

Translator's Subjectivity in Subtitle Translation: A Study of The Battle at Lake Changjin

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Abstract

Since the second half of the 20th century, cultural diversion has made “the translator’s subjectivity” a hot topic. Generally speaking, the translator’s subjectivity refers to the subjective initiative shown by the translator during the process of translating on the basis of respecting the objective translation circumstance. Taking the subtitle translation of *The Battle at Lake Changjin* as a research case, this paper deals with the translator’s subjective from Skopos Theory perspective to investigate how translators assert their subjectivity in subtitle translation. By analyzing the translation of *The battle at Lake Changjin*, this thesis draws a conclusion that translators enjoy much freedom in the translation of movie subtitles. The author hopes this thesis could make some contribution to the understanding of the translator’s subjectivity in other relevant research fields.

Keywords

Skopos Theory; Subtitle Translation; *The Battle at Lake Changjin*; Translator’s Subjectivity.

1. Introduction

The Chinese film and TV industry is picking up steam. With the development of the “Go Global” strategy, a number of excellent Chinese movies and TV dramas have been introduced into the overseas market, and the translation of these works has made a great contribution to cultural exchanges and national progress. For instance, *The Battle at Lake Changjin* is one of the representative works of this kind, which hit a record-high office box with a value of 5.7 billion yuan within 89 days according to the China Film Administration. While watching a movie originating from China, the foreign audience must rely on English subtitles to understand the plot and implicit cultural meaning behind. Therefore, the translator of the movie is an important worker.

Although translators serve as the main participants in translation, no consensus has been reached on their position and function. Therefore, based on the translation of the subtitles of *The Battle at Lake Changjin*, the author focuses on the specific information provided by the translators and tries to explore the subjectivity in the translation.

This thesis consists of five parts: Chapter one briefly introduces the background, purpose as well as structure of the paper. Chapter two is the literature review of the study, which introduces the development of the translator’s subjectivity, the features of movie language, and the current situation of subtitle translation. Chapter three is the theoretical framework of this thesis, which explains how Skopos Theory helps the translator during the translation of subtitles. Chapter four is the case of the study. In this part, the features of the subtitle translation were discussed and illustrated by ten examples. At the same time, the author will investigate how the translator manifests his subjectivity during the process of translating. Chapter five is the conclusion, including major findings and limitations.

2. Literature Review

Subtitle translation is a complicated matter due to its literariness. However, a movie can be either considered as a literary text to be read, or a performance to be watched. Therefore, every subtitle translator is confronted with a dilemma before doing his work: whether to translate the movie subtitles to the readers or to the audience. Since the English subtitles are prepared for overseas audiences, the translator is supposed to take the complicated performance factors in the target culture into consideration, as well as to transfer the linguistic information of the source text, which demands more subjectivity of the translator. Before stepping down to discussion, it is necessary to get more information about subjectivity and make a brief introduction to the subtitle translation.

2.1. Development of the Translator's Subjectivity

Translator's subjectivity has a long history of development. In Britain, Tytler wrote the first significant book called *Essay on the Principles of Translation* on translation in 1790, which focused on the original author, source text, and the target readers [1]. In China, Luo Xinzhang has pointed out that the traditional translation studies can be summarized as "following the original", "seeking faithfulness", "seeking spiritual resemblance", and "perfection" [2]. However, in these studies, the translators were ignored.

In 1923, W. Benjamin published *On the Task of the Translator*, which was the first treaty on the role of translators. In the early 1920s, the translation researchers represented by Bassnett and Lefevere put forward the theory of "cultural turn", which has provided a new research framework for translation study [3]. "Cultural turn" means that the research of translation has transformed from language research to cultural research, from internal research to external research. From the perspective of the cultural turn, scholars have realized the organic relationship between translation and other tools of communication and have begun investigating the extraneous factors [4]. Thanks to the "cultural turn", scholars have also begun to focus on the study of translators' subjectivity, thus the translator's subjective status gradually entering people's vision.

But the definition of "translator's subjectivity varies according to different scholars. Zhang Mingjian and Tian Yu hold that "Translator's subjectivity refers to the subjective initiative of the translator during the translation and its characteristics are cultural awareness and aesthetic creation" [5]. Xu Jun believes that "translator's subjective consciousness refers to a conscious personality consciousness embodied by the translator in the translation process and a kind of creative consciousness in the translation process. This subject consciousness affects the final result of translation" [6]. Essentially, the translator's subjectivity relates to the initiative, passivity, and selfness during the process. In the beginning, it is critical for the translator to get acquainted with the original text. In order to acquire the ideas of the original author, translators find it imperative to overcome the weakness of their own knowledge, experiences, and horizon. With the aim of serving human society, translators always suffer from the restrictions of text types, the reading habits of target readers, and other various object factors. In this context, the translator's subjectivity manifests itself as passivity. Translators will adopt various translation strategies and methods to overcome the difficulties encountered in translating, so as to break the language barriers and make the translation smoother. This is what we called "selfness".

A number of articles on this issue have been published based on various case studies, but few studies discuss the translator's subjectivity in the translation of movies with patriotism due to the lack of favorable examples. Last year, an influential movie called *The Battle at Changjin* was released. The movie, belonging to patriotism movies, can help us to introduce our Chinese stories in a simple and understandable way. Statistics show that the movie has come first in the

box office tallies in China [7]. More importantly, it has been imported by many foreign countries, such as Singapore, Britain, and Australia. As a model of patriotism education, this movie integrated reality and arts and conveys people's aspiration for a peaceful life, helping our country spread our excellent culture. But due to the colloquialism, individuality, intelligibility, and brevity of its literary genre, it will also demand more translator's subjectivity, so it can be seen as a favorable case for the research of subjectivity. That is the reason why it was taken as the case of this study.

2.2. The Features of Movie Language

The language features play an important role in translation, so it is necessary to find out the features of the movie language. Dialogue is the main body of movie language, which means the features of movie language are equal to the features of dialogue to some extent. The most conspicuous features of movie language can be summarized into colloquialism, individuality, intelligibility, and brevity.

Colloquialism means that the lines should be suited for oral expression and can be understood by the audience without too much effort. According to Lao She, a language master in China, individuality means the dialogue must be appropriate for the character in the given situation [8]. In source language, the dialogue reveals the characters' thoughts, personalities, and emotions, which is also the main factor to distinguish one character from another. So, the translation must try to capture the spirit of the nuances of the original words. In addition, movie language must be intelligible and brief. In a movie, the lines of the character appear one sentence after another without stopping, leaving no possibility for the audience to reflect on the script. Therefore, simple sentences are frequently used while complex lines are rarely adopted.

2.3. A Brief Introduction to Subtitle Translation

Subtitle translation belongs to literary translation. In his book *Literary Translation*, Zheng Hailing proposed that literary translation is an artistic transformation process, in which the translator has to reproduce the original language text in another language on the basis of mastering its ideas and artistic forms and leaving the readers with a beautiful experience [9]. That means the subtitle translator must convey both the linguistic information and the artistry of the word.

Although the history of subtitle translation in China is not a long story, it has advanced rapidly. From the beginning, translation in China was rigid and stereotypical. But nowadays, with the flexible use of various elements, the subtitle translation of film and TV has been blended with social elements, showing the trend of localization, popularization, and entertainment [10]. In the process of translation, translators will consciously rewrite the original text in order to meet the reading habits of the audience so as to cater to the market demand and earn box office. On the other hand, the translator's cultural skills and understanding of the work will also affect the subtitle translation.

3. A Brief Introduction to Skopos Theory

The theoretical base for this paper is Skopos Theory. Originated in the 1970s, Skopos Theory is an important part of the German functionalist translation theory. In 1971 Katherina Reiss carried out a model of translation criticism based on the equivalence theory in her book *Possibilities and Limits of Translation Criticism*. Since she found that equivalence cannot be achieved in some cases, she believed that different strategies should be adopted in accordance with different text types [11].

Inspired by Katherina's point of view, Hans Vermeer first put forward Skopos Theory, which has provided guidance to translation research for years. He insisted that any form of human

action, including translation, had a purpose. The Skopos Theory includes three rules, namely, the skopos rule, which is the top-ranking rule of all translations; the coherence rule, which means that the target language make sense in the context of the target culture; and the fidelity rule, which values that the target text must express the ideas of the original text.

The translation under the guidance of Skopos Theory has certain purposes, and the different purposes of the translation will determine the use of different translation strategies. Under the guidance of Skopos Theory, the evaluation of the translation is based on the adequacy of the purpose rather than equivalence, which offers much room for translators to leverage their subjectivity. For example, the purpose of the subtitle translation is to help foreign audiences understand the plot and spread Chinese civilization at the same time. The translator gives top priority to rendering the source language into the target language in accordance with English aesthetics, which is called target-oriented translation. It is not necessary for them to turn the Chinese sentences word by word into English. Therefore, Skopos Theory is an important and acceptable guiding theory for the analysis of subtitle translation.

4. The Translator's Subjectivity in the Subtitle Translation of the Movie

The English subtitles of this movie were provided by a translation company, which was called "MYNGO"(in Chinese: 博洋). The professional translators showed their expertise, understanding of the movie, and their subjectivities in the English subtitles. But, due to the cultural differences, they were also subjected to certain limitations. Therefore, this section is designed to explore the subjectivity of translators in subtitle translation and try to find some translations needed improvement.

According to the features of subtitles, this chapter is divided into four parts, namely, colloquialism, individuality, intelligibility, and brevity.

4.1. Colloquialism

Movie text mainly consists of dialogues, which come from the different characters in the story. The personalities of different characters are shown by their ways of speaking and behavior, but the speeches of various people share one common feature in the movie—colloquialism. In the source language, colloquialism is mainly manifested in dictation, which includes slang terms and informal words; and sentence structures, in which simple and incomplete sentences are frequently used. Therefore, it is challenging for translators to render colloquial Chinese into English.

Example 1:

Source language:如果我们置之不理,那国内外敌人就会认为我们软弱可欺。唇亡齿寒朝鲜的同志向我们请求支援。

Target language: If we ignore them, our domestic and foreign enemies would think we are weak and gullible. *We are in the same boat.* The comrades of Korea are asking for our help.

This example comes from a conference after the Korean war broke out. Here Chairman Mao was discussing the response to the war with other leaders. From September 15 to 19, 1950, over 70,000 well-equipped U.S. soldiers landed in Incheon, which forced the Korean People's Army to retreat to the North of the 38th Parallel. In addition, the more serious matter is that the 13th U.S. Air Force entered and was stationed in Taiwan, which was a complete violation of the statement issued by the U.S. government on the Taiwan question. All of these actions were threatening our national security and have completely crossed our bottom line. Therefore, a secret conclave was held to make response decisions. In this sentence, "唇亡齿寒" is a Chinese slang term with strong cultural richness. According to the Chinese dictionary, "唇亡齿寒" means that one's teeth will feel freezing in the absence of lips and its connotative meaning is

that two objects are closely related and interdependent. Since Skopos Theory pursues the translation of functional equivalence rather than word sentence equivalence, the translator rendered it as “we are in the same boat” in the target language, which also shows the close relationship between our country and Korea. Compared with the source language, “we are in the same boat” has lost its Chinese cultural image, but it expressed the same meaning which can be understood by overseas audiences easily. In order to achieve the goal of reproducing the spirit of the original words in subtitles, the translator adopted the strategy called under-translation, omitting some original information. Although the translation has cut off some information, it conforms to the coherent rule and the skopos rule. So, the author considers that flexibility was achieved in the translator’s work.

Example 2:

Source language: 伍万里: 看什么看啊?

余从戎: 大闺女啊? 还怕看。

Target language: Wu Wanli: What are you looking at?

Yu Congrong: Why? Are you shy?

Example 2 is a dialogue between Wu Wanli, a naughty boy, and Yu Congrong, who was an optimistic platoon leader. At this moment, Congrong wanted to play a trick on Wanli, who was a new recruit. Then, he fixed on Wanli to satisfy his curiosity. After Wanli asked why Congrong kept watching him, Congrong answered: 大闺女啊? 还怕看? In this line, Congrong did not mean to ask about the gender of Wanli intentionally, but he wanted to tease Wanli in a playful way. In ancient China, the phrase “大闺女” was often used to ridicule a timid person. In feudal society, women were in a more difficult position than men. They were not allowed to go out or talk with people who does not belong to their families. In this context, they were forced to be shy and gutless. Chinese are very familiar with this daily expression, while westerners may not understand its implicit meaning. In this example, due to the restrictions of time and cultural differences, the translator’s subjectivity manifests itself as passivity. Therefore, the translator rendered it as “why? Are you shy?”, which was concise and easy to understand. So that it is in line with the skopos rule and conciseness in the Skopos translation theory. It is also a favorable approach to avoid misunderstanding and gender discrimination in modern western society.

4.2. Individuality

Movies can be regarded as artistic works created by scriptwriters. The complements or criticisms the scriptwriter intended to express are presented by the speeches and behaviors of the characters in their works. Therefore, the ways of speaking and behaviors vary with the characters, showing their personalities and uniqueness. When a foreign audience is enjoying the movie, the behaviors can be captured by himself, but his understanding of the speeches mainly relies on the translated subtitles. It is of great importance for the translator to try his utmost to make the subtitles suitable for the characters’ identities based on his subjectivity.

Example 3:

Source language: 你拿枪给我看看, 看一眼。

Target language: Show me your gun. Let me see it.

Example 4:

Source language: 我不听雷o长的命o, 我去o我哥了, 我o了, 一定改。

Target language: I didn’t listen to leader Lei’s o. I went to o my brother. I o. I won’t do it again.

The two examples are from Wanli, a half-grown boy who was wild and persistent. In the third example, he was talking with his brother in a disrespectful tone, displaying his strength. The translator rendered it as “Show me your gun” instead of “May I take a look at your gun?”, in line with the fidelity rule. In the fourth example, Wanli was writing a self-criticism report. But at the

beginning, he even did not know what it is, let alone the spelling of words. Therefore, he used some marks in place of the words which he did not know how to spell. Since Skopos translation principle focuses on the expression effect of the target language, the translator kept these marks in the English subtitles, so as to satisfy the fidelity rule and the expression effect.

Example 5:

Source language:

司令员:我们刚刚取得了全国的胜利,屁股下面的板凳还没有焐热,美帝国主义就在我们的北边朝鲜发动了战争,妄图把战火烧到我们刚刚诞生的新中国,我们该怎么办?

士兵:打!打!打!

司令员:抗美援朝,保家卫国!

Target language:

Commander: We just triumphed over the entire nation. Before we even had no time to rest, the imperialist U.S. started a war with Korea at our northern border. They intended to spread the heat of war to our newly established China. What should we do?

Soldiers: Fight! Fight! Fight!

Commander: Resist U.S. aggression and aid Korea and defend our country!

This is a dialogue between the Commander and his soldiers. Received the order, he came to encourage his soldier. But he did not give the order directly. On the contrary, he cited his experience with him and Wu Wanli and told them about his personal emotion toward the country, trying to strike a chord with his listeners. As a commander, his speech agreed with his status, and what he did shows his leadership skills and public skills. More importantly, this dialogue shows the patriotism of the commander and the soldiers. In the translation, the translator comprehensively considered the context and used the negative word "aggression" to describe the U.S. soldiers, which vividly showed his patriotism and was in line with the coherence rule.

4.3. Intelligibility

Subtitle translation is not merely the arrangement of words on the screen. It can be regarded as a comprehensive performing art, which must be understood and appreciated by the audience. But owing to the cultural differences, some Chinese expressions may have various meanings in English in different circumstances.

Example 6:

Source language: 我没有把老大照顾好。

Target language: Baili.....*is gone*.

This is the first sentence of Qianli when he arrived home and met his parents. At the beginning of the movie, he came back from the troops with the bone ash of his brother, who had sacrificed in war. Influenced by the social system, ancient religion, and Confucianism, the Chinese have advocated the theory of the "Golden Mean" from ancient times, so they tend to restrain themselves from saying the word "die" directly [12]. In this sentence, for instance, "照顾好" does not refer to "to look after" or "to care for" in English. It belongs to euphemism, which means "die". The translator explored his subjectivity and took the context into consideration under the guidance of the coherence rule, and rendered it as "gone", which was concise and clear.

Example 7:

Source language:

伍仟里:雷公,你的炮呢?

雷公:别急,别急。

伍仟里:雷公,你是我亲爹!

Target language:

Wu Qianli: Lei, where are your mortars?

Lei: Hang on. Hang on.

Wu Qianli: Lei, *great job!*

Example 8:

Source language:彭叔叔,我向彭总申请做您的第一个兵。

Target language: Uncle Peng. Let me be your first soldier, Chief Command Peng.

A prominent feature of this movie is its Chinese-specific forms of address. Addressing forms play an important role in communication, for using an appropriate address is the first step to carrying out a successful dialogue. However, different nations possess their own address form system. For example, Chinese kinship terms are large in number and complex in naming while that of English, on the other hand, are relatively simple, fewer in number, and tend to be vague and general in naming. There is a generalized use of kinship terms in Chinese, which means they are used to refer to people who do not share blood relations [13]. Forms of address in *The Battle at Changjin* can be classified into three categories and shown in Table 1.

Table 1. The categories of the address in the movie

G.1	G.2	G.3
Company Commander	Dad	Limping Chen
Political Commander	Mom	Lei
Division Commander	Qianli	Son
Comrade	Baili	Old man
High official	My brother	Little boy

The addresses in the first category are used to show the positions in the army. The second category is employed to distinguish the relationships in a core family while the third category is the salutation for people who bear no relationship in kinship or strangers. All of these addresses are clear to the Chinese audience, but they may be vague to foreign audiences if translated literally. In the eighth example, belonging to the third category, the words “你是我亲爹” showed the ecstasy of Qianli after Lei had blasted the major mortar of enemies. It does not mean that Lei is the father of Wanli. Therefore, with the guidance of the fidelity rule and the coherence rule, the translator rendered it as “Lei, great job!”, which vividly showed the emotion of Wanli.

But in the eighth example, the translation is ambiguous. This dialogue was between Mao An'ying and Peng Dehuai, the Chief Command. In China, people have the habit of “respecting the old and loving the youth”, so they are used to adding the word—“叔叔” to show their respect when they are talking to elders. But things are different in Western countries. In the source language, the word “彭叔叔” is also used to show respect, but the translator rendered it as “Uncle Peng”. In English, the word “uncle” refers to a relationship through blood instead of showing respect. After reading the subtitles, a foreign audience may think Mao and Peng were relatives by misunderstanding, which tends to lead to the understanding deviation of the target language readers and it is not in line with the faithfulness principle of Skopos Theory. The author suggests rendering it as “Mr. Peng”, for English value core family.

4.4. Brevity

As we all know, subtitles are often shown at the bottom of a screen. Due to the space restriction, it is a favorable idea to control the subtitles in no more than two lines. If the subtitles are very long, the foreign audiences may drive their attention from the image to the words, which will lead to a loss of information. So the translator must leverage his or her subjectivity to make the translation short but effective.

Example 9:

Source language: 赶快隐蔽,找出敌方破击炮位置。

Target language: *Find some cover, get me the position of those gook mortars!*

When Qanli and his troops were fighting against enemies, his enemies were the weapon-and-tank-superior army. It is of great importance for them to find out the mainly powerful weapons. So Qanli made the order: “赶快隐蔽,找出敌方破击炮位置。” The translator employed the two imperative sentences, “find.....” and “get me.....”, to make them short and powerful, which was in line with the fidelity rule.

Example 10:

Source language: 几十万老百姓的孩子一道命令就上了战场,我毛岸英有什么理由不去!

Target language: Hundreds of thousands of civilian's children are going to war on one command. *Why shouldn't I go?*

Hearing that Chief Commander Peng Dehuai was going to enter the battlefield, Mao An'ying made up his mind to accompany him. But Peng attempted to persuade him to stay with Chairman Mao in Beijing. In order to show the resolution of An'ying, the translator adopted a rhetorical question sentence, which enhanced the tone and successfully molded the image of a martyr and fit the fidelity rule. By doing so, this translation showed the patriotic enthusiasm of Mao An'ying. After reading this line, a person can feel the patriotism rise within his breast.

5. Conclusion

Throughout the analysis of the above chapters, the translator's subjectivity in subtitle translation is discussed, and the conclusion can be drawn as follows: Firstly, this paper reviews the development of the translator's subjectivity, showing the current situation of translators. In the history of translation research, a number of related factors have been discussed, such as translation techniques, standards, and strategies, but the translators have been less discussed. But with the development of translation research, they have gained increasing attention and a growing number of research have been carried out to study their position.

Secondly, the subtitle translation of the movie is the result of the adaptation to the translator's own language ability, cultural acquisition, and external needs, which requires the translator to put his subjectivity into full play. In this movie, the translator's subjectivity is reflected in various ways, which means the translator enjoys much freedom in the process. Due to the features of the movie language, the translator adopted different methods: changing the image of the source language to achieve colloquialism, omitting unnecessary words to satisfy the individuality, maintaining the misnomer of the source language to show the personality of the character, employing the words with strong emotion, etc. While analyzing the subjectivity, the author also found patriotism in these examples, which means that patriotism can be reproduced in cross-cultural communication, which is the innovative part of this study.

Lastly, the display of the translator's subjectivity is also limited. The translator may process the different values, backgrounds, and purposes. In this movie, for example, in order to convey the emotion maintained in the source language, some addresses are inappropriate. But with the cultural difference, compromise is inevitable.

However, due to the limited time and sample, the analysis and research only apply to this specific movie, and examples are collected from the subtitles of *The Battle at Lake Changjin*, so the findings of this study are limited to a narrow scope. Based on this study, researchers who are interested in relevant topics may explore further on subtitle translation or other literary translations. With the mentality of learning and discussion, the thesis analyzed the subjectivity in the translation of the subtitles of *The Battle at Lake Changji*, hoping to make some practical contribution to the understanding of the translator's subjectivity in subtitle translation.

Acknowledgments

Funding Project: 2022 Education Research and Reform Project of Chengdu University of Information Technology: Student-competency-centered development of core values through Interpreting course reform of translation major (JYJG2022026).

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