



A Study on the Subtitle Translation of *Xue Ba* (《学爸》) from the Perspective of Relevance Theory

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Abstract

Movies play a crucial role in intercultural communication. It is a form of entertainment and a powerful medium of cultural communication. Movie subtitles also play a vital role in cultural communication. High-quality subtitles are conducive to transmitting Chinese culture to the outside world. This paper analyzes the subtitle translation method of the movie *Xue Ba* based on relevance theory, combined with specific cases, aiming to explore how to use correlation theory in movie subtitle translation to provide some references for movie subtitle translation.

Subject Areas

Culture

Keywords

Subtitle Translation, Relevance Theory, Translation Skills, *Xue Ba*

1. Introduction

With global integration, cultural exchanges among countries are becoming increasingly frequent. Film and television works are one of the essential mediums of cross-cultural exchanges. In recent years, Chinese movies have made many achievements and made a big splash on the international stage with solid momentum. In addition to the dramatic storyline and stunning visual effects, subtitle translation plays a crucial role. On the one hand, successful subtitle translation can help the target language audience get a better movie-watching experience. On the other hand, it can also effectively spread Chinese culture.

Xue Ba was released in August 2023. It shows the “involution” of Chinese education in a comedic way. This movie depicts parents’ challenges and difficulties in ensuring their children receive a quality education. High-quality subtitle translation not only helps to showcase unique phenomena such as the “involution” of Chinese-style education to audiences from different cultural backgrounds but also the subtitle translation techniques discussed in this article for comedy movies may provide some reference for future translation practices.

2. Subtitle Translation

Subtitle translation translates dialogues from the source to the target language through co-subtitles. This is typically done when translating audiovisual products, such as movies, TV shows, and animation, and displaying them at the bottom of the screen. These subtitles usually appear in synchronization with the audio content. Yin defines subtitles as a specific type of interactive text designed to facilitate comprehension of a film’s plot and content for the general public [1]. Unlike traditional translations, subtitles possess distinctive characteristics.

2.1. Complementarity

A film is a synthesis of the visual and auditory arts. Subtitle translation constructs the storyline and conveys emotions through sound and vision. It must accurately convey the original text’s meaning and coordinate with the visual elements and sound effects in the movie and television works. Subtitles become an indispensable supplement when the audience cannot fully understand the dialogue. A high level of subtitling is conducive to better immersion of the target language audience in the movie.

2.2. Time and Space Constraints

Subtitle translation is subject to two constraints: temporal and spatial. In terms of temporal constraints, subtitles remain visible on screen for an exceedingly brief period, with instances where this is even more abbreviated. As Chen observed, subtitles must be synchronized with audio, action, and screen, and subtitles must be quickly switched with the change of the screen [2]. Therefore, translators must have a firm grasp of the time factor. Only in this way can they ensure that the subtitles can effectively assist the audience within a limited time.

Secondly, subtitle translation is constrained by the limited space available on the screen. Typically, subtitles must be displayed within a restricted screen area while avoiding undue encroachment on the central information zone. Additionally, viewers must allocate their attention to other visual and audio elements. Subtitles are used to guarantee an optimal viewing experience. It is recommended that Chinese subtitles be limited to a maximum of one line and that English subtitles be limited to two.

2.3. Simplicity and Spoken Language

The simplicity of subtitles is, in fact, firmly grounded in the actual needs of the

audience. Viewers must be able to comprehend the narrative's progression and the characters' interactions within a limited timeframe. Furthermore, the temporal and spatial constraints imposed by the medium of film also necessitate a certain degree of simplification in the presentation of subtitles. However, Zhu posits that this does not entail an arbitrary reduction of the original text but instead a selective condensation, deletion, and omission of superfluous information while maintaining the essential content of the source text [3].

The dialogue in a film is derived from real-life interactions and is, therefore, inherently relatable. It represents one of the primary methods of transmitting information and conveying emotions between characters. It is often not a carefully crafted literary language with a distinct colloquial character. Nevertheless, subtitling presents a distinctive set of challenges. It necessitates adeptly translating character dialogue, evocative epigrams, and colloquialisms into written form. This process is not straightforward, and translators must consider the stylistic conventions and cultural nuances of different countries to ensure that viewers from diverse linguistic backgrounds can comprehend the film's content and appreciate its unique appeal.

2.4. Cross-Cultural and Cross Professional

The Cross professional of subtitle translation is mainly reflected in the integration of multi-disciplinary knowledge and the handling of specialized terminology. It requires the integration of multi-disciplinary knowledge, as well as an accurate translation and appropriate adjustment of specialized terminology, and explanatory translation when necessary. The cross-cultural characteristics of subtitle translation need to take into account the conversion of cultural background and the differences and conversion of language structure, etc. For example, translation of place names, proper nouns, and culturally loaded words. These test the translator's translation level and knowledge reserves even more to ensure the accuracy and cultural adaptability of subtitle translation.

3. Introduction of the Relevance Theory

In the 1980s, Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson published their seminal work *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, which introduced the concept of connectionism. In their seminal work, *Communicative and Cognition*, Sperber and Wilson put forth the relevance theory of language, which posits that language use is an inherently cognitive process. This process entails the speaker employing explicit actions to convey information to the listener, who in turn must engage in a process of reasoning based on their prior knowledge, cultural background, and accumulated experiences to ascertain the speaker's intentions [4]. In this process, humans adhere to the relevance principle, which dictates that individuals strive to identify and retrieve information that is most closely related to the current context, thereby minimizing the cognitive effort required to achieve the greatest possible understanding.

In 1991, Ernst-August Gutt published *Translation and Relativity: Cognition and Context*, the first to apply the relevance theory to translation, resulting in relevance translation theory. This theory posits that translation is a communicative process involving the source text author, the translator, and the target text reader. In a successful translation, the role of the translator is pivotal. They are responsible for receiving the source text, understanding its intentions, and serving as an intermediary for conveying that information to the target reader.

4. Subtitle Translation Guided by Relevance Theory

In contrast to the traditional approach to translation, the subtitling process is characterized by several distinctive features. According to Fang, the subtitler must be guided by the theoretical framework of translation to select an appropriate strategy and employ as many techniques as possible. The aim is to provide the audience with the optimal correlation of information content, enabling them to derive the most significant benefit from the subtitles with the least expenditure of cognitive effort [5].

4.1. A Combination of Literal Translation and Free Translation

The relation between the source text and the target text may vary in different contexts. In some cases, literal translation may be the most effective method of establishing the desired connection, as it allows for a straightforward conveyance of the source text's literal meaning and cultural nuances. Conversely, free translation may be more suitable in other instances, as it can better adapt to the target language's readers' specific context and cognitive abilities.

Example 1: 说了多少回，背个乘法表不动手。

Version: How many times have I told you? Memorizing the multiplication table needs no beating.

The context here is that Mrs. Huo's son could not memorize the multiplication tables and was beaten up by Mrs. Huo and ran out of the house. The conversation concerns Mrs. Huo and her husband looking for their son in the neighborhood. The first half of the sentence was translated using the literal translation strategy. In contrast, the second half of the sentence “背个乘法表不动手” was translated as “Memorising the multiplication table needs no beating.” Because “不动手” does not mean “no hand movements”. It means “no need to memorize the multiplication table through physical punishment and other coercive means.” Therefore, free translation is used here, translating it as “needs no beating,” *i.e.*, “does not need to be beaten to memorize.”

Example 2: 所有人都在跑，我不敢停。

Version: Everyone is running, and I dare not stop.

This quote reflects the pressure of social competition and parents' anxious mindsets. It also conveys a sense of urgency among parents. The words “running”

and “stop” here correspond to “跑” and “停” in the original text, respectively. This sentence adopts the literal and free translations, concisely conveying the original meaning and retaining the original text’s metaphorical meaning.

4.2. Addition

Addition is a common sentence technique translation skill. It is based on an accurate understanding of the original text, adding necessary words in the translation expression to express the meaning of the original text more accurately and fully. Relevance theory requires the translator to find the best association in the translation process. By adding the implicit information in the original text, the translation is closer to the original text in content and style, achieving the best correlation.

Example 3: 爸爸，对不起，我没有别的小朋友棒。

Version: Dad, I’m sorry. I’m not as good as other kids in some aspects.

In the film, Lei Dali hopes his son can attend an international primary school. This requires Xiaomi to live with his aunts. Xiaomi thought that his dad was giving himself away because he couldn’t get into the international elementary school and could not have many specialties compared to the other kids. Although Xiaomi’s learning ability is poor, his expression ability and emotion are vibrant. So, “in some aspects” was added when translating this sentence. When comparing with other people or things, the translator can use “in some aspects” to refine the scope of the comparison.

Example 4: 老子为你这个事找了好多关系你知不知道，叔叔、娘娘、伯伯、舅舅.....

Version: You know how much relation I had to manage for your matter. Uncles and aunts...

No word in the source language clearly expresses the “多少” relationship. The addition of “how much” in the English translation emphasizes the extent of the number of relationships found for this matter, making the English expression more specific and more straightforward and conveying the extent of the speaker’s effort. At the same time, there is no such expression as “不得不” in the source language. The addition of “had to” and “I had to manage” in the English translation emphasizes a feeling of having to do something with a certain degree of compulsion, which further conveys the fact that the speaker made many efforts for this matter, perhaps even unwillingly but had to do it. Reluctant but had to do it, enriching the sentence’s emotional color and expressive strength.

4.3. Omission

Omission is the opposite of Addition. In translating from Chinese to English, it is necessary to omit redundant words in the original Chinese text, as well as some words indicating conceptual categories in the Chinese language. According to relevance theory, translators need to consider the cognitive context of target language

readers to ensure that readers can easily understand the translation. For some problematic contexts or expressions, subtraction can be used to remove those parts that may cause obstacles to understanding.

Example 5: 什么都要拼, 拼完包包拼房子, 拼完老子拼儿子。

Version: Compete everything, handbag then house, father then son.

In example 5, “什么都要拼” in the original text is translated as “compete for everything,” which omits the specific referent of “什么” because “everything” already implies all things. At the same time, the structure of “拼完...拼...” does not have a direct equivalent in English, so the technique of omission is used. Instead of directly translating the verb phrase “拼完” the phrase “then” is used to connect the two comparisons, thus maintaining the sentence’s The sentence is kept simple and fluent.

Example 6: 为遏制学区房炒房现象, 我市多地同步开展打击哄抬房价信息误导的专项行动。请家长们根据相关政策理性购房迁户。

Version: For preventing the school zone property speculation. Our city has launched a special action in all aspects to combat misleading information about driving up housing prices at the same time. Please take this rationally.

In example 6, “为遏制学区房炒房现象” is translated as “for preventing the school zone property specification.” The translation of “为” and “现象” is omitted, and the gerund phrase is directly used as the target adverbial to make the sentence more concise. Secondly, “请家长们根据相关政策理性购房迁户” is translated into “please take this rationally.” In English, omitting the specific content of “家长”, “根据相关政策” and “购房迁户”. In this context, the previous dialogue mentioned the phenomenon of cracking down on real estate speculation in the school district and the particular action taken. The subsequent content can be appropriately omitted according to the context to avoid the translation being too lengthy and complex without affecting the transmission of the primary information, which aligns with the English expression habits.

5. Conclusion

Movie and television works are art rooted in people’s lives, so successful subtitles must also be popular with both refined and popular tastes. This paper analyzes the English subtitle of Xue Ba with specific cases under the guidance of relevance theory. It can be seen through the case that there are noticeable differences between Chinese and English, and the translator needs to flexibly use the translation methods and techniques according to the cognitive level, cultural background, and living environment of the audience in the target language, to maximize the contextual effect with minimum cognitive effort. At the same time, high-level subtitle translation can promote cultural exchanges between different countries and help Chinese movies go out of the country in many aspects. Therefore, the quality and effect of subtitle translation should be emphasized in film production and distribution to promote the international development of films better.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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