

A Study on the English Subtitle Translation of the Film “*Herstory*” from the Perspective of Skopos Theory

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Abstract:

In the context of globalization, film, as an important carrier of cultural communication, plays a pivotal role in cross-cultural communication. This paper employs Skopos Theory as its theoretical framework to conduct an in-depth study of the English subtitle translation of the film *Herstory*. Through the analysis of specific examples from the film, it explores the application of the three principles of Skopos Theory in subtitle translation, revealing how translators achieve transcoding of cultural symbols, balance language economy, and shape character language style within the constraints of temporal and spatial dimensions. The study finds that Skopos Theory offers effective theoretical guidance for Film and Television Subtitle Translation, assisting translators in establishing an effective dialogue mechanism between the source language and target language cultural context, thereby promoting international exchange of film and television culture and mutual learning among civilizations. This article aims to provide theoretical support for film subtitles translation practice, and to offer a fresh perspective on cross-cultural communication research.

Keywords:

Skopos Theory, Subtitle Translation, *Herstory*

1. Introduction

In the contemporary information communication system, film, alongside broadcasting, television, print media, and digital media, collectively forms a diverse mass communication media system. As a crucial vehicle for cultural communication, film plays a unique role in cross-civilizational communication. According to the cultural context theoretical framework proposed by the British anthropologist Malinowski, film texts essentially constitute a multi-dimensional cultural field, which not only carries the historical and cultural accumulation of specific temporal and spatial dimensions but also dynamically presents the ideology, values, and folk traditions of real society [9]. This cultural field is essentially a collective representation of a specific speech community's social norms and customs, encompassing multiple dimensions such as the political system, religious beliefs, and

art forms.

In the film and television works' practice of globalized communication, Subtitle Translation has emerged as a key communication method for overcoming cultural barriers. Research by Li Yan and Ma Zhengqi [5] indicates that professional Subtitle Translation effectively fosters international film and television cultural exchange and mutual learning among civilizations. This language conversion process demands that translators accomplish multiple transformations within limited temporal and spatial dimensions: accurately conveying the literal meaning of dialogue, achieving equivalent conversion of cultural connotations, and considering the immediacy and popularity inherent in film and television language [8]. Specifically, translators must prioritize addressing the following three levels of conversion challenges:

First, it is important to highlight the transcoding dilemma of cultural symbols. Given that English and Chinese belong to different language families and are embedded in distinct cultural landscapes, culture-specific items frequently encountered in film and television texts (such as Proverbs, Allusions, Puns, etc.) often pose obstacles to cross-cultural understanding. Secondly, the constraints of the principle of linguistic economy warrant attention. Film and television subtitles, restricted by time and space, must adhere to the translation principle of "Faithfulness, Expressiveness and Conciseness", demanding that translators achieve equilibrium between information integrity and expression conciseness. Finally, the need to reproduce character language style is crucial [8]. As a vital tool for character development, the translation of character dialogue should preserve the source language individual characteristics while aligning with the reception habits of the target language audience.

The convergence of these multifaceted requirements elevates film and television subtitle translation beyond mere language conversion, transforming it into a reconstruction of the cultural cognitive system. Effective subtitle translation demands not only linguistic accuracy but also a broad cross-cultural communication perspective from the translator, establishing a robust dialogue mechanism between the source language and the target language within their respective cultural context.

2. Definition of Skopos Theory

2.1. Concept of Skopos Theory

As a leading branch of functionalist translation theory, Skopos Theory was developed by German translation scholars Hans J. Vermeer and Katharina Reiss in the 1960s [6]. This theoretical framework breaks away from the constraints of the traditional "source text-centered" approach, proposing that translation is essentially a decision-making process driven by a defined communicative purpose. In contrast to traditional views of translation that focus on the original text, Vermeer [4] emphasized that "the target audience is the key factor in determining the purpose of translation." The translator's primary task is not to reproduce the source text mechanically but to adapt the content, style, and form to fulfill a specific purpose, whether it be informative, persuasive, instructional, or aesthetic. Accordingly, translators should conduct targeted translation, taking into account the cultural background, needs, and expectations of the specific target audience.

By emphasizing translator agency and situational adaptability, Skopos Theory has significantly influenced contemporary translation practices, particularly in contexts

where cross-cultural communication and functional effectiveness outweigh strict textual equivalence. Translation of Skopos Theory demonstrates strong communicative attributes and social functions, making it a key theory for serving specific social groups.

2.2. Principles of Skopos Theory

The core proposition of Skopos Theory can be summarized as the practical paradigm of “the purpose of translation determines the translation strategy,” and its theoretical system is based on three fundamental principles:

2.2.1. Skopos Rule

The Skopos rule stipulates that the translation should conform to the context and culture of the target language, be reader-oriented, and function in the way that target language readers expect. The purpose determines the process; that is, the purpose of translation determines the translation process, which is what we call purpose determining method. Usually, the purpose here refers to the communicative purpose of the translation [7].

This refers to the communication that arises between the translation and the reader, offering an alternative means of interaction and exchange. This principle dictates that the translation should align with the communicative context and cultural norms of the target language environment, prioritizing the communicative function of the translation over formal equivalence.

2.2.2. Coherence Rule

This principle emphasizes the internal logical consistency of the translation, requiring the translator to reconstruct the discourse coherence mechanisms within the Target Language cultural framework. Specifically, the translation should conform to the cognitive patterns and logical reasoning of the target audience, achieving a natural and fluent expression while preserving the original text's intent.

2.2.3. Fidelity Rule

The fidelity rule advocates for a dynamic equilibrium between the source text's intention and target language norms.

Zhao Yilin et al. [10] pointed out that this “limited fidelity” requires retaining the core information of the original text while making adaptive adjustments based on the characteristics of the target language to facilitate audience understanding. To refine this theory, Nord [1] proposed a supplementary framework of “function plus loyalty”: the former emphasizes achieving the intended function of the translation, while the latter requires the translator to assume a dual responsibility to both the author of the source text and the target readers.

3. Application of Skopos Theory in Film *Herstory* Subtitles

3.1. Subtitle Translation Guided by the Skopos Rule

Example 1:

Original Text: 《好东西》

Translated Text: *Herstory*

The film *Herstory* is titled “*Herstory*” in English. “*Herstory*” is a creative adaptation of the inherent English word “History,” directly challenging the male-centric perspective in traditional historical narratives by replacing the male pronoun “His” with the female pronoun “Her.” The primary aim of this translation is to highlight the film’s theme of gender equality, emphasizing the agency of women in history, society, and narrative. In contrast, the Chinese film title *Herstory* is more nuanced, alluding to overlooked female values and untold stories of women.

The English title “*Herstory*” cleverly uses language to clearly communicate a feminist perspective, aligning with western cultural approaches to discussing gender and better resonating with the target audience, particularly English speakers. As a newly coined word, “*Herstory*” is both memorable and easily disseminated, attracting audiences interested in gender issues while highlighting the film’s artistic innovation.

Example 2:

Original Text: 但我是个懦弱的人。

Translated Text: I don’t have the courage to keep fighting the system.

From the perspective of Skopos Theory, the Skopos rule, as a core element, emphasizes that the choice of strategies in the translation process should be governed by the function and communicative intention the target text is expected to achieve [3]. Taking the sentence “但我是个懦弱的人” translated as “I don’t have the courage to keep fighting the system” as an example, the embodiment of the Skopos rule is demonstrated by the dual effect of functional reconstruction and cultural intention. The original text highlights inner moral shame through the self-description of “懦弱” (cowardice), its main function being to expose the defects of individual character and the consequences of that character’s behavior. However, the translation, by specifying semantics and expanding the context, transforms the abstract criticism of personality, “懦弱” (cowardice), into an accusation of social oppression, “fighting the system,” so that the function of the text shifts from personal self-denial to broader social criticism.

This transformation aims to satisfy two core needs of the target culture: first, it avoids the sensitivity associated with western culture’s tendency to label personality (for example, the word “coward” can trigger excessively negative evaluations). Therefore, it chooses to highlight a deficit in behavioral ability with “lack of courage,” which aligns with the emphasis on “action choice” rather than “essential attributes” in individualistic discourse [1]. Second, by adding “the system,” it activates the English-speaking audience’s cognitive schema related to anti-establishment discourse (such as Foucault’s critique of power or dystopian narratives), allowing the translation to extend beyond individual psychology and integrate into public ideology reflection.

This demonstrates that Skopos Theory not only facilitated cross-cultural adaptation in this case but also, by enhancing functionality, opened up new avenues for political interpretation of the text, thus validating the theoretical perspective of “translation as target-oriented meaning reconstruction” [2].

3.2. Subtitle Translation Guided by the Coherence Principle

The principle of coherence, as embodied in Film and Television Subtitle Translation, requires translators to consider the context of character dialogues and the film’s background to produce understandable and accessible translations. This also involves adapting to the language habits and cultural background of the audience.

Example 3:

Original Text: 男人哎，这种鬼东西！你不仅背叛我，背叛我们的承诺，你还背叛你自己。

Translated Text: A man, of all the damn things! You didn't just betray me, and our community, you betrayed yourself.

In this dialogue scene, Xiao Ye and Wang Tiemei staged a play together to win Doctor Hu's favor, portraying themselves as being in a lesbian relationship. According to the principle of coherence, the translation must adhere to the standard of intralingual coherence to ensure audience comprehension.

In this context, the translation aligns with English logic and expression, beginning with the direct address to the man and progressively clarifying his betrayal in a clear, logical manner. The structure "didn't just...you..." creates a natural flow, allowing English readers to easily follow the logical connections between the clauses, thus ensuring coherence. Furthermore, assuming the audience understands the context, the translation clearly conveys the deeper meaning of the statement, remaining concise and culturally appropriate. Translating "背叛我们的承诺" (betrayed our promise) as "betrayed our community," with "community" referring to the lesbian community, preserves the group's strong sense of collective identity and reinforces the bonds of sexual kinship.

Example 4:

Original Text: 在急诊室按紧急按钮。

Translated Text: She sells seashells by the seashore.

The Dialogue scene depicts Xiaoye teaching Wang Molly a Cantonese tongue twister while they are out having fun. "在急诊室按紧急按钮" is a classic Cantonese tongue twister. Translating it with its Chinese characteristics for an English-speaking audience poses a challenge. However, the translator cleverly transformed it into a well-known English tongue twister. This translation concisely conveys the meaning of the sentence, effectively delivering the original text's meaning while resonating with the audience's cultural background.

3.3. Subtitle Translation Guided by the Fidelity Principle

In the translation of film subtitles, adhering to the fidelity principle of Skopos Theory, translation must first maintain semantic consistency with the source text. Moreover, translation should maximize readability, aligning with the language usage habits of the subtitle audience, and employ concise writing that is easy to understand and enhances the viewing experience.

Example 5:

Original Text: 我的感情很珍贵。

Translated Text: I don't take my feelings lightly.

The translator substitutes "emotional attribute" with "emotional attitude", transforming the source text's "value declaration" into a "behavioral statement". While the forms are adjusted, both converge on the same core theme – emphasizing the importance and protection of emotions. The translator made a compromise regarding literal content retention (e.g., translating to "My feelings are precious"), instead enhancing the readability and persuasive effect of the translation within the

target language environment through this dynamic expression. This approach aligns with Skopos Theory's principle of prioritizing "functional equivalence over formal equivalence".

Furthermore, the translator renders the Chinese declarative value judgment as the more palatable "behavioral attitude statement" in English-speaking cultures, striking a balance between cultural differences and communicative function.

Example 6:

Original Text: 你眼睛大得瘆人。

Translated Text: Your big eyes are creepy.

This dialogue occurs when Xiaoye is confiding in Wang Molin about her mother's lack of praise. Wang Molin asks, "Your eyes are so beautiful, doesn't your mother ever praise them?" Xiaoye replies, "My mother says my eyes are so big they're creepy." source text conveys a strong negative emotion through exaggerated description, akin to the depiction of bizarre appearances in horror narrative, with its core purpose being to evoke physiological or psychological discomfort associations with "eyes." In the English expression, "creepy" does indeed carry the meaning of unsettling and spine-chilling, corresponding to "瘆人", translation completely retains the key information of "big eyes" and "causing discomfort," thus achieving thematic consistency.

When dealing with hyperbolic rhetoric, the translator preserves the source language dialogue's dramatic tension while also ensuring the target audience accurately grasps the character interaction's subtext. Through a dual correspondence at the semantic level and cultural level, the translator successfully achieves Vermeer's [3] goal of maximizing "cross-cultural communicative validity."

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, film subtitle translation is not merely a conversion of languages, but a reconstruction of the cultural cognitive system. Skopos Theory offers systematic theoretical guidance for Film and Television Subtitle Translation, emphasizing the decisive role of the translation purpose in determining translation strategies. In practice, translators should fully consider the cultural background, cognitive habits, and receptive psychology of the target audience, flexibly applying the skopos rule, coherence rule, and fidelity principle to achieve effective alignment between the source language and the Target Language in terms of semantics, culture, and communicative function. Through an analysis of the English subtitles of the film *Herstory*, this paper verifies the applicability and practicality of Skopos Theory in film and television translation, offering a useful reference for future related research and practice.

Future research could incorporate audience feedback analysis to quantitatively assess the communication effectiveness of translation strategies and explore how artificial intelligence can optimize cross-cultural translation.

Conflicts of Interest

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

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