



A Comparative Analysis of Film Subtitle Translation from English to Chinese:

A Case Study of 15 Popular Animation Films



电影字幕英汉翻译理论的对比性研究： 以15部流行动画电影双语字幕为例

金卓◎著

 复旦大学出版社



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Abstract

As film-making has evolved, subtitling has become “a translation practice that consists of presenting a written text, generally on the lower part of the screen”, which seeks to deliver “the original dialogue of the speakers” (Diaz-Cintas and Remael 2007: 8). Subtitle translation in the field of Audiovisual Translation has attracted increasing interest from scholars, who believe that the quality of subtitling is an important criterion when evaluating the quality of a film. Inspired by Even-Zohar’s (1978) polysystem theory and Gottlieb’s (1992) typology, this comparative study focuses on the subtitling of English-language animation films, which represent one of the main foreign film genres introduced to Chinese audiences, in order to identify effective strategies to improve the quality of translated subtitles from the perspective of cultural awareness. The author proposes three main hypotheses in this research: 1) that the length of a film subtitle translated into Chinese is generally greater than the corresponding original English text; 2) that effective translation is contingent on the use of Chinese idioms and traditional expressions within translated subtitles; 3) that effective translation is contingent on the use of popular expressions within contemporary Chinese culture. The methodologies employed to address these hypotheses are: a self-built parallel corpus (as the main research tool) comprising 15 sets of animation film subtitles; a questionnaire survey; and interviews with relevant AVT practitioners and scholars. The research findings are: 1) the length of a film subtitle translated into Chinese is generally greater than the corresponding original English text; 2) the two discussed types of expression are effectively employed in the data; 3) unnecessary, erroneous or inappropriate uses, among others, were highlighted by the data; 4) the frequency of using popular expressions is higher than that of using traditional expressions; 5) there is frequent use of the typology strategies of paraphrase, transfer, condensation and transcription, as well as newer strategies of globalization and localization.

内 容 提 要

随着电影制作领域各方面的整体发展,电影字幕翻译从最初的“对屏幕下方呈现的文字的简单翻译”逐步提升到“对人物对话原汁原味的呈现”这样的最高标准。视听翻译领域中的电影字幕翻译吸引了众多专家学者的关注,字幕翻译的水准成为评价整部电影水准的关键指标。受埃文·佐哈的多元系统理论和戈特利布的类型学理论的启发,本书作者对英语动画电影的字幕翻译进行了对比性研究。动画电影是引入中国内地电影市场的一类主要的进口电影类型。本书通过对这类电影字幕翻译的研究,探寻能够从文化意识的视角提升翻译水准的翻译理论。

作者首先提出三个假设:1)翻译为中文后的字幕应比英文原文的字幕长度更长;2)在字幕翻译中采用更加本土化的中文习语和成语将提升观众对字幕的接受度;3)在字幕翻译中采用当前中国网络流行语更易被观众接受。本书的主要研究方法是作者自建的包含15部动画电影字幕的平行语料库,另外还有对问卷调查数据的研究以及对动画电影制作人及学者的访谈材料。本书的研究成果包含:1)有效的字幕翻译,其中文长度需大于英文原文的字幕长度才能保持信息量不丢失;2)数据显示中文习语和成语的运用提升了中文字幕的感受度;3)对冗余的、错误的及其他不恰当的字幕翻译进行了剖析;4)字幕翻译由于本土化的文化因素,当代流行语的运用频度高于传统成语;5)在全球化和本土化这一对矛盾共生体的影响下,字幕翻译还大量采用了释义法、近似表达法、压缩法以及英文原文等各种处理策略。

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Chapter 1 Introduction

This chapter explains the motivation behind the study and the research background. In turn, the research hypotheses, data and objectives, theoretical framework and methodologies will be introduced, while the significance of the study is described.

1.1 Motivation of the Study

With the increasing pace of globalization, both cultural clashes and cultural integration are inevitable occurrences. Although globalization can sometimes result in dominant cultures prevailing in regions that are less influential economically and culturally, more balanced forms of intercultural communication can facilitate greater mutual comprehension between nations, fostering tolerance and cooperation. Film products, as a means of intercultural communication, undoubtedly play a significant role in helping people from the world's different regions to understand each other's philosophies, traditions and value systems. The visual clarity of films conveys aspects of a given culture with an immediacy and accessibility that few other art forms possess. In this exchange

activity, although the role of film subtitlers is extremely important, it has frequently been undervalued in the process of translating and distributing films for consumption by audiences abroad. At times, the preparation of accurate, high-quality subtitles, which convey the essence of the source culture in a meaningful, evocative way for the target culture, requires a level of expenditure that film distributors are unwilling to meet. All too frequently, the reception of a film as a cultural product in another country is negatively affected by subtitles who fail in their task concerning intercultural communication.

In 2013, I met with Gottlieb at an international translation studies conference held in Zhuhai, China. In the course of talking with him about my study interests in English-Chinese subtitling, I realized that the 10 strategies discussed by Gottlieb, in the context of his own practical experience, are not always applicable to English-Chinese subtitling (hereafter, I will use the abbreviation of E-C subtitling in the rest of the book). Thus, Gottlieb recommended me to build upon the foundations of his own research and develop more effective strategies in relation to my study interests, as this would be inevitably helpful to the younger generation of scholars in developing a broader range of theoretical frameworks.

The issue of cultural components in film translation is set against the background of globalization. According to Manning and Shackford-Bradley (2010), “film can be a vehicle for critiquing and resisting the master narrative that has controlled discussions of the economic and cultural changes that define globalization” (p. 36). In the process of globalization, citizens around the world can transcend their national boundaries and unify under a single “society” that functions collectively, not only in economic and technological aspects but

also in cultural terms by sharing ways of life, religion and literary works. As a form of intercultural communication channel, film has the capacity to highlight various activities, civilizations and living conditions of human beings around the world. At the highest level of globalization, films exercise a significant role in the dissemination of culture. Therefore, when foreign films are imported into China, or when Chinese films are exported to the rest of the world, ensuring the quality of AVT work, including subtitles and dubbing, is critical. Moreover, successfully transferring any cultural phenomenon that may pervade a whole film is also necessary within AVT.

Cultural elements are increasingly a concern for a growing body of scholars engaged in subtitling research. For example, at a conference held at Stirling University, UK, in 2015, Garcia emphasized the importance of cultural differences in the study of subtitling. Furthermore, at an international workshop for the training of practical translators, Gavela gave a lecture on the topic of translation colloquialisms, in which she explained her case study on the subtitling of animation films by discussing, in particular, the influence of cultural difference between English and Spanish upon subtitling. Thanks to the work of these two Spanish academics, I have acquired knowledge relevant to intercultural communication in subtitle translation.

Successful intercultural communication has the potential to accelerate globalization, as well as facilitate a better understanding between people from different countries and with different national identities. As such, the challenge for me in researching English to Chinese AVT, particularly in the area of subtitling, is to help promote intercultural communication between people from English-speaking

countries and China. Thus, identifying effective ways for improving subtitle translation quality is inevitable and important.

1.2 Research Background

Since “cinema has its own forms of language policy and language planning which dictate the design and management of foreign-language dialogue” (O’Sullivan 2011:31), subtitlers have a key role to play in this communication process, being required to have the ability to translate one language into another and to distil the essence of a culture into the limited space of a screen subtitle. As language and culture are intertwined, subtitlers must constantly be aware of the cultural elements in the subtitles that they create. Appropriate forms of expression can convey foreign cultures and modes of expression vividly to the target audience, while effective subtitling can achieve this successful intercultural communication, facilitating a film’s reception in another country. The genre of animated films represents a particularly interesting subject in terms of the increasing need for subtitling to be of high quality. In recent decades, animated films produced by Disney and others have moved far beyond their original target audience of children, who represented the audiences to whom classic films such as *Cinderella* (1950), *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) and *The Sword in the Stone* (1963) were aimed in the mid-20th century. By contrast, the scripts for many recent animated films work on several levels, combining spectacular visuals for the benefit of younger viewers with dialogue whose humour, irony and idiosyncrasies are clearly aimed at adults. In this new context,

subtitling that fails to convey the richness of language contained in the scripts of today's animated films will cause them to lose much of their communicative impact on segments of a typical 21st century audience.

Film subtitles as “communicative translation” is a form of written translation or written rendering, which is projected on the lower part of the screen in synchronization with the original dialogue. Today, professional subtitlers usually work with specialized computer software and databases. In European countries, current film subtitling studies have focused mainly on quality aspects, from European perspectives (Bittner 2011), and as a manifestation of “a multi-talent task” (Gottlieb 2004). Scholars in the field of translation studies have established the theoretical branches of AVT, of whom the most influential have been Chaume (2004), Diaz-Cintas (2004), Gambier (2008), Gottlieb (1992), Ivarsson (1992) and Karamitroglou (2000). Their respective studies have shaped the theoretical framework of subtitle translation and consolidated effective translation strategies. These achievements represent a firm foundation for the study of AVT on a worldwide scale.

That said, there is little research that has focused on a comparative study between the Occident and China. In China, most existing research, however, is interested in the practice, rather than theoretical bases. According to recent studies, an increasing number of scholars have acknowledged the importance of cultural elements within AVT, in particular E-C; however, any discussion at the theoretical level regarding this new perspective is still limited. China represents an increasingly important market for commercial animated films, which are produced in the English-speaking world, particularly the USA.

Moreover, in terms of culture, traditions and language, there are vast differences between these regions of the world. The input of subtitlers is therefore particularly important in the context of these films, given that modern day Chinese audiences are not always familiar with what has become, in other areas of the world, globalized and/or American-influenced cultural and linguistic reference points. In the last decade, although the study of subtitle translation in China has steadily increased, scholars such as Li (2001), Zhang (2011) and Wang (2007) have discussed subtitle translation strategies for different film genres. That said, specific investigations into the subtitle translation of English animation films are still limited. Thus, this comparative study of E-C subtitle translation in 15 selected animation films should make a useful contribution at both the theoretical and practical levels of E-C subtitling in animation films.

1.3 Research Hypotheses, Data and Objectives

Hypotheses

From the perspectives of language peculiarities and cultural differences, I will carry out the study in relation to the following: 1) the visual difference between translated Chinese subtitles and their corresponding original texts; 2) the features of the translated Chinese subtitles in terms of both linguistics and cultural difference. Therefore, in order to identify the feature differences between the target language and the original language, the research hypotheses are: 1) that the length of film subtitles translated into Chinese is

generally greater than the corresponding original English texts; 2) that effective translation is contingent on the use of traditional expressions (e.g., Chinese idioms and archaisms) within the translated subtitles; and 3) that effective translation is contingent on the use of popular expressions (e.g., popular language in networks, new words, loaning words, dialects) within the translated subtitles.

Data

The primary data for this research are 15 animation films with the total number of 19,081 subtitle pairs, which I have selected on the basis that they were the most popular film releases in the Chinese translated animation film market in the last decade. They all enjoyed higher ticket sales than others released at the same time. The data in the study contain both English and Chinese subtitles for these animations within a self-built parallel corpus. In so doing, I have compartmentalized the key cultural elements that might influence the quality of AVT (E-C), linguistically and culturally, while aiming to discuss the most effective strategies in the practice of AVT. The main cultural elements are the names of characters, names of places, food, historical figures, Chinese idioms and archaisms, customs, and contemporary vernacular, such as language popularized networks. In the analysis, each cultural element is collected from the original data and classified into different categories. Each category is discussed in detail. The descriptive method of analysis for these cultural elements is critical for my identification of effective typologies from the perspective of cultural awareness.

As stated in the previous section, the 15 animation films were selected as a result of being the top five highest grossing English

animation films over the same year of release in the Chinese market, as well as pulling in the largest audiences. Moreover, in narrative terms, they all provide an uplifting theme with regard to all cultural elements in the story centring on the main characters' personalities, places, storylines, plots etc. The bilingual subtitles in these films highlight the main obstacles, which, according to this study, face practitioners of E-C subtitling. A list of the 15 films and their bilingual titles are provided in the following table below:

Source Title (English)	Year of Production	Translated Title (Chinese)
<i>Madagascar 1</i>	2005	《马达加斯加》1
<i>Madagascar 2</i>	2009	《马达加斯加》2
<i>Madagascar 3</i>	2012	《马达加斯加》3
<i>The Smurfs 1</i>	2011	《蓝精灵》1
<i>The Smurfs 2</i>	2013	《蓝精灵》2
<i>Despicable Me 1</i>	2010	《卑鄙的我》1 (中国香港、台湾)
<i>Despicable Me 2</i>	2014	《卑鄙的我》2
<i>Rio 1</i>	2011	《里约大冒险》1
<i>Rio 2</i>	2014	《里约大冒险》2
<i>Frozen</i>	2014	《冰雪奇缘》
<i>The Croods</i>	2013	《疯狂原始人》
<i>Turbo</i>	2013	《极速蜗牛》
<i>Cars 1</i>	2006	《汽车总动员》1
<i>Cars 2</i>	2011	《汽车总动员》2
<i>Alpha and Omega</i>	2011	《丛林有情狼》

Table 1

Building on the findings of pioneering scholars, I have chosen to concentrate on subtitling, an audiovisual mode, found in 15 popular