holistic interpretation of language [3]. It is a cross-subject framework, which suggests that the language ability is rooted in humans' cognition, centered on meaning, and shaped by language usage [4].

There are four main proposals of cognitive linguistics: language is the conceptualization carrier, construal is the core cognitive operation, metaphor is the key mechanism, and semantics relies on encyclopedic cognition. To analyze a film's subtitle, another theory is also suited: the cognitive load theory. Cognitive equivalence theory covers all of this theory; therefore, this paper is going to analyze the cognitive equivalence in the movie *The Pursuit of Happiness*'s subtitle translation.

Based on the mentioned proposals and theories, this paper is going to be divided into three dimensions: semantic equivalence, cultural equivalence, and cognitive load equivalence. These three aspects complement and interact with each other, and their internal logic is highly consistent with the linguistic cognitive mechanisms expounded by Wang Yin in his Cognitive Linguistics Theory, jointly contributing to the success of *The Pursuit of Happiness* in the Chinese market [5].

2 The Cognitive Equivalence Showed in the Subtitle of *The Pursuit of Happiness*

According to the above analysis, this paper is going to research the film's subtitle translation around three dimensions: semantic equivalence, cultural equivalence and cognitive equivalence.

2.1 Semantic Equivalence

Eugene Nida proposed dynamic equivalence [6]. A major point of this theory is that meaning is priority, grammar and expressions can give way to it as if the target text is not convey the meaning appropriately. This can also explain the semantic equivalence. Therefore, the key things of semantic equivalence are focusing on the author's original meaning, which is conveyed by the words and sentences, rather than their grammar and literal meaning.

Here are examples in the movie:

Example 1: At 5 minutes and 56 seconds, Chris Gardner describes his portable bone-density scanner.

The original subtitle is: It gave a slightly denser picture than an X-ray for twice the money.

The translation is: 它比x光机显像更精确一点点, 但贵了一倍。

Here the original meaning of "denser" is to have higher density or to describe someone is stupid. The translators have not used denser's literal meaning, but translate it into "精确" (accurate). Denser do not have the meaning of accurate. Trying to let the Chinese audience grasp the meaning and understand the bone-density scanner, translators use accurate. The major advantage is that it showcases the feature of this machine, which is an accurate scanner. Therefore, the strategy of abolishing the literary meaning is a wise decision.

Example 2: At 43 minutes and 53 seconds, Chris explains why he was not properly dressed at the interview.

The original subtitle is: And I ran all the way here from the Polk Station, the police station.

The translation is: 我是从警差局...警察局一路跑过来的

Here, the situation is that Chris is at an interview. He feels nervous because of his inappropriate dress and long time rush, then he is stripped by tongue and utters a mistake word. Polk actually is a kind of dance or a surname, which has a similar pronunciation to police. If translators directly translate into a dance or a surname, it will let people from other countries who do not speak English be baffled. Thus, the translators choose another word that has a similar form and pronunciation to police to let the audience know accurately where Chris's mistake is. Although the translators omitted the word's meaning "Polk", they tried to keep the whole sentence's meaning at that situation and wisely substituted "Polk" with another word. It is a reasonable way to maintain the semantic equivalence.

In conclusion, translators use many ways to achieve semantic equivalence, such as transferring the word meaning, replacing words that are not commonly used in the target language or will cause confusion in the target language, and replacing some professional words with ordinary ones. Which will let different cultures audience have a similar understanding of the movie, and reduce the difficulty for foreign audiences to touch director's ingenious thoughts.

2.2 Cultural Equivalence

Cultural equivalence promotes intercultural understanding of indigenous concepts through intercultural communication, using appropriate "cultural substitution" [7]. There are many differences between Chinese and Westerners in their daily life habits and expressions. Thus, the subtitles also have many cultural differences that are not comprehended by the Chinese audience. To handle such difficulties, translators must possess a keen cultural sensitivity and profound cultural knowledge to maintain the cognitive equivalence.

Here are some examples:

Example 1: At 4 minutes and 35 seconds, Chris Gardner asks the kindergarten principal to clean the spelled incorrectly scrawl on the wall

The original subtitle is: And the Y? We talked about this. It is an I in "happiness". There's no Y in "happiness". It is an I.

The translation is: 幸福的"幸"写错了, 我说过的。是"幸", 不是辛苦的"辛"。

It is easy to see the translators' effort to let the Chinese audience understand this wrong spelling of happiness. In China, there are no English letters in a phrase, but Chinese ideographs. Therefore, the translators choose to transfer an ideograph of the phrase "幸福" to "幸福" to let the Chinese audience understand better the wrongness of this phrase in the film. In China, when the Chinese want to correct others' mistakenly used characters, they always use another character to make a word with this one to let the listener know their mistake. Just as this subtitle, Chris wants to correct the phrase "幸福", he uses "辛苦" to let the principal know he used the wrong word. The translators

correctly use Chinese way to showcase the wrong spelling rather than literal translation, which are more equivalence to Chinese audience cognition in culturally.

Example 2: At 19 minutes 31 second, Chris enters the Witter company's gate, he said:

The original subtitle is: I was waiting for Witter Resource head Jay Twistle.

The translation is: 我在等威特公司都人事部主管杰伊·托斯特尔

Resource here is an abbreviation; the full form is Human Resource Department. However, the translation did not translate directly into "人力资源部". The main reason is that different cultures have different cognition of enterprise's employees' management. Humans are seen as an exploitable and manageable resource in Western culture, and the operator puts a great emphasis on employee and company progress jointly. A Western company will give employees courses and guidance to help them promote productivity. This characteristic will later show in Chris's internship course vividly. However, in the Chinese job market, employees are seldom seen as a resource but as an object which need rebound and regulated. In China, employees should obey the regulations and try their best to fulfill the mission that the operator gave to them. Chinese companies may have the training and courses for them, but it is not widespread and well-known in Western countries. In summary, employees are seen differently in different cultures, and the name of managing an employee's department also different. For a Chinese audience who did not know this culture will be confusing to see the "resource department". Then, to achieve cultural equivalence, translators choose a homogeneous function but a different name in the department to let the audience have a similar cognition.

Here is another word, "head". The head's literal meaning is one of a human's organ which serves as the controller and decision maker. Here, the head is used as a metaphor to mean the guru of that department. The translators did not adopt the literal meaning of head, but they adopted the occasional words in China: director. Not only can it eliminate the different meanings, but also make it more fit to Chinese audience.

Example 3: At 55 minutes 36 seconds, Chris teaches his son Christopher to chase and protect his dream.

The original subtitle is: If you want something, go get it. Period.

The translation is: 如果你想要什么，就去争取，就是这样。

Period is a classic American oral word. When the word appears at the end of a sentence, it serves as a real period punctuation or a full stop, meaning the argument is certain and no place for argument. Also, it can give tone reinforcement, meaning the speaker has an absolute mind or decision that is not vague or easily to rock. Here, Chris uses the word period " to mean his argumentation is not to be rocked; he wants his son to remember his words and practice this. If the translator translates it into a punctuation (句号) or an amount of time (时期), the Chinese audience may be confused or, even worse, lead them to misunderstand. Therefore, the translators choose to explain the inherent meaning directly and at the same time promote the tone and definiteness to show Chris's absolute mind.

In conclusion, the translators try to achieve cultural equivalence by turning the means of expression into target language form, using the target language's connoisseur

words and explain the inherent meaning directly. Therefore, It is easily to find out that this movie's subtitle translation is marched with cultural equivalence.

2.3 Cognitive Load Equivalence

Cognitive load equivalence is one of the extensive concepts of cognitive linguistics. It can regulate and control the target context's form, eliminate the cognitive difference, and decrease the information processing difficulties. The cognitive load theory posits that human working memory capacity is limited, and the complexity of cognitive tasks and their presentation forms directly influence the load level. As a complex cognitive activity, translation requires load management that balances the intrinsic task nature with the extrinsic presentation form [8].

For movie subtitles, it has characteristics like time and space limits, oral, and time-liness comprehension needs. Therefore, how to perfectly and precisely translate while not let the audience put on huge cognitive burden on the audience can be a challenging task.

Here are some examples shown in the movie:

Example 1: At 8 minutes and 16 seconds, Chris wants his son Christopher to go to bed.

The original subtitle is: Let's get ready for bed. Hey, put your plate in the sink.

The translation is: 准备上床了, 把盘子放水池里。

In China, it is a common phenomenon of omitting the subject in a sentence to let sentence simpler and neater. Look at this sentence; if the translators adopt literal translation, then this sentence will have a subject. Grammatically, it does not have any mistakes, but it seems a little bit wordy and do not account for the Chinese audience's reading habits. It can be seen as the translators trying to achieve the cognitive load equivalence for the Chinese audience. Also, here Chris commands his son to go to bed. He uses short sentences, which have a more directive tone and are more suitable for this situation.

Example 2: At 9 minutes and 51 seconds, after Chris asks the man's job and the job's requirement who got out of a fancy car, that man and Chris begin their conversation

The original subtitle is: You don't have to. Have to be good with numbers and good with people.

The translation is: 不用, 只需要精通数字、善于交际。

The translators have made a concise and coherent translation by using the free translation and omitting the redundant component. They also use short sentences and cohesive devices to release the audience's cognitive load. The foreign audience could have the perfect watching experience, and get the same cognitive load as the native audience.

In conclusion, the translators omit the redundant words, use short sentences, and try to fit the circumstance to maintain the cognitive load equivalence. By those methods, audience are truly losing their cognitive burden and have a similar viewing experience.

3 Discussion

Through all the examples which are showed above, It is easy to find out how to reach cognitive equivalence in film subtitle translation.

Firstly, the film's subtitle should try to obey meaning's dynamic equivalence. Sometimes, translating the original language directly will confuse the audience. Subtitle translation is not merely a linguistic transfer but a complex process of multimodal meaning reconstruction, involving the dynamic interaction among language, image, sound, and other semiotic resources [9]. Therefore, film subtitles translators should use words more attached to the target language to avoid transferring the words' literal meaning. They should try to analyze what the screenwriter's original meaning of the subtitle is and select suitable words to transfer it appropriately and precisely.

Secondly, film subtitles should try to integrate into the target language's culture. Film subtitle translator should do their best effort to know how the target language's customs, like the vocation's name in the target language and the target language user's speaking habits. Only in this way can translations fill the gap in foreign audiences' knowledge of the original work and make the film content simple and easy to understand [10].

Thirdly, film subtitles should concern cognitive load. Sometimes, directly translating will let the sentence become long and bear very little meaning, which may let the audience feel bored and exhausted. Therefore, subtitle translation should streamline sentence structures, optimize word order, and align with target language cognitive patterns while maintaining semantic fidelity, effectively reducing cognitive load to achieve a balance between information completeness and viewing fluency [11].

4 Conclusion

This study focuses on the cognitive equivalence theory application in the movie's subtitle translation of *The Pursuit of Happyness*. By using three aspects: semantic equivalence, cultural equivalence, and cognitive load equivalence, it is easy to systematically analyze the cognitive equivalence expression and practical effects. From analyzing the examples, It is easy to prove that cognitive equivalence is an effective way to decrease cultural dilemmas and easily let people from different countries have a similar understanding of the same movie.

However, at the same time, the cognitive equivalence has limitations. If the original language has a tremendous cultural dilemma with the target language or the cognitive background is completely separate of those two languages, then the cognitive equivalence cannot work perfectly at those moments. For example, the quotations and the literary allusions. If the translators translate it into the target language's own allusion, then they lose the precision of the original language; If the translator wants to explain it, then the subtitle will cause a huge cognitive load to the audience. Therefore, translators can try to use minimal annotation. Write the most inclusive words of explanation of the mentioned allusion at the noticed and blank place (usually the top of the screen) to let the audience have a brief background understanding of that. It is an effective and easy way to solve this problem.

The cognitive equivalence is widely used in *The Pursuit of Happyness*, which decreases the threshold of foreign audience understanding and widely opens the foreign

market of this movie. Therefore, cognitive equivalence is an undeniable factor of the movie's huge triumph.

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