

Translating English Film Titles into Chinese - from the Perspective of Functionalist Translation Theory

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Received: 5 April 2022; Accepted: 25 April 2022; Published: 5 May 2022

Abstract:

A properly translated film title can not only brings economic benefits to its box office, but also enhances international influence of the film itself. The translation of film title in China has been traditionally linked to subtitle translations. And the rigid quest for loyalty to the original and careless neglect to the function and peculiarity of film titles greatly hinders the translation practice of film titles. Functionalist theories can help to guide and evaluate film title translation. This is illustrated by descriptive analysis of proper and improper translation cases. Emphasis is put on the analysis of the text type and skopos of a film title, the general features observed in film title, and the strategies which may be applied in film title translation.

Keywords:

German Functionalist Approach, Skopos, Film Title Translation, Translation Methods And Strategies

1. Introduction

With the fast pace of globalization, communications among people from different cultures have become more and more frequent and widespread. Among the international exchange, imported movies have found their way into the daily life of ordinary people. As the concentrated essence of a film, the translated film title, plays a significant role in the whole film, as the film title has direct impact on the film's box office. Currently in China's film market, the situation of film title translation is far from satisfactory. Therefore, the author aims to carry out a systematic and intensive study on English film title translation.

Some traditional translation practices fail to view film title translations as a separate branch from subtitle translations. As a result, loyalty to the original was once considered the only criteria for the best translation [1]; appropriate additions and simplifications were regarded as the secondary resort. And flexible translations were generally seen as a reluctant choice that rarely used. The rigid quest for loyalty to the original and careless neglect to the function and peculiarity of film titles greatly hinders the translation practice of film titles? [2] To change the situation, some

scholars had done some researches on this subject. They point out that commercial concern should not be neglected in film title translation. However, a consensus has yet been reached. So it is hoped that this article may make a difference by analyzing popular translated film titles through functionalist translation theory, hoping to demonstrate that the theory is feasible to guide film title translation.

2. Theoretical Framework

German functionalist translation theory has opened up a new approach for translation studies. To explore the possibility of applying functionalist translation theory to film title translation, it is necessary to know some specifics about it. The present author is not going to give a comprehensive description of all functionalist translation theory but only focus on the points related with film title translation.

As Reiss pointed out that the evaluation of translation cannot only focus on some specific aspects or parts. Instead, it should be started by defining the type of the text. According to Reiss [3], there are three types of texts: the informative text, the expressive text and the operative text.

The informative text focuses on the content, mainly about facts, knowledge and ideas. The language used in informative texts is simple, plain and logical. The expressive text mainly refers to creative works, which mainly involve creative structures and aesthetic value. As for the operative text, she holds that the major purpose of which is to encourage readers to do something, that is to say, to make readers to take some specific action through persuasion, dissuasion and requirement and so on.

In terms of Reiss's classification of texts, film titles mainly have the characteristics of two of the three different types of text, the expressive text and the operative text, because they have to be both creative and persuasive so as to attract readers to see the movie. At the same time a translated film title should not be misleading and therefore has certain qualities of the informative texts.

Another important factor that should be taken into film title translation is the "Skopos". Vermeer applied this word to the translation research and came up with the idea that the Skopos of the overall translational action is the most important factor influencing the translation process. According to Skopos theory, translation is an action based on source text and translator is an expert of translational action, taking in charge of the translation task and the translation. Any forms of translational action, including the translating itself, has an aim or a purpose. Moreover, one action can lead to a result, a new situation or event, even a new object. Under such a theoretical framework, the most important factor determining the Skopos of the translation is the prospective receivers of the translation, who have their own cultural background, expectation of the translation and communicative needs. Every translation is made up for a certain readers, so that translation is a discourse produced for some purpose and for certain receivers in the target language situation. Therefore, translation is no longer a simple transition from one language to another language, but the communication between different cultures [4].

As a commercial product, film relies heavily on its box office income. Determined by this nature, the ultimate aim of both the translation act and the translated version of film title is to call on domestic audiences to watch the film produced in a foreign culture.

3. The Difficulties in Film Title Translation

Generally speaking, the film title is the first thing that audiences learn about a film, for which it's no exaggerating to say that it serves as a name card. And at the same time it is also a kind of linguistic text with its unique characteristics.

Linguistically, film title is concise and pithy, and the use of rhetorical devices makes it more concise, vivid and attractive. Besides, since films are also a cultural carrier, recording every aspect of human culture, a large number of film titles contain culturally specific idioms, slang and allusions. All of these unique features make film title translation all the more difficult. On the one hand, a successful film title translation should be expressive so as to retain the original information contained. On the other hand it should be creative in meeting the requirement on the linguist features of film titles. At the same time it should make allowance for the expressive and operative function of attracting the audience to see the movie so as to realize its ultimate commercial goal and bring economic benefits to its box office. The essence of English movie title translation as described above can be illustrated through some examples of English movie title translation as follows:

The title of the film *How Green Was My Valley* is translated into a four-word phrase 《青山翠谷》, which improves the cultural and aesthetic function with its Chinese aroma, so as to be well accepted by Chinese audience;

Gone with the Wind, adapted from the novel with the same title. The Chinese translation of the book is 《飘》 while the Chinese translation of the film title is 《乱世佳人》. According to the principle of skopo and features of film titles, the author thinks the second translation is more appropriate. Compared with the first, which will make the audience confused for failing to be related to the content of the film, the first translation is the typical four-word Chinese expression, which clearly point out the background of the story- war “乱世” and the main story- the turbulent life for the main character of the story who is a beautiful lady “佳人”. All in all, the translation into 《乱世佳人》 comply with the culture principle, information principle, aesthetic principle and commercial principle.

There are some improper cases too. For example, in Hongkong, many film titles are translated into similar forms. In order to attract people's attention, the translators usually use a title with attractive words, therefore, stereotype occurs, such as XX 风云、XX 总动员、魔鬼 XX、XX 风暴、神鬼 XX、XX 总动员、XX 追缉令、XX 往事 and so on. However, they are not applicable to all movies. For example, *Anonymous* is translated into 《无名风云》, in fact, the translation is improper. “风云”(wind and cloud), a phrase with Chinese aroma, is a metaphor for the unstable situation, while “无名”(the unknown) might give the audience the hint of a proper name for a person or a place, which is totally irrelevant to the original film, thus confusing the audience.

4. Considerations in Film Title Translation

Any single method is not possible to settle all the problems in film title translation. Due to the distinctive properties of film titles: brief and concise, and from the perspective of functionalist translation theory, especially guided by Skopos theory and deduced by the above analysis, the author proposes the following three basic methods

usually applied in film title translation: transliteration, literal translation and liberal translation, though which are not the only choices in the translation of film titles.

4.1. Transliteration

Transliteration is a conversion of a text from one script to another. In Chinese, Transliteration is known as yin yi, to translate words in another language using the same or similar pronunciation. In film title translation, transliteration is always applied to translate some proper names, the name of persons, places, historical events, which attempts to seek phonetic correspondence with original film titles. Here are some translated versions perfectly presented through transliteration: *Chicago* 《芝加哥》 (zhi jia ge), *Gandi* 《甘地》 (gan di) and *Troy* 《特洛伊》 (te luo yi).

From the perspective of functionalist translation theory, transliteration can clearly point out the character and the place just as the examples show. “Gandi” is the name of the character, and the translated version is also a name, from which the audience can know that the film is talking about the story of Gandi. Transliteration has its own limitations too. It only focus on reconstructing the original pronunciation. To achieve the real value of film title, the translation must be acceptable and familiar to the target audience, otherwise it may only confuse them. Take *Avatar* as an example. “Avatar” is a Sanskrit word, meaning incarnation, but its Chinese translation 《阿凡达》 (a fan da) has no correlation to its original meaning, which might have confused many Chinese audience.

4.2. Literal translation

Literal translation, or directed translation, is the rendering of text from one language to another “word-for-word” (Latin: *verbum pro verbo*) rather than conveying the sense of the original.

Literal translation is widely used in translation when there are equivalent expression between the target language and the source language. In the translation of film titles, literal translation is often adopted when the information and cultural connotations contained in the original title can be completely meaningful and comprehensible to the Chinese audience and meanwhile could help to fulfill the functions of the translated film titles. For example, *National Treasure* 《国家宝藏》, *Roman Holiday* 《罗马假日》, *Pearl Harbor* 《珍珠港》, *Wuthering Heights* 《呼啸山庄》, *Brave Heart* 《勇敢的心》, *True Lies* 《真实的谎言》, and *Dances with Wolves* 《与狼共舞》. These literally translated versions are well accepted by the Chinese audience. Although literal translation has been showed to be an effective approach in film title translation, it should be carefully used when the literally translated versions do not make any sense in the target culture. In Skopos theory, equivalence means adequacy to a Skopos, so it requires the target text serve the same communicative functions as the source text. We can easily find many bad examples which fail to achieve that. *Rain Man* (1988) is one of them, which tells the story of an abrasive and selfish yuppie, Charlie Babbitt, who discovers that his estranged father has died and bequeathed all of his multimillion-dollar estate to his other son, Raymond, an autistic savant of whose existence Charlie was unaware. Charlie cheat Raymond to leave the institution where he lives and to “travel” with him. In fact Charlie just hopes to use his brother as bargaining chip to get half of the fortune. In their trip crossing the country, Charlie realizes that Raymond is the protective figure from his childhood, whom he falsely remembered as an imaginary friend named “Rain Man”, which was a

mispronunciation of "Raymond". Towards the end of their trip Charlie finds himself becoming protective of Raymond, and grows to love him truly. Translators in Mainland literally translate the original title into 《雨人》 which confuse audiences that it tells a story about someone in rain or relevant to rain. From this title it is hard to tell what the film is about thus fail to attract audience.

4.3. Liberal translation

Liberal translation, or free translation, paraphrases, is the rendering of text from one language to another by conveying the sense of the original rather than word-for-word meanings.

Due to the differences between the source and target culture, sometimes transliteration and literal translation are not effective in fulfilling the functions of film titles, that is, informative, expressive, vocative and aesthetic function, and sometimes even confuse and mislead the target audience in some cases, thus liberal translation can be taken into consideration.

“Liberal translation is often divided into three types: transliteration combined with liberal translation as in *Godzilla* 《怪兽哥斯拉》, literal translation combined with liberal translation as in *Philadelphia* 《费城故事》 and adaptation as in *Frozen* 《冰雪奇缘》.” The following are some examples with high box offices.

Up is a classic Oscar film which make many audience sheer tears, which is liberally translated into 《飞屋环游记》. Viewing its main plot: an old men and a boy fly away by a house which is pulled by balloons. The word “up” has many implied meanings like finding the dream, destination, or a reminder of love. However, not every Chinese audience can get through the film by this little word. So the creative Chinese translation reminds the audience of the setting at least and provides a romantic sense.

For another example, *Dead Poets Society* has two translated Chinese version. One is literally translated as 《死亡诗社》, the other one is liberally translated as 《春风化雨》. The author believes that the latter one is better because the latter gives us a sense of tragedy, while the film show us the appreciation of struggle and the power of poem despite tough struggles. At the same time it is better to convey the influence the teacher has on the students, just as spring wind has been brought to the students, and whose wisdom and spirit is like spring rain nourishing the hearts of the students.

5. Conclusions

A film title is the concentrated essence of a film, which is a commodity and of which the ultimate goal is to help producers gain commercial value and profits. [5].The large-scale intercultural communication through films in recent years has witnessed the increasing significance of film title translation. A successful film title translation not only brings economic benefits to its box office, but also enhances international influence of the film itself. Through descriptive analysis, this thesis demonstrates that functionalist theories are applicable to E-C film title translation and sheds lights on E-C film title translation practice.

As the types of the text determines the language form and the style. The purpose of the translation action decide the choice of translation strategies and methods. And the receiver of the translation is one of the most important factors in determining the

Skopos of the translation. In the translation of film titles, the translators should bear the particular aim of a film title, attach importance to the acceptability of the target audience and wield various strategies based on specific conditions so as to convey information in a better way and facilitate the communication between China and the outside world. In short, a successful film title should be witty and also thought-provoking. It should be able to draw the audiences' attention and favor by its profound connotation and vivid language, thus helps to win more box office.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

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