

Subtitle Translation of Film and Television Works from the Perspective of Cross-Cultural Communication – Take *Modern Family* as an Example

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Abstract

With the development of economic globalization, cross-cultural exchanges between China and the West have become increasingly frequent. A large number of excellent foreign film and television works, as an important medium for cross-cultural communication activities, were introduced to China and loved by Chinese audiences. Based on the different cultural backgrounds of China and the West, this paper, from the perspective of cross-cultural communication theory, takes *Modern Family* as the research object, analyzes the use of domestication and foreignization translation strategies in the subtitle translation of film and television works, and discusses in detail the applicability and necessity of the selection and combination of different translation techniques in the subtitle translation of film and television works.

Keywords: cross-cultural communication, subtitle translation, domestication translation strategy, foreignization translation strategy, *Modern Family*

1. Introduction

Today's society, with the development of economic globalization, cross-cultural exchanges between China and the West have become increasingly frequent. Film and television works, as one of the important carriers of cross-cultural communication, play an important role in the process of high-quality cultural exchange and mutual learning between China and the West. Subtitle translation helps audiences understand the information content in film and television works, effectively conveying the cultural connotations and value orientations in the works

to the target audience. This paper analyzes the application of domestication and foreignization translation strategies in the subtitle translation of the popular American TV series *Modern Family* by selecting some English-to-Chinese subtitles, providing some references for the translation and research of film and television subtitles.

2. Research Object and Research Method

2.1 Research Object

Modern Family is a situational comedy narrated and filmed in the form of a mockumentary. The

series tells the daily stories of three different American families: a pair of middle-class parents with three children of different personalities, a pair of gay husbands who adopted a Vietnamese daughter, and an elderly man who married a young and hot Colombian beauty, who also has an 11-year-old chubby son. The series has become popular worldwide since its release, topping the ratings in many countries and winning many awards in the United States. The series uses humor to show the American society and the daily life of American families to the world.

2.2 Research Method

This paper uses cross-cultural communication theory to study the translation of Chinese subtitles in American TV series. In terms of research objects, this paper selects the American TV series *Modern Family* and analyzes its translation characteristics in combination with domestication and foreignization translation theories. Starting from the perspective of cross-cultural communication theory, this paper discusses how to effectively reflect the information content of the work in subtitle translation. The research methods used are conceptual analysis and text analysis. The former uses a theoretical framework, and the latter uses case studies. After each case, a theoretical explanation and explanation are given through analysis.

2.2.1 Subtitle Translation

“Subtitles refer to the display of dialogue and other non-image content in the form of text in TV, film, and stage works, as well as the text processed in the later stage of film and television works” (Zhan Cheng, 2017).

Subtitle translation has the characteristic of instantaneity. Most of the language in film and television works is carried out in the form of dialogue. Translators should provide concise and accurate translations according to the specific context, combining the film’s images with the voices and behaviors of the actors, as well as the pauses between speeches, to help the audience quickly understand the content of the film.

Subtitle translation has the characteristic of popularity. The audience of film and television works varies in age, gender, living habits, and cultural level. Therefore, subtitle translation work should take into account different audience groups, reduce the use of written

language as much as possible, and use more understandable and life-oriented language. Translators should be familiar with the cultural differences between China and the West, combine the specific content of the film and television works with the personality characteristics of the characters in the play, and translate in a way that the target audience can accept and understand.

2.2.2 The Applicability of Domestication in Subtitle Translation

Domestication refers to translating from the perspective of the target audience, making the source text as close as possible to the world of readers in the target language culture. In the subtitle translation of film and television works, domestication requires translators to cater to the audience of the target language, using the language expression methods that the audience is accustomed to, to convey the content of the original text. The use of domestication can effectively reduce the obstacles for the audience in reading subtitles, attract the audience’s interest, and enhance the audience’s aesthetic experience.

2.2.3 The Necessity of Foreignization in Subtitle Translation

Foreignization refers to translators aligning with the source language culture during translation, respecting the cultural differences between the source language and the target language, and using expressions corresponding to the source language text to convey the original content. In the subtitle translation of film and television works, on the one hand, due to the influence of cultural differences between China and the West, it is impossible to find expressions in the target language that can correspond to all expressions in the source language. On the other hand, translators themselves are limited by time, workload, and other factors, as well as the characteristics of subtitle translation itself, requiring the use of foreignization to handle the translation of some sentences. Subtitles processed by foreignization can retain the exotic atmosphere of the source language to the greatest extent, allowing the audience to experience the characteristics of different cultures and the wonderful artistic conception they bring.

3. Strategies for Subtitle Translation of *Modern Family* from the Perspective of Cross-Cultural Communication

3.1 Domestication Strategy

“Domestication strategy refers to translators fully considering the target language culture, making the translation more natural, smooth, and clear, minimizing the parts containing ‘cultural differences’ in the translation, and making it more acceptable to the target language audience” (Huang Ruiwen & Zhao HaiPing, 2022). Common translation methods under domestication strategy include liberal translation and transcreation.

3.1.1 Liberal Translation

Liberal translation has a certain degree of freedom and does not require word-for-word translation. As long as the original idea and the author’s viewpoint remain unchanged, the translator’s translation can be supplemented and explained. That is, translation can sometimes be a translation with a certain degree of freedom, an explanatory translation.

Example 1: “But we’re gonna need to lower the asking price.”

Translation: “看来我们得吐血甩卖了。”

Analysis: This sentence occurs in a scene where a family is selling something. Under pressure, they lower the price of the goods to get more sales. The sentence uses the familiar Chinese expression “吐血甩卖” to show the family’s reluctant but inevitable psychological activity. The translation is close to the situation described in the play, making it clear at a glance for the audience. It meets the requirements of subtitle translation.

Example 2: “We give him some money, a hot meal, laundry.”

Translation: “我们给了他钱, 热食, 帮他洗衣服。”

Analysis: This sentence occurs in a scene where two people discuss helping the poor. “Laundry” originally means “洗衣店; 洗衣物”. A direct translation would cause ambiguity and confusion for the reader. The translator combines the plot and speaking context, translating it as “帮他洗衣服” to better help readers quickly understand the speaker’s meaning.

Example 3: “Well, what’s wrong with ‘Thanks?’”
“It’s pretty much the bare minimum, dad.”

Translation: “说声谢谢怎么了?” “爸爸, 这几乎是最低程度的感激了。”

Analysis: This dialogue occurs between a father and daughter. English grammar emphasizes

diversity and dislikes repetition. “The bare minimum” originally means “最低程度”. A direct translation would confuse the audience and not understand the meaning of the dialogue. In this sentence, the translator combines the context, completes the speaker’s original intention in the play, and translates “It’s pretty much the bare minimum, dad.” as “爸爸, 这几乎是最低程度的感激了。”, better helping the audience understand the dialogue content between the father and daughter in this situation.

3.1.2 Transcreation

Transcreation is a re-creation based on translation. The translator disregards the meaning expressed by the original text and the format of the sentences, adapting the original text to the target language culture, and the adapted version may be very different from the original text but very suitable for the target language culture, effectively conveying the information in the original text.

Example 1: “You’re... you’re, like, in cahoots.”

Translation: “你们, 居然狼狈为奸。”

Example 2: “I’ve got, like, three huge exams tomorrow.” “Honey, you can’t just slap something together at the last minute.”

Translation: “我明天有三门很重要的考试。” “宝贝, 万圣节装扮可不能临时抱佛脚啊。”

Example 3: “No, that’s great. So, it’s all up to me.”

Translation: “没事, 好极了。看来又是我背黑锅了。”

Analysis: In Example 1, “in cahoots” originally means “同谋; 同伙” and here it is translated as “狼狈为奸”; in Example 2, the dialogue “slap something together at the last minute” is originally a Western proverb, meaning “草率仓促地建造; 拼凑” and here it is translated as “临时抱佛脚”; in Example 3, “all up to me” originally means “全部取决于我” and here it is translated as “背黑锅”. The three translations have adopted the form of transcreation, using idioms and proverbs with Chinese characteristics, making Chinese audiences feel familiar and intimate, reflecting the application of domestication translation strategy.

3.2 Foreignization Strategy

Foreignization strategy refers to “combining the linguistic characteristics of foreign cultures, requiring translators to translate content as close

as possible to the source language culture, so that subtitle translation can allow the collision and mutual penetration of Chinese and Western cultures" (Wan Li, 2021). Common translation methods under foreignization strategy include literal translation and zero translation.

3.2.1 Literal Translation

Literal translation is word-for-word translation, that is, when converting one language into another, the translator translates the source language into the target language word by word or sentence by sentence. Literal translation is a translation method that retains both the content and form of the original text.

Example 1: "Slow is smooth, and smooth is fast."

Translation: "慢则稳, 稳则快。"

Example 2: "I call my method 'The Trojan horse'."

Translation: "我把这称为'特洛伊木马'战术。"

Example 3: "Of course. You know what they say 'Every time God closes a door, he opens a window'."

Translation: "当然, 你知道有句俗话说'每当上帝关上一扇门, 他就打开一扇窗'。"

Analysis: In Example 1, the original sentence is a proverb, and the translator directly translates it, retaining the original meaning and structure to the greatest extent, making it concise and clear for the audience; in Example 2, "The Trojan horse" is an allusion originating from ancient Greek mythology. Many Chinese audiences are also familiar with this allusion, so the translator retains the literal translation here, which is more likely to evoke the audience's empathy; in Example 3, when translating "God," a term originating from Western religion, it is directly translated as "帝", retaining the exotic atmosphere brought by the original text.

3.2.2 Zero Translation

So-called "zero translation" means not translating the words in the source language with ready-made words in the target language, which includes three meanings: the first meaning is that words in the source language are deliberately not translated, such as some articles and personal pronouns not being translated in English to Chinese, and some quantifiers not being translated in Chinese to English; the second meaning is not using ready-made words in the target language to

translate the words in the source language, that is, transliteration; the third meaning is "moving the words in the source language to the target language unchanged" (Fang Mengzhi, 2018), that is, transference or transfer writing.

Example 1: "humiliate yourself in front of all those people?"

Translation: "在那么多人面前丢脸。"

Example 2: "Um, I remember once at a New Year's Eve party, stroke of midnight, he high-fived me."

Translation: "我记得有一年的新年派对上, 零点钟声一响, 他和我击掌庆祝。"

Example 3: "Listen, I've got a bunch of moms over here who wanna watch the talent show DVD, and I can't get the sound to work."

Translation: "听着, 我这儿有很多妈妈们, 她们都想看选秀比赛的DVD。"

Analysis: In Example 1, the pronoun "yourself" is not translated, translating "humiliate yourself" as "丢脸", making the translation more in line with Chinese expression habits; in Example 2, the word "party" is not translated using ready-made words in the target language, but uses transliteration, translating it as "派对", similar examples include 秀(show), 酷(cool), 黑客(hacker), 伊妹儿(email), etc.; in Example 3, the term DVD is used as transfer writing, moving the words in the source language unchanged to the target language, similar examples include CT, ICU, CD, VCD, VCR, DNA, etc. Zero translation seems not to translate, but it is a precise translation that perfectly retains all the original meanings for some words and expressions that are not suitable for liberal translation.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, in today's world where cultural exchanges collide and contend, film and television works play an increasingly important role in cross-cultural communication between China and the West. Domestication and foreignization translation theories have important guiding significance for subtitle translation. Translators should fully understand the cultural differences between China and the West, take the audience as the core, select appropriate translation strategies and skills, and present perfect film and television translation works. Build a bridge between different cultures with high-quality translation, help the target audience better enjoy the multicultural feast,

and promote the dissemination and mutual learning of excellent Chinese and Western cultures.

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